



Western Balkans Summit Vienna 2015  
**Civil Society Forum**

## Recommendations of the Civil Society Organisations for the Vienna Summit 2015

### Short version

Socio-economic and political reforms remain key for the successful European integration of the Western Balkans. This process can only be successful with the broad and comprehensive inclusion of civil society. **The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum constitutes one venue for civil society to articulate recommendations, make suggestions and be a critical and competent voice at the series of Western Balkans summits that began in Berlin in 2014 and continues in Vienna in 2015 and Paris in 2016. Three themes have been identified as key areas of social concern: the culture of regional cooperation, freedom of expression and the creation of jobs.<sup>1</sup>**

General crucial prerequisites for reform are the strengthening of state institutions, including the rule of law and democratic practice. EU integration thus constitutes an important opportunity for the pursuit of reforms and the establishment of institutions and governance that ensure the countries' compatibility with the EU. If nothing else, a modern and EU-orientated state needs a democratic leadership including a respectful dialogue between all actors of politics and society. Furthermore, governments of the Western Balkans should accept the civil society sector as an equal partner in the EU integration process and commit to funding civil society initiatives and networks that have delivered tangible results.

<sup>1</sup> These recommendations are the result of deliberations among approx. 120 civil society activists, members of think tanks and media, who discussed the themes in three workshops in the spring 2015 in Tirana, Sarajevo and Belgrade.

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## Enhancing Regional Cooperation

**Dealing with the past and regional confidence building.** While regional cooperation is beneficial in many fields, improving mutual understanding, exploring and discussing difficult episodes of the common history remain important aspects of regional cooperation where civil society can and should play an active role.

**Regional cooperation to increase human resources and to exchange best practices.** Civil society actors can contribute toward policies and strategies for enhancing regional cooperation in the area of social development and help improve the institutional and legal environment for civil society regionally.

**Civil society networks as pillars of regional cooperation.** Existing regional civil society networks and groups should be supported as mechanisms of confidence building and regional cooperation. A government-led regional cooperation should engage with these initiatives.

**Civil society organisations feature a high potential for EU integration.** Civil society merits inclusion in fields of regional cooperation not obviously linked to civil society, such as energy or infrastructure. Civil society involvement can push EU integration and reforms in these fields.

**Strengthening the synergies of regional cooperation.** A careful stock-taking would help to ensure that the institutional landscape of regional cooperation is streamlined and more visible and transparent.

## Securing Freedom of Expression and Independent Media

**Legal protection and working conditions of journalists.** The legal protection of journalists needs to be increased as well as their working conditions improved through the social dialogue with employers, which would overall diminish the precarity in work relations. Media owners should adhere to existing laws in regard to employment and working conditions.

**Public broadcasters must be independent.** Public broadcasters and regulatory bodies need to become free from direct or indirect government influence. The process of choosing board members of public broadcasters



should be transparent, non-partisan and based on professional standards, just as their meetings ought to be transparent.

**State funding of media.** Governments should ensure full, long-term and reliable financial independence of public TV, and government funding to media should be guided by clear and transparent criteria. The state should adhere to a moratorium on advertisement until new mechanisms on funding and advertisement that also include civil society are established.

**Transparent media markets are indispensable.** The ownership structure of all media outlets should be permanently available to the public in an easy and transparent way and prevent monopolies in media and media distribution.

### **Successful Creation of Jobs in the Whole Region – Developing Prosperity in a Common Labour Market**

**More production as a balance to the growing consumption sector.** Each country should develop its own economic model based on the local comparative advantage, structures and competences. In this context, the complementarity in the value chain must be supported mainly through cross-border cooperation in related areas of economy.

**Strong support of SME and developing local production capacities based on own competences.** The focus should be on supporting high, added value production and manufacturing activities, and embedding them into the EU supply chain – and less in consumption activities – taking into account the economic structure based on nano, small and medium sized enterprises.

**Modernising and supporting the agricultural sector.** The agricultural sector should be developed through on-the-ground assistance and micro-credits targeting the rural population with training, micro-credits, advice, etc., which could be a model for Nano and SME in other fields of economy.

**Entrepreneurship and innovation as driving factors.** Promotion of entrepreneurship, creation of conditions for sustainable activity and promotion of an innovative economy – especially in bio-agriculture, tourism, IT, etc. – sectors, where the requested financial capital to start up is relatively low.



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**Representative regional, national and local economic councils.** Civil society actors should be included in economic planning from the very beginning – like in a National Economic Council (including politics, employers, scientists, trade unions, civil society, local scientific community, etc.).

**Joint regional agreements to support regional exchange.** Free market competition should be compensated by joint regional and cross-border planning for economic development – a process that should be completed by the production of harmonised regional data, not only on trade and investment but also on social factors.

**Raising quality of life and consumers' protection.** Defining minimum standards for the quality of products and services directly means a higher protection of consumers such as is required in the EU.

**Developing an active labour market policy – fighting the grey labour market.** The countries have to develop an active labour market policy, actively involving all the actors as co-responsible partners. An efficient labour market policy requires an informed, active and permanent collaboration between employers and employees through joint decision making, development and planning for crises.