



6th meeting, 12 April 2018, Brussels

JOINT DECLARATION

The EU-Serbia Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) is one of the bodies set up within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Union and Serbia. The JCC enables civil society organisations (CSOs) from both sides to monitor Serbia's progress towards the European Union, and to adopt recommendations for the attention of the Government of Serbia and the EU institutions. The JCC understands the notion of civil society as encompassing organisations of employers, trade unions and other economic, social and civic interests.

The JCC is made up of eighteen members, nine from each side, representing the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and Serbian civil society. During its current term, the JCC is co-chaired by **Ionuț Sibian**, member of the EESC and Executive Director of the Civil Society Development Foundation of Romania, and **Zoran Stojiljković**, President of the Trade Union Confederation "Nezavisnost".

The members of the JCC discussed the state of play and the work ahead in Serbia's accession negotiations to the EU. They assessed the extent to which EU standards had been adopted in the areas of the social economy and social enterprises in Serbia and held a discussion on the involvement of the social partners and other civil society organisations in the preparation of the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) and the Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme (ESRP).

1. State of play of EU-Serbia relations and the accession process

- 1.1 The JCC members are pleased that since the last meeting, Serbia has opened Chapter 6 (Company law) and Chapter 30 (External relations). This brings the number of chapters open to twelve, of which two have already been provisionally closed. The members of the JCC again called on the Serbian authorities and the EU to keep up the pace of meetings and the evaluation of all interim benchmarks, especially those on the rule of law – Chapters 23 and 24 – which are essential for ensuring progress on the EU accession negotiations. They also reiterate the need to continue to involve civil society representatives, including the social partners, in a meaningful way in all the relevant chapters and at all stages of the accession negotiations.
- 1.2 The EESC welcomes the EU-Western Balkans heads of states and governments summit to be held on 17 May in Sofia. The EESC hopes that the summit in Sofia will confirm the renewed

momentum for the EU's commitment to the region and encourage other future presidencies to keep the integration of the Western Balkan countries high on their priorities.

- 1.3 The JCC welcomes the Commission's new strategy for the Western Balkans entitled "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" which was published on 6 February 2018, and its six flagship initiatives.
- 1.4 The JCC expresses its readiness to contribute to the implementation of the actions stipulated in the Action Plan in Support of the Transformation of the Western Balkans for 2018-2020, particularly in the areas of the rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, connectivity, the digital agenda and reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.
- 1.5 The JCC is pleased that Serbia is recognised as one of the two frontrunner candidates in the Western Balkan region and invites the Serbian authorities, as well as the EU institutions, to make every effort to keep the prospect of Serbia's EU accession by 2025 feasible.
- 1.6 The JCC encourages the Serbian authorities to work ceaselessly to ensure respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights, judicial reform, the fight against corruption and the autonomy of journalists and freedom of the press. Once again, it reminds the Serbian authorities of the importance of ensuring an enabling civic space for a strong and effective social and civil dialogue. The JCC stresses that civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as independent regulatory bodies, are an important partner for the government and play an essential democratic role. Their participation in working groups on drafting laws, strategies and action plans should be ensured, with the obligation to report on the results of the consultation processes.

2. The social economy and social enterprises

- 2.1 The JCC invites the Serbian government to establish at national level a working group for social entrepreneurship that would bring together all relevant stakeholders in a constructive dialogue. This working group would establish a broad framework for the development of social entrepreneurship, formulate a social entrepreneurship development strategy in Serbia, and monitor the quality and level of training of social entrepreneurs. At local level, the JCC believes that regional support centres for social entrepreneurship should be established to provide support for local authorities in recognising the role of social enterprises. Those centres should also help social enterprises with capacity-building measures and with establishing partnerships with the public and private sectors.
- 2.2 The JCC invites the Serbian authorities to adopt the Law on the Social Economy as a matter of priority, since it has been proven that the social economy and social enterprises contribute significantly to addressing challenges such as including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in both society and the labour market. It stresses that a balance should be struck between the legislative objective of giving visibility to this sector and supporting its development, and the danger of neglecting some other forms of social enterprises which are not recognised as such, but which nonetheless deliver services of general interest.

- 2.3 The JCC stresses that existing Serbian legislation (such as the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Law on Associations, Company Law and Law on Cooperatives) needs to be amended in order to harmonise the definition of social entrepreneurship already mentioned in some legislation and to make social entrepreneurship sustainable.
- 2.4 In order to achieve the economic sustainability of social enterprises, the members of the JCC call upon the Serbian authorities at central and local level to:
- concentrate on securing resources to finance projects (by means of the Centre for Social Entrepreneurship within regional agencies);
 - develop a more open approach to financing using the local budget (financing operational expenses);
 - further develop possibilities for micro-credit (the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Fund deployed in under-developed parts of Serbia can be used as a model, and the Fund could finance social entrepreneurship in areas within its remit);
 - develop effective mechanisms to prevent risks of corruption in allocating public funds;
 - provide social enterprises with funding from the local authorities to cover the cost of training in business skills; this could be done through the voucher system so that social enterprises may freely choose the programmes and services which best suit them;
 - achieve complete territorial coverage of the country with support services for training and educating social entrepreneurs through networking and cooperation between institutions, primarily at local level;
 - continuously improve the abilities, skills and knowledge of employees in central and local institutions in the area of social entrepreneurship;
 - raise the awareness and visibility of support services for training and educating social enterprises and potential social entrepreneurs through promotional campaigns organised by the Social Entrepreneurship Development Centre;
 - adopt support measures to the types of enterprises envisaged and boost support, both financial and by opening access to the socially and environmentally responsible public procurement.
- 2.5 The members of the JCC emphasise that the approach towards the recognition of the social economy and social enterprises should be chosen following a careful assessment of the impact of various measures on the sector in the EU Member States. They stress that relevant experience in EU Member States should be assessed and used to build trust in the sector and increase understanding of the evolving concepts of the social economy and social enterprises.
- 2.6 The JCC invites the European Commission to further facilitate learning and development by means of the exchange of best practice at regional level. Building the capacity of relevant stakeholders, facilitating access to the market and finance and providing business advisory services should be given priority.
- 2.7 The JCC believes that the EESC's Category on the Social Economy could facilitate the exchange of best practice, access to information and involvement in policy formulation for national and regional stakeholders.

3. **The involvement of the social partners and other civil society organisations in the preparation of Economic Reform Programmes**

- 3.1 The JCC welcomes the establishment of the Platform for Monitoring the Implementation of the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) and the Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP), incorporated in the National Convention on the EU (NCEU), as a new form of structured dialogue between the Serbian Government and CSOs. It reminds the Serbian authorities that the European Commission's Guidance for the Economic Reform Programmes notes that the involvement of the social partners and other civil society organisations in reporting on programme implementation is crucial to creating ownership and the widest possible political support.
- 3.2 The JCC believes that it is of the utmost importance to ensure the sustainability of structures and the monitoring mechanism of the ERP and the ESRP, at the level of both the government and civil society. It emphasises that the knowledge and experience obtained during the first phase of structured monitoring of the ERP and the ESRP by civil society should be kept up and developed.
- 3.3 The JCC stresses the important role that the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Serbia has to play in shaping and monitoring the ERP and the ESRP, and invites the Serbian authorities to regularly involve and consult the Economic and Social Council in the process of adopting these important documents and all the reforms stemming from them.
- 3.4 The JCC calls upon the Serbian authorities to include the European Pillar of Social Rights in the next cycle of the ERP in Serbia. It invites the Serbian authorities, in cooperation with the social partners and other CSOs, to perform social impact assessments of all structural reforms, and to link these assessments to the priorities determined during the ESRP. Further monitoring and revision of the ESRP and its instruments, in line with the Social Pillar and its social scoreboard, would be necessary.
- 3.5 When designing employment and social inclusion measures, the JCC invites the Serbian authorities to make use of the Employment Guidelines proposed by the European Commission that align the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights with the commitment to enhance the EU's competitiveness through investment, job creation and social cohesion. The JCC strongly believes that the creation of sustainable and good quality jobs must be identified as one of the objectives of the ERP and that structural reforms must be designed to achieve this goal.
- 3.6 The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to involve all the relevant stakeholders, including the Serbian National Assembly and local authorities, in a more effective and efficient way when developing and implementing public policies and programming documents such as the ERP and the ESRP.
- 3.7 The JCC instructs its co-chairs to forward this joint declaration to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Council, the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission and the Government of Serbia.

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The next JCC meeting, to be held in Serbia in the second half of 2018, will deal with the subjects of equal opportunities and reducing inequalities in the Serbian society, as well as enabling civic space.
