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**The Western Balkans Civil Society High-Level Conference**

**Continuing the success story of EU enlargement –**

**bringing benefits to the Western Balkans in advance of accession**

*Background of the EESC’s Western Balkans High-Level Conference*

*The Western Balkans Civil Society High-Level Conference will bring together EESC members, organised civil society representatives from the Western Balkan countries, and members of organised civil society and officials from Slovenia. It will mark 20 years of the biggest EU enlargement thus far, and 20 years since Slovenia joined the Union. The conference will be organised in close cooperation with and support from our partners and will complement the EESC’s work, such as the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, which the EESC has organised every two years since 2006. The event will provide an opportunity for participants to exchange views on the needed reforms in the Western Balkans and in the EU to maintain enlargement policy as one of the most important EU success stories. It will also be an opportunity to discuss the current situation of civil society in the region and the need for its better inclusion in the accession process. The participants will adopt conclusions addressed to national authorities and European institutions.*

*For more information on the EESC’s activities on the Western Balkans, see:*

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/tags/western-balkans>*.*

1. **Date and venue**

The Western Balkans Conference is scheduled to take place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 24 May 2024. The venue for the conference has yet to be determined.

1. **Programme**

Two main sessions will be organised in two parts.

# **Morning session key topic: EU accession path for the Western Balkans**

# Part I: The EU and the Western Balkans – focus on fundamentals

The opening session with speeches by high-level participants will tackle the current geopolitical situation, developments in Western Balkan accession negotiations, the rule of law, fundamental rights, reconciliation and the role of organised civil society in the Western Balkans’ path towards the European Union.

Part II: Reforms needed to ensure a successful next enlargement

* What are the prospects of the EU’s renewed enlargement policy, including the idea of accession in stages?
* Are there reforms needed in the EU in areas such as the internal market, cohesion policy and the common agricultural policy, in view of the next enlargement? Are changes needed to accommodate new Member States?
* What is public opinion on enlargement in the EU and in the Western Balkans? How can we achieve the right communication strategy to ‘win the hearts and minds of citizens’?

# **Afternoon session key topic:** **Contribution of oragnised civil society to the implementation of the new growth plan for the Western Balkans**

# Part I: Lessons learned from the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF)

* What structures can be used from the RRF to improve the inclusion of social partners and CSOs in the development and implementation of the new plan for the Western Balkans?
* How will the crucial importance of the rule of law be reflected in the implementation?

 Part II: Accelerating the socio-economic convergence of the region with the EU

* What are the current obstacles to a fast socio-economic convergence of the Western Balkans?
* How will the new facility improve the chances for faster convergence? What role will social partners and CSOs have in project implementation?

# **Concluding remarks**

1. Participants

# Representatives of social partners and CSOs from the region

Up to 60 delegates from the Western Balkans will attend the conference in Ljubljana.

The participants will represent different interest groups represented in the EESC – employers, trade unions and civil society organisations of various interests, for example.

# Members of the EESC

A delegation of 17 EESC members will be taking part in the conference. The delegation will bring together members involved in the work of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee and in the regular meetings of the Joint Consultative Committees established with Montenegro and Serbia, as well as the president of the External Relations Section (REX).

The EESC president will head the EESC delegation and open the conference.

# High-level speakers (tbc)

* **Oliver Röpke**, President of the EESC
* **Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography
* **Olivér Várhelyi**, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement
* **Majlinda Bregu**,Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council
* **Tanja Fajon**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovenia
* **Luka Mesec**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of Slovenia.

# Other participants

* Representatives from the Belgian Presidency of the EU Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament.
* Representatives from the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the European Training Foundation (ETF), the Open Society Foundations (OSF) – Western Balkans and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA).
* Representatives from the main International and European civil society umbrella organisations.
* Representatives from Economic and Social Committees and similar institutions from the region and from Slovenia.
* Diplomatic corps.
* The press.
1. Outcome

The conclusions of the conference will provide a organised civil society contribution for the heads of state and governments of the EU Member States and of the Western Balkan countries that will meet at the next EU-Western Balkans Summit.

The conclusions will bring together the views of social partners and civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and the EU on issues of shared interest. They will also be addressed to EU institutions, EU Member States and governments of the region and other relevant stakeholders.

**For more information**

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