

Western Balkans Civil Society Forum*

Abstract

This article is a report of the Civil Society Forum organised by the European Economic and Social Committee and held in Thessaloniki, Greece, in October 2023. The conference took place on the basis of three panels held on implementation of the green agenda, democracy and participation, and education and youth policy, each of which are referenced below. First, however, the article addresses the keynote presentations, featuring also interviews conducted by the author, which explored issues such as co-operation, the extent to which government authorities in the western Balkans do (or do not) consult civil society in the course of policymaking, and the question of EU enlargement, an issue which has been more or less moribund for some time but which has been given a new lease of life as a result of the war in Ukraine and the applications of both Ukraine and Moldova for EU membership. The communiqué agreed at the conference emphasised the need for enlargement to the western Balkans in the interests of European peace, security and economic and social prosperity, but it is not yet clear how this will translate into policy.

Keywords: social dialogue, civil society, trade unions, western Balkans, EU integration, green agenda, lifelong learning

Introduction

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)¹ invited representatives of trade unions, employer associations and civil society organisations from western Balkan countries for the 9th Civil Society Forum, which took place in Thessaloniki on 19 and 20 October 2023. The state of democracy, youth and education policies and the implementation of the ‘green agenda’ were all on the programme.

Oliver Röpke, former head of the Brussels office of Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB; Austrian Trade Union Federation), has presided over the EESC since April 2023. The EU enlargement process and cooperation with civil society in candidate countries are at the top of his ‘to do’ list. The EU enlargement process for western Balkan countries has a history of more than twenty years: Slove-

* This article was carried in its original German language on *Europa* blog (<https://europa.blog/de/zivilgesellschaftliches-forum-der-westbalkanstaaten/>). It has been translated into English, including liaison with the author, specifically for the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, with which copyright for the English version lies.

1 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is an advisory body of the EU composed of representatives from trade unions, employer organisations and other interest groups.

nia became the first country from the former Yugoslavia to join the European Union, in 2004; while Croatia followed in 2013. There has, however, been no substantial progress in the enlargement process for almost ten years but, following Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova both recently obtaining candidate status, the discussion on EU enlargement has regained some momentum among Balkan countries.

Cooperation and participation

For the candidate countries with which the EESC has established a bilateral body, there is already a joint advisory committee, a situation which includes Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. A so-called ‘civil society platform’ also exists with regard to Ukraine and to Moldova. Candidate countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are expected to follow suit and the administrative steps towards cooperation possibilities are already being taken.

In September, the EESC decided that members from candidate countries should be involved in its work from 2024. For Oliver Röpke, this is a significant step towards EU enlargement. In an interview with the author,² Röpke set down carefully the extent of the EESC’s cooperation with partner organisations in south-east Europe, around which he is aware of the need to avoid the mistakes from the past in the EU enlargement process while seeking to accelerate the active participation of all partner organisations.

Within the EESC, the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee deals with developments in industrial relations and civil society. Andrej Zorko, executive secretary of Zveza Svobodnih Sindikatov Slovenije (ZSSS; Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia), is the chair of this working group. In his interview with the author,³ he described how trade unions in the western Balkans could benefit from participating in the work of the EESC before going on to discuss the current situation in western Balkans countries regarding social dialogue and trade union rights in EU candidate countries.

Implementation of the ‘green agenda’

Thematically, the conference was divided into three panel discussions. One panel focused on the implementation of a sustainable environmental policy – that is, the green agenda – in western Balkan countries. In his presentation, Matej Zakonjšek, Director of the Transport Community Permanent Secretariat,⁴ emphasised the importance of working rapidly and effectively towards a sustainable environmental policy in Balkan countries. Zakonjšek stressed that eight of the fifteen European cities with the most severe environmental pollution were located in western Balkan states. For

2 Included in the Annex.

3 Included in the Annex.

4 An international organisation in the field of mobility and transport, established by a treaty signed on 9 October 2017 under Council Decision (EU) 2019/392, whose aim is the creation of a Transport Community in the field of road, rail, inland waterways and maritime transport, as well as the development of the transport network between the European Union and the six western Balkan partners.

this transport and traffic specialist, the development of a cross-border rail network is thus of utmost importance. ‘We need a network, not a patchwork’, he appealed to political leaders in the candidate countries.

Nataša Kalauz, Director of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Adria, felt that the debate lacked any sort of demand for the protection of biodiversity in the western Balkans. The goal of environmental policy should be to preserve the rich diversity of species in a region which, according to Kalauz, has unique flora and fauna. She emphasised that protecting the forests, which make up 70% of the area of the western Balkans, is extremely important. In particular, she was critical that energy supply often takes centre stage in green agenda policies, overshadowing other crucial aspects.

Kalauz saw a dilemma in the green agenda on the grounds that active and practical environmental organisations are severely underfunded and lack personnel. At the same time, she also stated that ‘corrupt people’ are benefiting from EU funding, pointing out that, of the small amount of money dedicated for environmental policy, too much is flowing into the wrong hands, resulting in EU funding having minimal societal benefits. She advocated the need for a review of the implementation tools of the green agenda, demanding that ‘We need more credible projects’.

Atthe Hykolli, chair of Bashkimi i Sindikatave të Pavarura të Kosovës (BSPK; Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Kosovo), is convinced that employees are willing to implement the green agenda in their workplaces. However, he observed that this requires companies to do more in the sense of undertaking the necessary training and skills development measures.

Democracy and participation

Numerous speakers at the conference lamented that governments and authorities are not involving civil society in their decision-making processes: consultation with the social partners either does not take place at all or otherwise only lip service is paid to it. At the same time, speakers were aware that the allocation of EU funding to NGOs is unpredictable and opaque because it is controlled by domestic governments and institutions. Furthermore, civil society organisations and social partners are also not seriously involved in the EU enlargement process.

Education and youth policy

Adult education, lifelong learning and vocational education and training were at the centre of this panel discussion. Čedanka Andrić, chair of Ujedinjeni granski sindikati ‘Nezavisnost’ (Serbian Trade Union Confederation ‘Nezavisnost’), emphasised the need to acquire professional qualifications in green and digital competencies. Her conviction is that companies in Serbia are not adequately prepared for a blended training approach combining workplace and school/university settings. To create quality jobs, moreover, she observed that it is crucial quickly to train a sufficient number of teachers and trainers. Trade unions are, however, ready to cooperate with companies on these issues.

Saša Ačić, Director of Unija Poslodovaca Republike Srpske (Entrepreneurs Association of the Bosnian Republika Srpska), called for an initiative to train engineers. His view is that there is a shortage of technicians and vocational training and, consequently, he used his address to emphasise the priority need for the promotion of engineering programmes in connection with the concept of lifelong learning.

Declaration

At the end of the conference, the participants adopted a communiqué calling for a resolute policy on EU enlargement to include western Balkan countries, emphasising that the swift integration of these countries into the European Union is an investment in peace, security and in economic and social prosperity in Europe.⁵

Annex⁶

Interview with Oliver Röpke

Röpke: I was elected President of the European Economic and Social Committee only six months ago and presented a manifesto back then wherein it was very clear that one of my flagship commitments was enlargement. We can see that the issue of enlargement is suddenly back at the top of the agenda since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and we have to see how we can deal with that.

Europe also has to create capacity, so to speak. I really see a fundamental task for the EESC in terms of strengthening civil society organisations and especially, of course, our social partner unions in the enlargement states. What we saw during the last rounds of enlargement was that we included the states, which I think is right, but the structures were sometimes not as they should have been when it comes both to civil society and to social dialogue and the trade unions. I think these mistakes have to be avoided in the next round of enlargement.

Scherrer: What exactly does the Committee plan to do?

Röpke: We want to be the first EU institution to integrate candidate countries into our work, to integrate them in full. We already have 329 members of our committee from all EU member states and we want that to include all candidate countries. This also means that everyone who wants to have candidate status can start with the EESC and appoint members from there with whom we can work. Of course, this is as far as the EU allows: there are certain restrictions, for example a lack of formal laws. However, colleagues who are appointed can vote and work with us on developing statements that are important for candidate countries. I'm thinking here in terms of social dialogue. This is how the EESC works.

We have three groups – employers, trade unions and other civil society organisations – and, when it comes to candidate member states, then exactly the same applies. This means that they are selected on an equal basis, so to speak. We current-

5 <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/9th-western-balkans-civil-society-forum>.

6 Editor's Note: the transcripts of each of these interviews have been minimally edited in order to improve the flow and eliminate speakers' mis-steps.

ly have certain joint consultative committees where candidate countries are already partially represented.

And I think as a second step we can then also help to strengthen the three groups represented in the EESC within their own member states vis-à-vis their governments in order that we can seriously promote a genuine social dialogue between trade unions and the employer organisations.

We recently decided that we wanted to integrate the three groups from the enlargement countries in our work. There was also a certain amount of scepticism in our house. But I'm glad that we ultimately decided on this, and by a very large majority. We are now starting the process, a selection process, which will be democratic and transparent.

And we really want to start this project in January 2024. As a symbolic prelude, so to speak, there will be a plenary session of the EESC to which we will also invite the new candidate member countries and, above all, to have a focus on enlargement and with civil society and social partners included within that. That also has some costs.

Scherrer: Are the finances in place?

Röpke: We will provide the finances. I presented the project to the Commission and the Parliament very early on. Everyone wants to support this and we also have a commitment from the Commission that financial support will be provided here too. Now it's about establishing the technical details.

The final details will be clarified there in the final negotiations. But I'm very optimistic; we all are. We all say that there is now momentum for enlargement, and everyone praises our initiative, but you can't then just pay lip service to that; it also needs to be supported. But I am very optimistic that we will then have the support.

Annex 2 – Interview with Andrej Zorko

Scherrer: What is in this initiative for the trade unions of the region of the western Balkans?

Zorko: It means a lot. One is the work inside the JCCs – the joint consultative committees – that we have inside of the Committee. Another is the work of the Committee itself. So this initiative will help them a lot. When a country becomes a member of the European Union, those people already have some kind of experience of how a committee works and this will help them integrate in the work of the Committee faster and, of course, in an official way.

I can give you my personal experience on that. When I became a member of the EESC, it took quite a lot of time – more than half a mandate – to know how the Committee works, to get knowledge of which people are important; to know what kind of rights you have in the work of the Committee; and what you can do and what you cannot do. So this initiative from the Committee, will help especially trade union representatives from the candidate countries, and also for the western Balkan countries, to become integrated more quickly in the work of the Committee.

Scherrer: The employer associations of western Balkan countries will be there as well. They will see that they should have proper social dialogue. Does that help?

Zorko: Yes, it will help. If I compare for example the social dialogue in some countries of the western Balkans and how the dialogue is at European level, it's a totally different story. It's like black and white. I really hope that this integration of representatives of the social partners from the western Balkans into the work of the Committee will also have consequences for the social dialogue in a positive way; that they can see new possibilities in the way of working at national level.

There is another important issue here. Integrating in this phase all the social partners into the work of the Committee also means that all the members of the social partners will get access to all of the opinions which have been produced and adopted by the EESC. That means that all the positions of the social partners from the different member states and civil society which are reflected in the opinions adopted with consensus, or a majority, can also be used at national level. This is important when we are talking about the integration process, the negotiations process, which must be done at national level in the candidate countries.

Scherrer: We have to face quite often that fundamental trade union rights are not given in some countries or there is a violation of these rights. Does that help when they are now integrated in your work? And what about the other committee which is drawing attention to the western Balkans, the Fundamental Rights Committee of the EESC?

Zorko: Of course it will help. I know the situation in the western Balkans very well. On paper, everything is perfect – on paper. But in reality, in real life, many things do not work. It is very difficult to develop social dialogue in the candidate countries of the western Balkans. The way they will be included in the work of the Committee will also give the possibility that they can say what is really happening on the ground. Many times we have heard very nice words from the politicians – ‘we have the law which is totally in line with European standards and everything’ – yes, on paper. But in real life, in reality, a lot of time the story is totally different.

So after January when they will be included in the work of the Committee, they can also get the possibility to say to all the members of the EESC what is really happening in their countries. This is important. Their voices can be heard directly in one European institution.



© Peter Scherrer