



Civil Society Forum Skopje

of the Western Balkans Summit Series

"Reclaiming Democracy, Europe and Social Justice"

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Recommendations

Democracy, Europe, Social Justice: Future Strategies

Where are we now?

The acknowledgement of the global crisis of democracy was the upshot of the discussion on the challenges democracy faces at the moment. Democracy and its institutions, both in the West and in the Western Balkans, are believed to be captured by groups guided by special interest – both political and business elites. This increases the mistrust of people in democratic institutions resulting in diminished popular faith in democratic practice and providing a fertile ground for the rise of populist politics offering simple solutions to complex political and social problems. Rising social inequalities and the insufficient level of education on democratic values were pointed as the main reason for the democratic malaise. What makes the situation even more frustrating in some countries of the Western Balkans is the awareness that the authoritarian turn comes after a period of steady democratic achievements that are now being reversed.

While the enlargement process continues to lose support in Brussels, a feeling of togetherness and of a common European path is also diminishing in the WB. This requires rethinking the approach that Civil Society in the WB has towards European integration. Lackluster communication between European governments and the citizens in the Western Balkans impedes the integration process.

Where do we want to be?

In an ideal scenario CSOs would have the opportunity to work independently to build a deliberative democracy in which educated citizens reattach themselves to the democratic process. Democracy needs to be re-defined in such a way that the rule of law becomes its basic principle. It should be more about stable norms than contingent and arbitrary political decisions. The institutions of liberal democracy need to be strengthened in a collective enterprise of states and non-state actors. Human rights need to be a tenet. Progressive legislation needs to be thoroughly implemented, not just adopted as part of ticking-the-box administrative exercises.

Having in mind that the WB Civil Society still has a vision of the WB6 countries being part of one European family based on the same values and principles. Furthermore, a new paradigm for enlargement is paramount. A narrative that offers a change of perspective, which is not about the enlargement 'of a club' but rather about one European society whose stakeholders are active citizens throughout the continent. Changing the established narrative can allow Europe to harness the progressive energy present in the Western Balkans today.

We aspire to a society where citizens know, protect and claim their rights – where citizens are free from fear, live in solidarity with each other and identify as citizens of a common society with accountable institutions providing justice and equality.

What are the future strategies?

In order to address the identified shortcomings, CSOs need to reinvent themselves in order to be more responsive to the real needs of the citizens. CSOs need to come up with mechanisms that will demonstrate the social benefits of their work to wider society such as improved strategies of communication, measures aimed at tackling their lack of credibility and actions for ensuring their financial sustainability. Instead of being focused exclusively on their particular missions, CSOs need to be open to building links of solidarity and equivalence with others CSOs, the state institutions, the media and the private sector. The role of the youth in the restoration of faith in democracy is pivotal. The outreach of the activities of the CSOs needs to be expanded to tackle the local level, not just the central one.

Hope for a socially just society lies in engaging with people and communities. Self-organization should be intrinsic in this process. If communities are organized, vocal and active, governments must take note. The association of textile workers Glasno from Shtip in Macedonia is an encouraging example of local self-organizing that can serve as an inspirational case. Civil society should take actions to fight for the rights of marginalized groups and build and support progressive ways of organizing.

Youth and students especially should be enabled to self-organize, cooperate and develop joint positions in order to advocate their positions towards the institutions. Consultative arrangements can help to bridge the gap between civil society and the institutions. Regional solidarity and communication between movements and organizations working on similar issues or approaches can help and support successful actions.