



Civil Society Forum Belgrade Recommendations

The Civil Society Forum Belgrade Forum was realised as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and ERSTE Foundation, supported by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Info Point Novi Sad, The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia and the Provincial Secretariat for Science and Technological Development, and in close cooperation with the European Movement in Serbia – Local Council in Novi Sad and the Center for Regionalism.

In the course of two working days with panel discussions and focused thematic workshops, as well as two public events, more than 100 participants, representatives of think tanks, policy institutes and other CSOs from the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU, jointly adopted the following conclusions:

In 2014, the Western Balkan Summit Series was initiated in Berlin to consolidate and keep the dynamics in EU Enlargement. The Paris Summit should reconfirm the intrinsic link between the Western Balkan Summit Series and EU Enlargement. In this light, CSOs should be among the key players of the summit series. They enhance democracy by providing citizens' participation and prioritising social issues. They contribute to building human security and mutual trust by working on reconciliation, solving bilateral disputes and increasing regional cooperation.

CSOs, ranging from grassroots initiatives and community organisations to specialised CSOs in different policy sectors, have shown that they are committed to democratisation and Europeanisation of the Western Balkans throughout many challenges. Most recently, CSOs provided crucial assistance during the migrant crisis. CSOs are a strong advocate of the summit series, because they see it as an important additional avenue for supporting the European future of the Balkans. Therefore, CSOs demand greater inclusion in the process, through their contribution as an equal partner to agenda-setting and the follow-up implementation of the agreed initiatives aiming ultimately at enhancing democracy and social cohesion in the region.

The lessons learned

CSOs seek involvement in the summit series with focus on national- and local- level inclusion.

The opportunity for CSOs to contribute was opened at the Vienna Summit in 2015. CSOs welcome the invitation to be present in Paris 2016 and to continue to actively support the process beyond that. With that, CSOs understand that they are contributing to EU enlargement and to enhancing regional cooperation. CSOs are committed to contributing to national- and local-level processes by providing critical thinking and concrete policy expertise and by creating constructive partnerships with governments.

Civil society has capacities.

CSOs contribute to the summit series from the highly sensitive issue of solving bilateral disputes to regional youth cooperation. CSOs have shown that they can build political will for reconciliation, such as the Igman and RECOM initiatives or the recent efforts trying to improve Serbia-Kosovo relations. CSOs can ensure the sustainability of the process by informing, monitoring and advocating for governments' implementation of the agreements reached at the different summits.

Democratisation should be in focus.

Various indicators, for example media freedoms and reports (such as Freedom House or Bertelsmann Transformation Index), show a steady backsliding of democracy in the Western Balkans. While the summit series prioritises infrastructure projects, CSOs consider that it is important to engage with citizens to reinvigorate democratisation. CSOs will seek to build stronger relations with politicians and governments in line with democratic standards, solidarity and EU integration, within countries and across borders, including at the European level. CSOs also acknowledge that democracy needs to improve within civil society as a whole, as illiberal segments are growing stronger, and within CSOs.

The mechanisms for structured dialogue

The Western Balkans Summit Series is expanding the issues that are addressed and the actors that are included. Therefore inclusion and participation need to be the main principles to build mechanisms for dialogue. Awareness should be raised that the summits do not only provide funding for major infrastructural projects, but that they are also an opportunity to enhance democracy and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as part of the EU Enlargement agenda.

There needs to be a recognised, formal mechanism for follow-up between summits, with an explicit place for civil society.

We invite the Paris Summit conclusions to include a commitment about the future inclusion of CSOs. A civil society forum must ensure that CSOs' place at the table is meaningfully taken in consideration and not one-off meetings to consult. CSOs need continuity of topics and commitments to provide meaningful contribution in an evidence-based manner.

Different levels of cooperation should build on existing regional and local networks and CSOs.

Cooperation and inclusion of CSOs need to be comprehensive, from the local, national, and regional to transnational levels with politicians and with public administration officials. There is no substitute for the existing structures of cooperation, such as the Councils for Civil Society Development or EU/IPA coordination mechanisms (Convents, IPA SECO etc.) that

exist in several countries. All forms and levels of cooperation need to be effective and functional.

We should use all instruments.

We need to use dialogue mechanisms that exist in the summit series (e.g. reporting on bilateral issues resolution and connectivity) and we need to create new mechanisms for dialogue and monitoring (e.g. contact groups between stakeholders in the summit series, transnational thematic platforms or opening sectoral EU accession). However, we need to remain flexible and to utilise the existing platforms built in the EU integration process, as well as the vibrant regional frameworks and networks.

Togetherness

There is an economic togetherness between the EU and Western Balkans, and there are “pockets” of “soft” togetherness, in terms of cultural exchange, arts and CSO cooperation, within the region. However, there is also togetherness of undemocratic and illiberal forces. CSOs strongly believe that a sense of togetherness is necessary, despite the many impediments that are based on competing political agendas, different identities and values.

It is worrisome that socio-economic divisions are growing, within the countries, among the EU and the Western Balkan countries. The existing set of policies and relations is reproducing economic gaps and inequalities. The aim of the countries in the region to improve the standard of living has not been fulfilled. To remedy this, it is necessary for Western Balkans countries to get access to the EU’s Structural Funds.

We need more than ever to stand together and support EU democratic values. Past and present examples show that it is the timely response of CSOs that assures protection of democracy and sustains EU enlargement efforts. In particular, it is important to create more opportunities for youth engagement to assure the sustainability of democracy in the long term.

Recommendations

Regional Youth Cooperation

- CSOs welcome the establishment of a Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and consider that the inclusive process in preparing RYCO’s founding documents, bringing together government and civil society representatives on a parity basis, should be taken as a best practice for other initiatives in the summit series. CSOs call on RYCO and other forms of regional youth cooperation to highlight the needs of “overlooked” youth, such as socially excluded and marginalised youth, youth victims of abuse, violence and trafficking, youth in rural areas, youth of minority communities and young people with disabilities. CSOs propose youth employability and skills-building to be considered among the top priorities for RYCO and other projects of regional youth cooperation.
- CSOs demand that civil society participation in RYCO bodies and in project implementation be based on pre-defined, clear and transparent criteria and through open calls. CSOs demand civil society inclusion in the entire process from the selection of our representatives to the creation of the strategy and working priorities.

- CSOs offer to use existing competences and networks and to synergise with existing projects, for example in education, in order to accelerate youth cooperation. CSOs commit to tackling new challenges, such as youth radicalisation, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, while addressing old ones, such as reconciliation, and through youth cooperation to continue our contribution in building sustainable peace. CSOs encourage the formation of an online registration platform that can serve as a database for RYCO and as a networking resource.

Migration crisis: Political and social implications for the Balkans in Europe

- CSOs played a crucial role in responding to the migrant crisis and meeting the basic needs of migrants transiting through or arriving in their countries. CSOs need to continue to be closely associated with addressing the migrant crisis, both regarding the monitoring of commitments made by governments regarding the reception of migrants under the Turkey agreement, but also in view of preparing populations in the Western Balkans and the EU for the need to integrate a certain number of migrants that will durably settle in their countries.
- CSOs recommend that the asylum systems across the Western Balkans be upgraded in view of the expected increase in asylum seekers within the region that will no longer simply transit, but will require long-term integration into the societies of the Western Balkans, including access to education, health and social services.
- CSOs warn of the risk to trade off between the perceived need for stable governments and the need to tackle backsliding of democracy in transit countries and Turkey. CSOs call on the actors of the Berlin Process to explicitly incorporate democratic and rule-of-law standards as contained in Negotiation Chapters 23 and 24, rather than bracketing these sensitive issues in favour of more technical cooperation. In addition, CSOs note that the economic situation within the Western Balkans region needs to be urgently improved in order to address the high rates of emigration and ensuing brain drain, particularly among the youth.

Green growth and challenges for the environment

- CSO Forum participants thank the French Government for addressing the environment and climate change as crucial topics for development of WB6 countries, as demonstrated by the Podgorica Ministerial Meeting held on April 2, 2016.
- Specifically this should mean an end to new coal projects; a greater commitment to regional cooperation through planning, financing and developing smart grids to cater to much larger elements of solar and wind; to increase attention to energy efficiency as a way of creating jobs for young people, fighting climate change and reducing energy poverty.
- CSOs stress that addressing environment and climate change issues provides a powerful leverage for sustainable development and democracy in the Western Balkans region and an opportunity to train young people for new job opportunities.

Conflict resolution and solving bilateral issues in the Western Balkans Region

- CSOs urge the summit series to define a framework for the resolution of bilateral issues and to widen the base for it, including monitoring of the agreements' implementation, for example by involving national parliaments and affected local communities. CSOs point to

past positive examples of solving similar disputes in the region and making use of the lessons learned. CSOs warn that persistence of bilateral issues is a threat to stability in the region and an obstacle to EU integration and regional cooperation.

- CSOs should be involved from the very beginning of the resolution process. They can provide specific expertise and can increase awareness, mobilise public opinion and assure the involvement of affected local communities. CSOs can be instrumental in sensitising the public, creating cross-border alliances in support of resolution and building political will to resolve the disputes, and media outlets can also play a significant role in that.
- CSOs request a formal structure and allocated funding in the summit series that would ensure and support their involvement in resolving bilateral issues. The inclusion of CSOs will strengthen a spirit of compromise by contributing to governments' efforts and will increase the democratic standards of mediation and dialogue, even in the absence of a final resolution of the dispute.