**The 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum asks for a clear enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans countries**

**The EESC's Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, which took place in Skopje on 30 September and 1 October, put the spotlight on the need for a clear EU accession perspective for the region and the role civil society should play in this process.**

The Forum was organised by the European Economic and Social Committee in cooperation with the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council ahead of the EU-Western Balkan Summit in Brdo on 6 October. It aims to send a clear message to political authorities regarding the challenges and aspirations of civil society in the region.

In their statements, both the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev and the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, insisted on the fact that EU enlargement is a geostrategic investment in peace, poverty reduction and economic growth of the whole continent.

All participants in the Forum agreed that the prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's own interest if we want to avoid destabilisation of the region, third-country influence and negative impacts for the EU itself.

Despite the general enthusiasm of the prospect for increased convergence of the region with the EU with the help of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), the Green Agenda and support to post-Covid-19 crisis recovery, subsequent discussions showed that the path to the EU is long and full of challenges. The countries of the region still have much work to do in strengthening regional cooperation, implementing structural domestic reforms and aligning with the EU legislation. A meaningful civic and social dialogue and genuine inclusion of social partners and other civil society organisations in national policy and reforms remains a challenge in many Western Balkans countries.

As indicated by the EESC President, Christa Schweng, "We must also not forget that any discussion on enlargement is implicitly a discussion on the future of Europe".

The participants therefore called for the organisation of high-level civil society conferences as side events to the regular EU-Western Balkans summits in order to allow the voice of civil society to be heard on the subjects that will be addressed.

Please find the final declaration in attachment or you may visit the website [HERE](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/8th-western-balkans-civil-society-forum).