

Joint declaration of the participants in the EU Civil Society Forum for Western Balkans and Türkiye

We, the representatives of civil society organizations and activists from the Western Balkans and Turkey, gathered at the EU Civil Society Forum held on 11-13 June 2024, in Belgrade, Serbia, hereby issue this joint declaration drawing from the discussions held at the Forum concerning the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

The new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans represents a major new opportunity to incentivise EU-compliant reforms in the region, while also boosting the EU's public image and overall support for EU accession. But this can only be achieved if the process of implementing the Growth Plan is transparent and inclusive, recognising the major stakes the entire societies of the region have in it – not least because of the 6 billion EUR of additional financial support attached to it.

The regulation on the Reform and Growth Facility, the constitutive part of the Plan, sets up an appropriate role of civil society organisations and social partners in the development of Reform Agendas. The Reform Agendas, prepared by each of the Western Balkan 6 governments, will be the basis for establishing, implementing monitoring and evaluating the reform progress tied to biannual payments of the new financial package. Thus, paragraph 6 of Article 11 (Submission of Reform Agendas) states: “The Reform Agendas shall be prepared in an inclusive and transparent manner, in consultation with social partners and civil society organisations.” Moreover, Article 13 (Content of the Reform Agendas) states that these documents should contain a summary of the consultation process conducted in their preparation. Such consultations, to be implemented “in accordance with the beneficiaries’ legal framework,” should include “relevant stakeholders, including beneficiaries’ parliaments, local and regional representative bodies and authorities, social partners and civil society organisations.” Reform Agendas should also indicate how the stakeholders’ inputs were reflected in their text.

Compared to the myriad of complex tasks that both the Commission and the WB governments must undertake to put the implementation of the Growth Plan in motion, these provisions concerning the role of national parliaments, civil society and social partners may seem like minor details. Yet, for these actors – largely marginalised in the EU accession process characterised by a strong “executive bias” – they are crucial. The duty to conduct consultations is enshrined in the Regulation, making it the letter of the law. As such, it must not be an optional activity, but a matter of rule of law observation for both the WB governments and the EU institutions.

The obligation to conduct consultations in the development of these key reform planning and prioritisation documents is a reform achievement in itself – a minimum standard that all involved parties should observe. This minimum standard applies more widely, across all EU support for the Enlargement region.

While we understand the challenge of ensuring quality Reform Agendas are developed promptly, we must not allow the consultation process to be compromised by haste. In the

past, we have frequently observed the detrimental practice in our countries of using the EU accession process obligations and tight schedules as a reason to neglect consultation processes. The European Commission has acknowledged our concerns regarding such practices.

Now is the time to align actions with commitments. If the European Commission aims to uphold the EU's image as a protector of the fundamental values of democracy and a pluralistic society, it must demonstrate this commitment by insisting that the Western Balkan governments respect the legal provisions on consultations of draft Reform Agendas. We call upon the Commission to support us in this endeavour and to ensure accountability from our governments. The Commission holds the authority to assess and, if necessary, reject these agendas if the minimum prescribed criteria are not met (Articles 14 and 15 of the Regulation). Initiating this process correctly is crucial. Breaching clear legal obligations at the outset will complicate rectifying such issues later during the implementation of this new support for the region's EU accession efforts.

The list of organizations that supported open letter:

1. Center for Monitoring and Activism - CEMA
2. Association DUGA
3. Institute for Corruption Research Kareja
4. Laris Association
5. Association Lilit
6. Urban Green 2022
7. Incubator for Ecological Education
8. RUZICA
9. Caritas St. Anastasia Sremska Mitrovica
10. Initiative for Ecological Standardization and Innovation - IESI
11. Rainbow Spark
12. UNEKOOP
13. Dialogue
14. Archive of Public Meetings
15. Association of Beekeeping Organizations of Serbia
16. Local Response
17. National Ecological Association
18. Drug Policy Network South East Europe
19. Kraljevo Development Center
20. European Center for Ecology
21. TO BE ALL EQUAL
22. Young Heart
23. Novi Sad Cycling Initiative
24. Center for Human Rights-Nis
25. Center for Advanced Economic Studies CEVES
26. Youth in Rural Areas, Blace
27. Association for the Development of Creativity
28. Association "Dr. Djordje Hadzic"
29. Initiative for the Rights of Persons with Mental Disabilities MDRI-S

30. Academic Initiative "Forum 10"
31. Krusevac Ecological Organization
32. Eko Surdulica
33. Civic Turnaround
34. Uzice Center for Human Rights and Democracy
35. Jezdimirovic Academy
36. Association of Citizens "From Another Angle"
37. iRevolution
38. Lighthouse
39. Environment Improvement Center
40. Misdemeanor Court
41. National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS)
42. Center for Growth, Development, and Violence Prevention
43. Praskozorje
44. Association Tolerance Against Diversity
45. Institute for Territorial Economic Development - InTER
46. Academy of Women's Leadership
47. Center for Modern Skills
48. Children's Center
49. Association Bazi Mili
50. Confederation of Free Trade Unions
51. ASTRA - Anti Trafficking Action
52. Atina - Citizens' Association for Combating Human Trafficking
53. Sport Union "Extreme Sports"
54. Association "Kokoro" Bor
55. Citizens' Association "Friend in Hand"
56. Autism Kragujevac
57. Bio Idea for Sustainable Development
58. Citizens' Association "IZOM"
59. Build Green Group
60. Bahadır Çetin
61. ADO Alevi Philosophy Center Association
62. ADİP Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform
63. Local Development Association
64. Foundation for Leadership, Opportunities, Learning, and Innovation (Foundation L.O.L.I.)
65. Joscelyn Foundation
66. Consulting @da Danışmanlık
67. Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers
68. Albanian Disability Rights Foundation
69. European Policy Centre - CEP
70. Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society
71. Active Mobility
72. Local Democracy Agency Subotica
73. NGO THE CONSUMER
74. LINK Entrepreneurial Center
75. IPS Communication Foundation

76. NGO 35mm
77. Center for Social Policy
78. Association for Support and Development SISTEM
79. Center for Democracy Foundation
80. Civic Alliance
81. NGO VIP CULTURE
82. Center for European Policy Studies on Regional and Local Development
83. Humanitarian Association Roma Heart
84. European Movement in Serbia
85. Partners Albania for Change and Development
86. Jelena Šantić Foundation
87. RESIS - Research Institute on Social Development
88. Rainbow Association Against Discrimination
89. Center for the Promotion of Civil Society
90. Multiethnic Culture of Kosovo
91. Genesis Project
92. Contemporary Life Support Association
93. Initiative for Development and Cooperation
94. Impact Incubator | Albania
95. FINANCE THINK - Economic, Research & Policy Institute, Skopje
96. European Institute of Peace
97. Women Center for D&C Albania
98. Center for Investigative Journalism (CIN)
99. Balkan Civil Society Development Network - BCSDN
100. PLAY International Kosovo
101. European Policy Institute Skopje
102. Reactor - Research in Action
103. European Policy Institute
104. European Policy Institute (EPI) - Skopje
105. Down Syndrome Albania Foundation
106. National Roma Center
107. Asylum Protection Center
108. Kosovo Civil Society Foundation
109. Belgrade Open School
110. Centers of Civil Initiatives
111. STGM – Türkiye
112. Macedonian Center for International Cooperation
113. Center for the Development of Non-Governmental Organizations
114. May 17 Association
115. Kaos GL Association
116. National Civil Society Development Foundation Civic Resource Centre