

Furthermore, the cooperation with the Delegations of the European Union in the countries of the region proved to be instrumental in promoting and developing dialogue with civil society organisations.

Promotion of consultative processes

The EESC promotes and supports the development of Economic and Social Councils or similar institutions in the countries of the region.

The EESC consistently advocates for the strengthening of social dialogue and civil dialogue, either in its opinions, or through the participation of its members in conferences and events.

Regular contacts

Members of the EESC participate in various conferences or events dealing with the Western Balkans organised in Brussels or in the region.

They also meet representatives of civil society organisations within the context of study visits organised in Brussels or of programmes managed by other EU institutions such as the EU Visitors Programme or the Civil Society Facility.



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The EESC and the Western Balkans

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European Economic and Social Committee

THE EESC AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: A TWO-LEVEL APPROACH

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has developed a dual approach, regional and bilateral, for its relations with civil society organizations (CSOs) of the Western Balkans. Both are linked by common global objectives, which are:

- to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and the future accession to the EU;
- to foster both civil and social dialogue:
 - by the development of a culture of dialogue between the authorities and the CSOs and among the CSOs themselves;
 - by the creation of transparent and efficient institutional frameworks for civil and social dialogue;
 - by promoting the setting-up of adequate legal environments for the activities of the CSOs;
- to strengthen civil society networks;
- to increase exchange of experiences and best practices.

A Regional Approach

The Western Balkans Follow-up Committee – a permanent internal body established by the EESC in 2004 – is the main instrument for coordinating the EESC's activities in this regard. The role of the Follow-up Committee is also to monitor the changes in the political, economic and social situation in the Western Balkan countries and in EU-Western Balkans relations. Furthermore, the Follow-up Committee promotes cooperation between the EESC and Western Balkans civil society organizations.

The EESC has also adopted opinions on topics of regional interest in the Western Balkans, such as Transport policy, Rural Development and Employment or Energy policy. The drafting process itself enabled to reinforce the regional cooperation at civil society level on those topics via the organisation of hearings.

The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum

The Forum is part of the work of the Follow-up Committee. Organized every two years since 2006, it provides an opportunity to exchange views on the current situation of civil society in the region, its needs and its future development. It brings together participants from Western Balkans countries, members of the EESC, representatives of national Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions, international socio-professional organizations (employers, trade unions, farmers, consumers), NGOs, representatives of EU institutions and diplomats. The participants adopt conclusions addressed to national authorities and European institutions.

The 6th Forum, organised in July 2017 in Sarajevo, enabled the participants to discuss issues such as perspectives for the EU-Western Balkans relations, the role of civil society organisations in promoting sustainable growth and employment, migration, freedom of expression and media, as well as rights and empowerment of women. Among the various recommendations adopted by the participants, one could underline the call on the EU institutions to further assist the countries in the region to develop well-functioning social and civil dialogues.

A Bilateral Approach

The EESC also works on a bilateral basis through the elaboration of opinions and the establishment of Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs).

Opinions

As an advisory body to the EU institutions, one of the core functions of the EESC is to draft opinions on several EU policies. In 2007, the EESC started a series of opinions dealing with the situation of civil society in each country of the region. By 2015, the EESC has issued opinions on the role of civil society in each country.

In order to prepare each opinion, a delegation of EESC members went to the country concerned to meet the various stakeholders and to involve them in the elaboration of the opinion.

The Civil Society Joint Consultative Committees

The EESC is also involved in the enlargement process of the EU through the establishment of Civil Society Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs). They complement the EU institutional framework related to each Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) signed between the EU and a country of the region and ratified. It allows civil society organisations from both EU and national sides to monitor the country's path towards EU accession once it has started its accession negotiations. It is a platform of dialogue for civil society representatives to discuss issues of common interest. It also prepares civil society representatives to join the EESC.

The EU-Montenegro JCC and EU-Serbia JCC have been established and meetings are being held on a regular basis.

Inter-institutional Cooperation

In order to have a comprehensive approach towards the region, the EESC, via the Follow-up Committee, is maintaining a strong relationship with EU institutions and agencies (the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the Committee of the Regions, the European Training Foundation) as well as with active international organizations in the Western Balkans such as the International Labour Organisation, the OSCE and the Regional Cooperation Council.

EU institutions can request the EESC to draft an exploratory opinion on a precise topic, to contribute to the definition of EU policies or programmes. Recently, the European Commission requested the EESC to draft an opinion on "The role of civil society in EU-Serbia relations" and the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU requested the EESC to draft an opinion on "Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans – challenges and priorities".