

Event Notes

Civil Society and Beyond – A Joint Dialogue on the European Path

25-26 February 2016

Belgrade, Serbia

The two day International Conference “**Civil Society and Beyond: A Joint Dialogue on the European Path**” was organized on 25-26 February 2016 by the European Movement International and European Movement in Serbia, in partnership with TACSO and the Serbian European Integration Office, kindly hosted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. The main goal of the conference was to exchange thoughts and experiences between stakeholders from different Balkan countries, referring to civil society’s role in the process of European integration, as well as to work on the mechanisms for strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation among CSOs in the region and Europe (EU).

The event gathered approximately 200 participants from civil society from the EU, the Western Balkan region and Serbia, as well as from European institutions and national authorities from the region, and attracted significant media attention.

Day 1

Welcome Words and Opening Speeches

Serbian National Assembly Speaker, Maja Gojković opened the conference on Thursday, 25 February. Gojković said that the past months had been an extremely important period for Serbia, which consequently made the cooperation with civil society even more critical. The Parliament of Serbia achieved political consensus on Serbia’s EU Membership, and EU Membership is Serbia’s foreign policy top priority. However, she emphasised that the economic and political reforms undertaken as part of the association process were not pursued for the sake of the memberships only, but also because they would bring benefits to Serbian citizens and help Serbia become a modern and well-regulated country.

President of the European Movement in Serbia, Mihailo Crnobrnja put big emphasis on the role of the Movement in the EU accession process as well as the importance of the participation of the civil society in the process. “The mission of the European Movement is to facilitate a public debate and contribute to the acceleration of the negotiation process and accession to the EU”, he said and recalled that “the conference should serve as a forum to come up with ideas on how to strengthen influence of the European Movement and CSOs in Europe”.



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Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić stated that the role of the civil society in our societies cannot be “overemphasized”; while in the 1990s governments were waging wars, CSOs were advocating for peace and reconciliation and cooperating to handle the multiple crises that were happening at the time. Today, with more than 27000 CSOs registered in Serbia, Prime Minister admitted that his own view towards them had changed significantly. CSOs play an important role in the process of transformation, even if their views are strongly critical. The government of Serbia had adopted guidelines for participation of CSOs in the legislative process and has established Office for CSO cooperation.

Serbian Minister without portfolio in charge of European Integration, Jadranka Joksimović commented on the phenomenon of Euro-skepticism currently gaining its momentum; the way to combat it was to work on clear communication between the government and citizens. Member States and candidate countries should remind us why EU membership is beneficial. Everyone is a stakeholder in the process of European integration, which she termed a process of regulated change, and the contribution of CSOs in this regard is priceless.

H. E. Michael Davenport, Head of the EU Delegation in Serbia, said that the EU was pleased to observe a very welcome momentum in regional cooperation. He also commented on EU enlargement policy and said that it focuses on three broad areas: the rule of law, public administration, and economic governance. Strong civil society and citizens’ participation are crucial for every democratic system and should be actively involved in policy making from an early stage. The involvement of CSOs in the EU accession process ensures that it is not just a governmental exercise, but that it also reflects citizens’ needs.

President of the European Movement International, Jo Leinen MEP quoted Jean Monnet who did not speak about uniting states, but about uniting people. Without understanding people, European integration will not survive. He pointed out that both the European Parliament and the European Movement work for a new dynamic in the enlargement process, and that we have to take all necessary steps to bring this association process to its final aim - candidate countries becoming full EU members. In this regard, regional cooperation is essential, as the EU cannot do it alone.

Plenary Session I: Multilateral Dialogue between EU and Enlargement Countries

The first plenary session **Multilateral Dialogue between EU and Enlargement Countries** concluded that the regional cooperation should especially be tightened on issues in the realm of Chapters 23 and 34, and in monitoring the progress in these criteria. Cooperation should not be developed through national baskets, but through content baskets, and the state should not be the only actor: civil society already has the know-how and can add to the accountability and transparency that is indispensable in communication. Resources need to be pulled together to form regional platforms and the EU funding should be just a trigger for development of civil society and cooperation.

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Chief Negotiator for Montenegro's Accession to EU Aleksandar, Andrija Pejović assessed that the transformative power of the EU is tested in the Balkans and allows the EU values to show they can function. Indeed sometimes EU values are better felt in the candidate countries than in the old member states, who have forgotten about the values they have fought for. He pointed out that increased regional cooperation in the area of rule of law is necessary, and that the focus should be on economic reforms and the migration crisis. Montenegro served as a testing ground for a new approach with the opening of Chapters 23 and 24 first, so the country was prepared and could deal with the coming legislative reforms. This proved to be the right approach in the end.

Bülent Özcan, Director at the Turkish Ministry for EU Affairs, said that it was crucial to facilitate dialogue between the state, the civil society, and their counterparts in EU member states. EU support mechanisms for civil society development are in that sense very valuable. However, consultations with the civil society were not enough, there is a need for consultations with the private sector as well. "We also need to strengthened cooperation between the public, private, and the CS sectors. It is very important to develop a civil society sectoral strategy – not project by project but structural funding, strategy, roadmap. EU funding is not enough, so it's necessary to build cooperation between CSO and private sector", Özcan said. He stressed that he is expecting the EC to support and encourage candidate countries to work closely together on common projects, especially in the setup of civil society dialogue.

Deputy Director at the Serbian European Integration Office, Srđan Majstorović, pointed out three important things in the process of interstate-communication: "We need transparent dialogue between all stakeholders – including the Western Balkans and all other aspiring EU membership countries; inclusiveness of all relevant stakeholders in dialogue on European integration process, meaning civil society needs to participate in the negotiations and IPA programing. And third is compromise - we all have to be equally happy with the reached solution", he said. He reminded that the EU Serbia will eventually join will not be the same as the EU today. Dangers to fundamental freedoms of the EU need to be discussed with a wide circle of stakeholders. This is the only way to bring EU closer to the citizens, Majstorović concluded.

Bernd Hüttemann, Secretary General of the European Movement Germany, explained that a language change from "civil society" to "civil society organizations" structured the dialogue for both EU and national policies. Structured dialogue is part of democracy – but it is not enough at present and more democratic processes are needed outside of the Parliament. The difference between lobbying states and lobbying countries is crucial, he underlined, adding that stakeholders were not just states, but their citizens. "Some countries even within EU cannot show a lively structured dialogue within their countries – we should have member countries rather than member states – so society is included," Hüttemann argued.



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In response to the opening speech of Minister Joksimović, Hüttemann said that ownership of the process was crucial to avoid blame games in the times of crisis. “We want to intervene in other countries not just by making statements, but by bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Let’s be more critical towards the EU member countries, they should also abide by the same standard the countries in accession are trying to reach”.

Frédéric Vallier, Secretary General of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, said that municipalities are important in the EU integration process as they are the form of governance that is closest to citizens. “Because of the specific way of thinking everything is about the discussions on high levels, but the EU is built when citizens are brought together”, Vallier emphasized. Instruments like IPA II are indispensable for building up local authorities and civil society, as is learning from those countries that have already finished the process. Vallier argued that “If we followed the integration in the past it showed no joint work with local self-governments, but a lot of EU policies are about regional development. If regions and municipalities are not fit to answer this, it will take much longer.”

He concluded that if the goal was to reach the citizens, building strong municipalities was necessary: “We need everyone on board and CSOs working together with local self-governments, national governments and the EU in good partnership if we want stronger integration.”

Mercator-IPC Fellow at the German institute for International and Security Affairs, Alida Vračić said that the enlargement process of Western Balkans was like a unicorn: we believe there is one, but have never actually seen it; “It is high time to craft one on our own. For civil society it is time for self-reflection and revision of what we are doing.”

Vračić assessed that the Western Balkans had a much better response to the refugee crises than the EU itself. Civil society took up the work of their authorities at the moment when governments were not properly involved. “However, now civil society is not part of the discussion on the migration crisis on the government level. Also, academia is completely missing from the debate, and how to include them more is question for all of us,” she stated. Vračić added that the EU often advocated that civil society in part of our internal reforms, but that it often has inconsistent policies, while national governments comply “to the extent it does not hurt”. Vračić emphasised the need for regional cooperation of CSOs on the rule of law and in addressing the issue of financial resources, and pointed out that support for the informal forms of regional cooperation is sometimes more effective than insisting on formal structures.

Plenary Session II: Civil Society Heard: National Conventions and Consultation Mechanisms in the European Integration Process

The panel **Civil Society Heard: National Conventions and Consultation Mechanisms in the European Integration Process** inspired a debate on the quality of participation of civil society in the process of EU accession negotiations. It addressed the evolution of the CS mechanisms in the region but also focused on the quality of the state-CS dialogue and the quality of CS participation and inputs.

The recent report on Enlargement of the European Economic and Social Committee concluded that the region witnessed too many emergency legal procedures without any prior public consultation, with the “pressure from Brussels” excuse. Quality of reforms surely suffers from this, so the panel participants called upon the EESC to assess the quality of participatory democracy in its next report, as to encourage governments to change these practices. Another practice needing change is the EU taking sides with governments instead of with civil society in the fight for transparency.

Dr Tanja Mišćević, Head of the Negotiating Team for Accession of Serbia to the EU, said that in Serbia CSOs are not a formal part of the negotiating structures, because their role had been very different from that of the executive branch of the government. The Serbian consultation mechanism for civil society in the European integration process was built on previous experiences and three lessons learnt: civil society can give extremely important insights during the preparation of Action Plans (as it was case for Chapters 23, 24 and for minorities); it had taken responsibility for the inclusiveness in the implementation; and it provided the analytical base by investing its experience and knowledge in all Chapters (e.g. regarding the law on sale and lease of agricultural land). If the government does not accept CSOs suggestion, it is obliged to provide a formal explanation. The above mechanism is important for mutual trust and communication as well as for effectiveness of consultations.

Associate fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations, Natasha Wunsch stressed that procedural empowerment is a crucial step towards substantive engagement. In case of the Croatian 112 platform, monitoring of the accession process and attempt to leverage influence on EU conditionality happened too late in the negotiations, and failed once the EU leverage was removed. Wunsch argued that “civil society can be external to the negotiating team, but needs to have an institutional link to them.” Hence, the models of National Convention such as in Serbia and Montenegro had been formed before the process of negotiations formally started, which make them interesting tools. Natasha reminded that National Conventions should be considered as platform for dialogue existing beyond the accession process but resulting in the EU membership.

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Momčilo Radulović, President of the European Movement Montenegro showcased the Montenegrin experience proving that the most important goals in the EU integration process had been accomplished not by attacking government, but through constructive consultations and expert discussions and suggestions. In Montenegro, the process of constant consultation resulted in 300 recommendations from Montenegrin civil society organizations, of which the government accepted half, contributing to a huge achievement. In different countries, different methodologies are used, but a constant flow and stimulation of communication between CSOs and governments is crucial. All countries of the region might be at different levels of integration, but still they can move forward together.

Secretary General of the European Movement in Serbia, Maja Bobić explained the model of the involvement of Serbia's CSOs in the process of negotiations. This mechanism was conceived before the start of the negotiations when 17 very credible and influential organizations in Serbia decided to cooperate upon the initiative of EMinS and based on the Slovak model of Convention. The main idea was not to be a part of the government structures, but to be present, informed and active in all stages of the process. Important support for the ambitions of the Nation Convention on the EU (NCEU) was provided from the very beginning by Chief of the negotiation Team Tanja Mišćević and the Committee for European Integration of the Parliament, headed by Mr Senic. Thus it was possible for the NCEU to be recognized as interlocutor both with the Parliament and the Negotiation Team in the process of negotiations, having an institutional link and access in the process.

The three main goals and purposes of the NCEU are: meaningful participation of civil society during EU accession process with input on all the relevant documents (not only negotiations positions but also actions plans and benchmarks, etc.); monitoring of the process, reforms and impact of negotiation; and collecting all relevant information and making it accessible to everyone to emphasize that the process holds benefits for all citizens of Serbia. Educating civil society along the process is also crucial. NCEU will also insist on Serbia being a good and active EU member state once membership is achieved.

The Serbian NCEU now has around 700 CSOs participating in 21 Working Groups. Participation of civil society from the local level is encouraged and enabled to avoid the pitfall of the process remaining on the level of the elites. Horizontal expert team looks at cross-sectoral/horizontal issues in all chapters. "We enabled more transparent inclusive negotiations process. We contribute, but still need to build culture of dialogue between civil society and the state," explained Bobić.

Gledis Gjipali, Executive Director of the European Movement Albania, explored the consultations' model in Albania and explained that real difficulties arise when civil society makes an attempt to provide real input. This is an inherited problem in the relationship between the civil society and the government, mostly relating to sharing and getting access to relevant information. Consequently, if CSOs cannot freely offer their valuable expertise or concrete input, there is a risk of the entire process getting jeopardized.

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The solution lies in timely and quality consultations. "The process of consultation with civil society should be a constant process, not an ad-hoc process for the EU checklist, but an open process of exchanging information, constant communication, sharing input and expertise valuable for both partners", he stated.

Dejan Gojković from the Serbian European Integration Office shed some light on the Sectorial Civil Society Organizations (SECO) - mechanism with a special focus on the EU funds. In his presentation the audience learnt that each sector consists of a consortium of 3-5 organizations, with one leading. It represents a kind of public-private partnership with the objective to establish long-term relationships, enhance constructive dialogue between the state and civil society in the programming and planning process; and increase effectiveness of funds, especially EU funds. The main stakeholders in the SECO mechanism are sectoral civil society organizations, the Serbia European Integration Office, and the TACSO office in Serbia.

Parallel Workshops

Workshop 1 - Consultation and Cooperation during the EU accession process

In this workshop, Moderator **Kenan Hadžimusić from the European Citizens' Action Service** split the participants in small groups to discuss and share experiences. By sharing their experiences with the consultation process, participants arrived at a list of common experiences. On the negative side: 1) the CSO recommendations are not taken into account; 2) the announcement on the process takes place at a very short notice, leaving no time for CSOs to digest and gather information and impacting the quality of input; 3) different ministries have different approaches; 4) NGOs are mutually competitive or there is poor participation. However, on the positive side there is: 1) a learning opportunity in terms of professionalization; which leads to 2) increased institutional cooperation with the civil society sector.

Participants also defined the main challenges in the process: the instrumentalisation of NGOs ("they are just to be"); the fact that governments are opposed to NGOs; the government support for NGOs created dependency; a lack of cooperation and communication among CSOs; and a lack of necessary expertise in CSOs. The main opportunities identified were that CSOs can widen their support base; increase their expertise; have the opportunity for regional cooperation; and can explain themselves better to the EU.

The problems mentioned were: bureaucracy on the state and EU level; communication issues (state – CSOs, CSOs-CSOs); and the lack of political will to listen. The solutions deliberated: CSOs should be proactive/prepared; and take the opportunities which national/regional networking provides.

Workshop 2 – Monitoring Change

Moderator **Ayça Bulut Bican from TACSO Turkey** used small group discussions and plenary feedback to arrive at conclusions on monitoring governments and EU benchmarks for accession. The needs were identified as follows: restricted access to info; small available catalogue of public information (on EU and national level); (timely) access to information (2nd level complaint procedures included); info on negotiations (documents in broader sense, evolution of grant schemes, impact of twinning projects, confidentiality timings, accountability); statistics and accessible segregated data (either to produce or provide them); and the improvement of the technical capacity and institutional infrastructure of National Statistics Institutes.

The lessons learnt are: choose your focus; promote your cause; have an open approach; follow up on regional initiatives; peer influence; and policy learning (regional initiatives, international and best practices).

It seems that the governments do not appreciate feedback provided in the consultation process. It could be the case that state-funded CSOs are biased. Furthermore, inclusiveness can lead to false expectations with regard to compliance as well as a lack of public control. Confidentiality in the process is a problem also, as you can end up with information you cannot use. But the reasons governments should take monitoring into account are: expertise; stakeholder engagement aspect (citizens, grassroots, all policy stakeholders); and the fact that inclusive monitoring with all impacted groups for policy impact will be stronger.

As for the role of CSOs in the process, it was mentioned that raising awareness on the need of monitoring would enhance the procedures. CSOs can create an interface between the public and the government and develop a large range of capacities if they are supported - for example, they can combine experts and grassroots, create cross-sectoral alliances and coalitions, build capacity specifically for monitoring, and develop user-friendly information. The dependence and/or political affiliation of academia should decrease, so they can support CSO capacity building and can contribute to monitoring change.

Different tools to influence policy were mentioned, starting from campaigns, through media connections, ending with enhanced credibility of broad coalitions. The empowerment of CSOs, the representability of diverse opinions and visibility and public dissemination of CSO results were also deemed crucial.

Workshop 2 – Programming of EU Financial Assistance

Moderator **Ivan Knežević from the European Movement in Serbia** opened the Workshop with a presentation of the experience of the SECO mechanism in Serbia, focused on the participation of civil society organizations in programming financial assistance. He enlisted the main problems, opportunities, challenges and other important points regarding Serbian SECO mechanism. Following on the introduction, participants of the workshop presented the experiences from their countries in the Western Balkan region and Turkey.

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Problems hindering the consultations' process:

1. Lack of knowledge CSOs in Serbia regarding overall management of pre-accession funds, especially compared to the capacities of CSOs in Serbia in other fields. SECO increased the capacity of CSOs in terms of knowledge and ability to monitor the process of pre-accession funds management.
2. Technical issues were unclear and changed frequently. As a result SECO members did not have a clear calendar of activities and after a lot of waiting for contributions and comments they were always left with short deadlines to complete their activities.
3. Lack of specific knowledge within CSOs, as programming is very technical. SECO members have been included in preparation process, which was good, as it enabled to set priorities.
4. The system of communication posed a problem as SECO members communicated directly with SEIO and not with the authorized project fiche applicant. Indirect communication prevented the quality of project fiches preparation process. However, the situation in this regard has recently changed.
5. SECO still has ownership of the contact with the government (CSOs are partners). CSOs have not used SECO mechanism as a platform for launching some other advocacy initiatives, although there was room for it.
6. Due to the limit of funding opportunities, the consultation process has been held mainly online, not that much through joint meetings.
7. The problem regarding time lags within the programming procedure still exists, which demotivates some members from CSO network. The number of organizations in the SECO mechanism is the same or declining.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- There are different experiences in the region with regard to the extent and modalities of involvement of civil society in the programming and monitoring of financial assistance.
- It is difficult to unify the consultation mechanisms across the countries of the region; instead, the consultation processes should be based on the same principles.
- Bearing in mind that the specific field of programming of financial assistance and resources requires highly technical knowledge, civil society organizations in the countries of the region did not have enough capacity and knowledge to equally participate in the process. Constant efforts in building capacities of CSOs in this regard are needed.
- There is a huge potential of the consultation mechanism for advocacy in the process of the programming financial assistance.



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- The establishment of the consultation mechanism with civil society organizations in the process of programming and monitoring of financial assistance is very important for greater transparency and accountability of all actors involved in the process.
- Government should provide feedback in the consultation process, as this is very important for the motivation of the CSOs involved.
- The very establishment of the consultation mechanism is not enough to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the process of programming and monitoring of financial assistance. The activism of CSOs is key for the success of the mechanism. Therefore, a mechanism should be seen as an instrument, not as a target.
- Countries of the region don't have the tradition of looking at the CSOs as partners. Therefore, formalization and creation of consultation mechanism can prove that CSOs can be equal partners, because they have experience, knowledge and power to influence the decision-makers. Consultation mechanism should improve the relationship and dialogue between the representatives of CSOs and of government, and contribute to the greater influence of civil society in the decision-making process.
- Sustainability of the mechanism of consultations and its operation requires the availability of resources to finance its activities in order to ensure its sustainability.
- The role of local authorities in the process is very important and is necessary to include them in the process of programming of financial assistance.

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Day 2

Plenary Session III: Lessons Learnt in EU accession: How to regain Enlargement Momentum

The second day started with a plenary session **on Lessons Learnt in EU accession: How to Regain Enlargement Momentum**. The panel focused on reframing of political and policy arguments related to the enlargement in terms of the reality and current crisis in Europe, and showing how enlargement is integral to these issues.

A lack of leadership was evident to panelist and participants, in particular because states are focused on individual national problems. We are facing illiberal – not authoritarian - tendencies in some countries, including Croatia, Poland, and Hungary. The structural cohesion funds are not the only answer, and there is a need for a pan-European rule of law mechanism to prevent setbacks as we witness now. There is also a need to change our way of working and to debate our European future, identifying and setting common goals, of which enlargement is an important element.

Senior Researcher at Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Tomas Stražay talked about Slovak experiences in the EU accession which combined three aspects: integration and accession at the same time, political and economic transformation, and the split of the country. In his opinion, the challenges and opportunities for current candidate countries are deeply connected to the current crises that Europe faces. “We are facing enlargement fatigue, not only in the words of the Commissioner, but also because many EU countries are not taking it seriously. Also in the Western Balkans reforms are not implemented as fast and as easy as expected, facing political instability in the region,” he assessed.

Central Europe/Višeград Group countries have always been a proponent of enlargement, especially in the Western Balkans. “I do not think we will give up on giving support of the Western Balkans enlargement. EU can use the enlargement as a very positive thing to show that the EU model is still attractive to countries in Europe, that it still brings stability and prosperity to countries in the region” , said Stražay. He added that Slovakia holding the EU presidency from July 2016 would represent a good chance for Višeград Group countries to improve their position in the EU and advocate for enlargement.

Corina Stratulat, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre, stressed that the situation is the region extremely worrisome, not just in the view of complex problems like the financial crises, migration crisis, Brexit etc. but also with regard to the widespread and deep-rooted mistrust between countries and different levels. The unprecedented political, economic and ideational fragmentation right now is important for enlargement policy, as enlargement momentum is linked to integration momentum. On the other hand, mistrust in combination with divergence leads to incapacitation, which will prevent long-term thinking. The Balkan countries are in the same tight spot as the EU with regards to these issues.

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"Crises will keep coming, but we can work on rebuilding trust and ensuring convergence that will help us overcome not only the current crises, but also prepare for future ones," said Stratulat and suggested a team-building exercise so that the conversation about enlargement becomes relevant once again. "If you want to regain enlargement momentum, go back to the basics of communication and cooperation and regain integration momentum", she advised.

Marina Škrabalo, Senior Adviser at GONG and Member of the European Economic and Social Committee, kicked off with a question on how to make Europe a project worth fighting for. The most important lesson learned is that the enlargement process is highly contingent on context and that the enlargement processes of the past will never be repeated: the system that worked with Romania over a decade ago is a completely different system today.

Enlargement is more than intentional institutional policy: policies happen intentionally, unintentionally, and accidentally. In Marina's view, "enlargement is happening in the border areas of Croatia and Serbia, Serbia and Macedonia, police officers, civil societies are cooperating and solving everyday crises in regards to migration flows, even the Ministers of Interior, besides creating a big mess, are exchanging information and cooperating. Cooperation is alive and well, driven by the crisis". But it is necessary to make a political case for enlargement and to portray it as a brutal geopolitical necessity for Europe. Politicising enlargement and linking it to the big European issues is a proper way to regain momentum.

Fatmir Curri, Kosovar Civil Society Foundation, said that EU would accept the Western Balkans when it became convinced that the region no longer need the EU – and that for some of the countries, reaching this point would take more than a decade. "Enlargement policy is the only policy that made our countries the way they are today: the constitution, the human rights, public service recruitment" he stated, and added that the civil society experts more than ever needed to communicate the benefits of the enlargements and increase public trust in enlargement. The Western Balkans should not pay the price for the EU's inability to deal with complex global issues.

Policy Fellow, Associate Director in the Madrid Office of the European Council on Foreign Relations, Francisco de Borja Lasheras, opened his intervention with a quote that in times of universal deceit, telling the truth is revolutionary. The EU lies to the region, and the region lies to the EU, he explained, and added that civil society organizations are usually the only ones who usually tell the truth. "The story that we need to bring the Balkans into the EU to prevent future repeated conflict in the region is patronizing and infantilizes the region," he said, noting that EU offers tools for improvement and reforms but is not an answer for everything. What we need is a credible EU policy, not progress report saying one thing and Member states saying another thing. And more than anything we need elites willing to make fundamental reforms followed by willing constituencies. We also need societal rapprochement, and civil society can contribute to this.

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Parallel Workshops

Workshop 1: Rule of Law

Daliborka Uljarević, Director at CGO, talked about interesting examples of the participation of civil society within negotiation structure and about advantages and disadvantages of this process in Montenegro. She stressed that Western Balkan governments are still not accepting civil society as actors who can contribute to this process. CSOs are still recognised as “a necessary evil”, whilst the government tries to minimize their impact. In practical terms, there were two main obstacles at the very beginning: NGO members of the working groups had not been able to go to meetings in Brussels where they could have had direct exchanges of opinions, because their travel expenses could not be reimbursed. Each organization, which is proposing certain members, is paying for its own expenses. The danger of getting a negative reaction of the public was quite high, so CSOs didn't speak up about that. Second, CSOs were given a paper to sign at first meeting, agreeing that they will not disclose any single information. The CSO standpoint was that they will only refrain from disclosing information that is under the law of state secret obligation. All in all, the process is very challenging. Question is what kind of methods we are using in trying to contribute to the establishment of a rule of law culture. It is not just informing, it is not all educating, or monitoring. We have to propose more specific solutions and we must think strategically.

Senada Selo Šabić, Research Associate at the Institute for Development and International Relations, emphasised that all questions about CSO impact must be put in a broader framework, and the broader framework is the question of what kind of society we want, and why we want to join the EU. She was talking about the moment after the announcement of the Croatian referendum on EU membership, when citizens didn't have a clue what had been negotiated, or what Croatia would be doing as a member state. The government was so afraid that they didn't allow a strong eurosceptic debate. The EU delegation in Zagreb gave grants for CSOs who wanted to advocate against entering Croatia in EU, which is an example of the diversity of values which we want to have in our societies. We must create space for political alternatives, as well as more participation and responsibility. Chapter 23 was one of the most problematic chapters in the process, and reason for numerous debates in Croatia. Countries in the Western Balkan usually have great laws but a weak implementation. It is more about the integrity of people who have to implement those laws. It's important to consult CSOs before implementation of those laws, and a broader discussion is necessary. Lack of discussion helps those politicians that want to avoid to have a proper rule of law framework.

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Workshop 2: Economic Governance and Competitiveness

Conny Reuter, Secretary General at Solidar, firstly explained that economic governance is an important issue now discussed at the EU level, and has two interpretations. There is the question of how to have better coordination between the member states, and this need for a better coordination is highly motivated by the increasing divergence between them. Competitiveness is also at stake. The debate focuses either on plans for a more flexible labour market, undermining social potential and making labour more cheap and creating more precarious employment conditions in and outside of the EU; or productivity, in the sense that well paid and highly qualified and satisfied workers are also increasing the productivity, which is the key question.

When it comes to the process with regard to economic governance we have the EU 2020 Strategy, often forgotten, and the European Semester Process. Within the European Semester process there is the possibility for the contribution of civil society in the form of a contractual arrangement between 40 European networks that work in the direction of coordination, mobilization and accompanying of the process.

There seem to be some positive developments, such as a growing GDP and statements on the creation of more jobs - though no statements on the quality of these jobs are offered. There are concerns, in particular for the young generation. It is difficult to always support the discourse on the mismatch of the labour market and the competences, as in fact, the mismatch is there because there is no labour. And if there is no labour, the problem is not qualifications but not enough job creation, which has many reasons that have to do with the economic environment. Finally, some have understood that there is a necessity to give the European Economic and Monetary Union a social dimension.

Workshop 3: Public Administration Reform

Karl Giancinti, Programme manager at General Directorate for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, presented the European Commission approaches towards Public Administration (PA) reforms: one that assist PAs in candidates and potential candidates and another one that involves civil society organizations. According to him, CSOs are key actors in reforms, because they contribute to the Commission's Annual Progress Reports by gathering research and other relevant information. CSO influence can be seen on different levels of governance: local and national (by monitoring, providing essential inputs and participating in policy cycles); or regional and international (by cooperating with other relevant stakeholders such as other CSOs or the European Commission in order to improve PA systems). He highlighted the SIGMA program, which focuses on management improvement in different fields such as PA reforms, Public Procurement reforms; public sector ethics; fight against corruption; and external and internal financial control. Dialogue between CSOs and authorities must be permanent and based on partnership. Giancinti mentioned the value and importance of the annual meetings between Western Balkans CSOs and PAs in Skopje. In this kind of gatherings, open dialogue, cooperation and trust can be achieved.

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Igor Stojanović, Director of Development at the Centre for Civil Initiatives (CCI), referred to the history of public administration reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Public administration reform strategy has been adopted in 2006, together with an action plan with the necessary measures to be taken in order to achieve reform. The plan covered the actions until 2014. From the beginning, this strategy had the strong support of all EU representatives in the country as well as numerous other organizations. By 2016, BH is still at an early stage of the reform of public administration. Stojanović pointed out that there are numerous problems in the administration and that the CCI started to research the relations between the political and public sector. They found that committees which carry out public calls for particular positions create lists of the best candidates and choose those who favor their political party. This occurred in the final year of implementation of the strategy, which is very worrying because the strategy aims to bring people who are more competent, and less inclined to policy in order to perform their jobs in the best way.

In Montenegro a website was launched where citizens can complain, share their experience or praise employees in public sector, also covered by the media. Some of the problems that participants encountered were a lack of public interest and corruption as a normal phenomenon. The role of CSO is highly important, especially in education and information. However, laws adopted to this end are rarely implemented in practice and there are no channels of communication and contact points between PA and civil society.

Plenary Presentation of Conclusions of Workshops

The conclusions of the **Workshop on the Rule of Law** were presented by **Mr. Milan Antonijević from YUCOM**. The discussion addressed the role of CSOs in supporting the rule of law in the region, and different approaches were set. The main conclusion is that civil society can have different approaches and tactics, instead of relying on one approach, for example a bottom-up approach or support from the international community and other actors in upholding and promoting the rule of law.

- There are EU Member States that have a constant focus on rule of law issues, but there is a need for a better coordination and adjustments of the policy of EU countries, so that the job doesn't rely on a few active countries, e.g. on Germany, Netherlands, and the UK, that have very active missions and delegations coming to Serbia and putting pressure on the government to follow the rule of law agenda.
- A large part of the discussion focused on European values and how to adjust it to the policy and to the region. The need for dialogue between civil society and the government is one of the key issues, as well as mutual respect and much more results from it and follow-up.
- This is the region of instability and stabilization is needed. However, this should not be an excuse for the lack of rule of law and institution building. Experience from Croatia shows that the ratification process is also one of the last stages where CSOs can focus on the results of the negotiation.
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- When it comes to funding, especially funding of media, the government is putting much more emphasis on those media outlets that are not critical. The same applies to CSOs. This can shrink the space for CSOs and their influence in the area of the rule of law. A public funding mechanism is needed and a regional solution to keep impartiality while supporting media and CSOs can be searched for.
- Constant debate on EU and EU values is needed. EU cannot be seen as mantra and the EU and its values have to be explained both to citizens and governments. The role of civil society is crucial here.

Conclusions of the **Workshop on Public Administration Reform (PAR)**, which discussed the role of civil society in monitoring, supporting, contributing PAR in the enlargement countries, were presented by **Milena Lazarević (CEP)**. The most important conclusions are:

- When it comes to the role of the EU in stimulating the countries in terms of PAR, there should be stronger linkages and coordination between the two parallel processes of PAR monitoring. There are certainly some elements with which these two processes can feed each other, and maybe there is room for additional coordination of these two processes from the EC.
- There are 2 different basic mechanisms for CSOs to implement their activities within the PAR. These two methods are not mutually exclusive, but can also strongly reinforce one another: research and independent monitoring of this process, and participation in different working groups in governmental structures for consultations.
- CSOs can react and “bring” reforms back on track when they start backsliding, even when the reaction of international actors and the European Commission is not so quick and to the point, by strongly advocating and creating networks.
- Open government partnership is a very strong mechanism which can support CSOs, not only in the area of PAR, but also more widely, in the rule of law area.
- Peer pressure by other countries is an important support factor for civil society. Regional approaches can create similar kind of peer pressure, so that governments don't want to be the only ones who are laggards in specific areas.
- Trough multilateral initiatives and a regional approach additional pressure on governments can be created to keep the proper course of reforms.

The EU accession process can often be a negative factor when it comes to involving CSOs, because of the perceived urgency and speed of delivering reforms. The European Commission is recommended to build some checks and balances into the processes of their own conditionality and the recommendations of the CSOs to the government, so that this consultative process and cooperation with CS and the public can become more deeply embedded into the interactions between every single DG and sector within the national governments.

The role of the CSOs in PAR is even more important at the local level than at the national one. At the national level there is the EU conditionality directing the countries, especially now with the principles of public administration. However, these principles are not applied to the local level, so there is a very strong need for CSOs as domestic actors to help reinforce this external conditionality to the local level. Also, national level CSOs should be more present at local level in PAR.

CSOs can communicate their concerns, needs, proposals and recommendations not only to their governments or the European Commission, but also individual EU member states, because they can also influence the EU accession process.

Conclusions of the **Workshop on Economic Governance and Competitiveness** were presented by **Conny Reuter (Solidar)**:

There is a necessity for CSOs to become full actors in the process, to become 'players' instead of just commenting, observing, analysing and criticizing. We have to bring in competences and these competences exist, but if they are not sufficient, we have to work on empowerment. We have to reclaim the economic debate, as it is not only for bankers and economists. It should be a civic debate because it comes down to political choices, and therefore, if we speak on the empowerment and role of civil society, we have to take on the ownership and leadership in this debate.

In every kind of enlargement policy or EU neighbourhood policy we have to strengthen the social dimension. It is not only on rule of law and economic convergence; it has much to do with the objective of cohesion. The empowerment of CSOs in rural area is also a key issue, because without it, you continue with the division within member states, which effectively will not work.

When it comes to the economic development, it is important to remind that we cannot only look to the financial capital markets or the classical industrial side, but to social economy and social enterprises, because this is a growth sector both within and outside of the EU. This sector has perhaps not the productivity in the classical sense, but it has the social productivity and it contributes to cohesion and job creation (EU figure: 12% of the labour market is the social economy).

We were speaking about the empowerment of CSOs, not only in the question of rule of law, but also on transparency and inclusiveness. If transparency is not given and granted, it's difficult to contribute content-wise. Therefore, we have to continue on the empowerment and events like this should not be the last stop but just entry point, because there is a necessity to increase cooperation and to really have a civic re-appropriation of these hard topics.

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World Café: Planning for Joint Action

The World Café Session was led by **Martina Staznik** and **Neslihan Özgüneş**. With its interactive setup, it provided an opportunity to delve into deeper conversations about issues that emerged in the course of the conference. Separated in small groups, in a welcoming atmosphere, participants had the opportunity to connect and share their experiences, while looking forward to the future.

The discussions focused on a series of questions, split in three rounds:

- Question I: How are the ideas and experiences presented during the conference relevant to your work/activism/efforts in your community today?
- Question II: What opportunities can we see for us to evolve together and collaborate? What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- Question III: What actions (including collaborations or conversations) would you like to engage in after this event? What would be useful and of added value – and in which form would it serve best to our future efforts?

After the discussions in small groups, the results were harvested and summarized in a list of recommendations and action points:

- The creation of *support structures for CSOs* for networking and advocacy and lobbying in Brussels and EU member states.
- *Mobility support* with simple procedures for regional exchanges, exchanges with EU, networking and partnership building. Supported by *partnership forum* to identify potential partners.
- *Provision of space for CSOs* to promote their activities by municipalities.
- *Create space and atmosphere of dialogue in events*. Organise events in interactive manner – turn the conference upside down so it begins with participants engagement and ends with the politicians and media.
- *Maintain contact and communication among participants*: sharing of contact directory, creation of FB page for World Café participants to continue World Café dialogue online.
- *Include diverse voices in discussions on EU accession* – e.g. youth, marginalized groups, minorities, civil servants, academics, business, media. Make different groups heard.
- *Approach issues in thematic, intersectoral and multi-disciplinary way*: e.g. environment discussion to include gender, youth, education etc.
- *Create regional thematic communities of practice/cooperation* to continue discussion of issues at national/regional level with multi-disciplinary perspectives.
- *National World Café sessions for CSOs*: reflect this discussion at national level and build CSO alliance. More meaningful exchange (in good formats-informal/social/free talk- like World Café exchange) between civil servants/local governments and CSOs.



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- *Build media – CSO relations* for advocacy and to communicate EU accession in language that is understood by citizens. Support ethical journalism.
- *Move away from donor-driven, project oriented work* and return to activism. *Build crowdfunding/community support* to enable this.
- *Strengthen philanthropy and transparency of public funding.*
- *Capacity building of CSOs* in advocacy and lobbying, bringing grassroots and advocacy/lobbying organisations together.
- *Joint action/regional cooperation needed for successful advocacy.* Peer cooperation for achieving targets in CS essential. E.g. migration crisis. Share practices, exchange, engage with colleagues from other countries
- *Share best practices in Public Administration Reform* - SECO of Serbia.
- Ensure that solutions are context sensitive rather than copy-paste – remain creative.
- *Shadow reporting* – use of enlargement strategies to monitor
- *Communicate enlargement/accession process better.*