**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

**President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum**

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*[check against delivery]*

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me welcome the distinguished guests of this important Forum – honourable Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, State Secretary Gašper Dovžan, and all of you participants coming from the civil society organisations of the Western Balkans, as well as from the European Union. I equally welcome those speakers and participants physically present in the room, as well as those following us online.

Let me also warmly welcome the representatives of the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council and thank you for your support in organising this Civil Society Forum.

I am very pleased to be with you today!

For the European Economic and Social Committee, the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum is an opportunity to bring together organised civil society from the European Union and the Western Balkans. We have decided that this opportunity should not be missed despite the dire times of the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore, here we are in the first Forum held in a hybrid format. I hope that this new and unusual format could also be beneficial and that thanks to the new technologies we will be able to bring to our Forum even more civil society organisations.

We will discuss many topics in these two days such as the green agenda, the economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans, the post-COVID-19 recovery. We will look at these issues from all possible angles, analysing processes in the European Union and the Western Balkans, but the underlining moto of all these topics is the need to involve social partners and other civil society organisations in the making and the implementation of these policies.

As many of you present here will agree, functioning social dialogue and enabling civic space, together with the respect of the rule of law, is of prime importance when assessing country's readiness to join the European Union. It starts with genuine involvement of organised civil society in policy making.

We are concerned about the shrinking space for civil society in a number of our partners in the Western Balkans. We are also concerned that democracy is under threat in the European Union. Therefore, we all need to join forces and fight to preserve and promote the common European values such as the respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedom of media.

We need to send to the informal EU-Western Balkans Summit to be held on 6 October in Brdo, Slovenia, a clear message for civil society empowerment and we will do that by adopting a strong Final declaration of this Forum.

Dear friends, I am here today to express my support to you and to the enlargement of the European Union. Despite COVID-19 pandemic, last year we witnessed a renewed focus on the Western Balkans with the ambitious Commission's communications for the Western Balkans, as well as the Zagreb's EU-Western Balkans Summit. Now we need to keep this momentum alive. We, organized civil society, need to convince our leaders that the place of this geopolitically strategic region is in the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen, any discussion about the European Union’s enlargement is implicitly a discussion on the future of Europe and vice versa. We need to therefore include our partners – civil society organisations and citizens from the Western Balkans – into the activities within the Conference on the Future of Europe. We consider this Forum as one of the integral events of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Dear friends, it is also clear that initiatives for democracy, transformation and the resolution of bilateral disputes in the region have to come from within Western Balkans. I have been following closely the developments regarding the Prespa Agreement between Greece and what is now North Macedonia. The resolution of the long-standing name issue can be an example of reconciliation for Europe and it brought some genuinely good news and hope from the Balkans.

The relations between neighbouring North Macedonia and Bulgaria should also be nurtured and developed in such a way, for all outstanding issues to be successfully resolved in a climate of mutual consideration and in a friendly environment.

The European Union was built on hope, a hope for lasting peace and better future, and it should continue to reinvent itself on that postulate. It continues to be the best gift that we can leave to our children, the best place in the world in which to live, to start a family, to do business, to be looked after, to be protected, and to live together in a rich diversity.

During my mandate I will engage this Committee in providing a vision for a stronger and more resilient post-COVID Europe – one that should prosper economically, and be socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. Our Committee believes that the Western Balkans, as a key region in our closest neighbourhood, a region of geostrategic importance, should be an integral part of this Europe. Countries from the Western Balkans should be given the real opportunity to join the EU's family, providing that they meet all the necessary conditions for accession. We should not forget that other global players are also looking with interest at this region.

To conclude, I truly believe that it is in the interest not just of the countries and citizens of the Western Balkans, but also of all of us in the European Union, to integrate this region into our common Union as soon as possible. The organised civil society from the region and from the European Union should and must have a prominent role in promoting this process, as an important controlling mechanism that guarantees the quality of its end result. I can assure you that our Committee will continue to be there to support you.

The motto of my Presidency is "United for the Future of Europe". I truly hope, this year's Western Balkans Civil Society Forum can send a strong signal and create additional momentum in bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU and the EU closer to the Western Balkans.

I wish you a great success in the discussions and I thank you for your attention!