

International Conference
February 25-26, 2016.

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

Description of Sessions

Plenary Sessions

Multilateral dialogue between the EU and Enlargement Countries

The EU has already identified a number of key challenges facing the Western Balkans and Turkey in the process of becoming a member state: economic governance and competitiveness; the rule of law; the functioning of institutions guaranteeing democracy; fundamental rights; and, in the case of the Western Balkans, overcoming the legacy of the past. These challenges are central to the Copenhagen criteria and the conditionality of the Stabilisation and Association process.

The EU aspirations of the Western Balkans countries and Turkey are made even more difficult when one bears in mind the overall state of European politics and sentiments toward enlargement in EU countries. As much as accession depends on the internal commitment and willingness to find the strength to undergo policy reforms, it also depends on the revitalisation of the European Union and the European project itself, which is now facing a vote of no confidence in many areas.

The Western Balkans and Turkey, while acknowledging the “5 year pause”, are determined not to slow down the pace of accession and to press ahead with the reform process. This goes hand in hand with the enlargement principle adopted by the European Parliament of “reforms before enlargement”. In this process, the EU provides valuable expertise, technical support and guidance while there is an Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) in place to financially support reforms leading towards membership.

The European Parliament is among other things responsible for actively monitoring the progress of reforms in candidate and potential candidate countries. However, member states i.e. national governments and parliaments are becoming increasingly relevant to the enlargement debate and able to influence the pace and conditionality. Other interest groups at European and national levels, including civil society networks and umbrella organisations, trade unions, businesses and local government also have the ability to intervene in the enlargement policy, for better or for worse, depending on the perspective and the level of information and involvement.

In the end, the enlargement process should create, among other things, networks and contacts between the EU and future member states, be it along social, economic, political, cultural axes. This cannot be done solely via political and technical accession negotiation frameworks but implies a greater and more substantial involvement by different stakeholders in both EU and candidate and potential candidate countries.

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Civil Society Impact: National Conventions and Consultation Mechanisms in European Integration Process

Following the Slovak experience and with the help of both government and civil society organisations from Slovakia, which have been working in several Western Balkan countries, a platform for dialogue on EU integration has been created. This was first established in Serbia in 2005, then in Montenegro in 2008, and finally in Albania in 2015 – each with its specific evolution path, different methodology and approach. These efforts had one strategic goal: to help democratisation and support the legitimacy of the EU integration process by gathering different stakeholders from politics, civil society, business and media around the table to discuss reforms, effects, costs and benefits at the same time as providing mechanisms for debate and consensus building.

Contrary to existing practices, these models are inspirational and effective in involving civil society in a timely, transparent and efficient manner in consultation processes and development policies. In Serbia the National Convention is a platform for the inclusion of civil society in the negotiation process and, as such, has become an indispensable interlocutor that is recognised by both the Parliament and the government of the Republic of Serbia.



Discussion topics:

What are the existing consultation mechanisms and how do they differ in terms of scope, approach and effect?

How can we secure transparent and inclusive accession negotiations and European integration?

What are the lessons learned and the areas for regional cooperation and joint intervention of civil society?

What are the expectations of civil society on the one hand, and of the government and other stakeholders on the other?

Lessons Learnt in EU Accession – How to Regain Enlargement Momentum

It is easily forgotten that the enlargement policy, even with all its shortcomings, still represents a unique and extremely successful policy of the European Union. Multiple crises have struck the European continent, putting the EU's stability and solidarity to test, as well as the strength of democratic values and readiness of some of the younger EU member states (such as Hungary or Poland) to defend them. The refugee crisis, growing threats of terrorism and other challenges have proved yet again that fragmented European states cannot handle global challenges and international (security) issues separately. Further enlargement and inclusion of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey in the EU family is an essential piece of the puzzle, which is indispensable to achieving and ensuring the security, prosperity and progress of all European countries and citizens.

Therefore, the lessons learned in the EU accession process need to undergo fresh analysis that can help us overcome the existing difficulties, improve EU instruments, reconfirm the EU's commitment to democratic

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governance, the rule of law and fundamental rights and redefine a new, stronger Union for all of its European citizens. This requires a careful and detailed analysis of past accessions, to look at how important it is for an acceding country to implement reforms efficiently and in fully capacity, and thus join the European Union fully harmonized and compliant with the EU framework. In this way, the enlargement momentum can be invigorated with candidate countries that bring a fresh strength to the EU and equally contribute to the overall prosperity of the European community

Discussion topics:

Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy: (where) is the Western Balkans on the EU's policy agenda?

How to handle the 'enlargement fatigue' and reinforce the belief of EU member states and their citizens that further enlargement of the EU is crucial for ensuring security, prosperity and progress throughout Europe?

Growing sticks and no carrots: How to handle the growing 'accession fatigue' in candidate countries faced with the EU's double standards with regard to the rule of law and human rights in EU member states?

The times of multiple crises as a chance to reinvent the enlargement momentum?



Parallel Workshops

Workshops Day 1

Objective: To share different experiences, identify challenges and recommendations for improvements.

Process: Group to be divided into smaller groups of 4-5 people to discuss the questions. After small group discussion, sharing of conclusions in larger group.

Consultation and Cooperation during the EU accession process

Focus questions:

What are some experiences – positive and negative – regarding consultation and cooperation in relation to the EU accession process?

What are some of the challenges and opportunities in relation to cooperation between the public administration and CSOs during the EU accession process?

What are the ways in which timely and meaningful engagement can be developed to contribute to the quality of reforms, their sustainability and efficiency?



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Monitoring Change



Focus questions

What are the experiences, practices and achievements of CSOs in monitoring and evaluation of government performance against the benchmarks on the EU agenda?

What are the practices and achievements by CSOs in monitoring and evaluating and learning about policy influence?

What are the capacities of CSOs to use MEL tools and thus track the impact and enhance the effects of their advocacy and research efforts?

Programming and Monitoring of Financial Assistance – SECO



Focus questions

Serbia's SECO mechanism was specifically recognized as good practice in terms of institutionalization of civil society inclusion in programming and monitoring of EU financial assistance, both by DG Near, EUDs and other national actors.

What are the mechanisms for dialogue between the government and civil society organizations in the programming process –planning of European Union development assistance as well as programming and monitoring of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance/EU funds in the countries in the region?

What are some of the challenges and opportunities with regard to programming?

How can CSOs best be included in a timely and responsive manner in programming and monitoring of EU financial assistance?

New Dimensions for Assistance to CSOs in the Enlargement Countries

The focus of the latest EU Enlargement Strategy is on the “fundamentals first” principle as the backbone of enlargement policy. Key priorities in the enlargement process include: the rule of law, economic governance and competitiveness, and public administration reform, as well as their effective implementation. These indivisible, mutually reinforcing political, economic and institutional fundamentals require a persistent, comprehensive and joint effort by the EU and its member states and the governments and civil society groups in enlargement countries.

The EU has recognised the importance and potential of civil society organisations (CSOs) in addressing these issues, as well as the need to work even more closely with local CSOs in order to anchor reforms across society. The CSOs in the enlargement countries are crucial actors in enhancing political accountability, promoting a deeper understanding of accession reforms and contributing to increasing public support for the EU integration process in both the current and the future EU member states.

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Therefore, a stronger role for CSOs in the process of EU integration is needed as well as a much more supportive and enabling environment, in order for CSOs to develop and fully contribute to the process of EU integration and internal transformation.

Rule of Law



Discussion topics:

With which activities can CSOs contribute to reforms and reaching the necessary standards highlighted in the area of the rule of law?

What can be done to strengthen the role of CSOs in the Western Balkans and to create a supportive and enabling environment, by the EU on the one hand and by their governments on the other?

How can CSOs contribute to preventing the backsliding of reforms (as in the case of the freedom of expression)?

Economic Governance and Competitiveness



Discussion topics:

With which activities can CSOs contribute to reforms and reaching the necessary standards highlighted in the area of economic governance and competitiveness?

What can be done to strengthen the role of CSOs in the Western Balkans and to create a supportive and enabling environment, by the EU on the one hand and by their governments on the other?

How can CSOs contribute to boosting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, to promoting regional economic development and strengthening 'connectivity'?

Public Administration Reform



Discussion topics:

With which activities can CSOs contribute to reforms and to reaching the necessary standards in public administration reform?

What can be done to strengthen the role of CSOs in the Western Balkans and to create a supportive and enabling environment, by the EU on the one hand and by their governments on the other?

How can CSOs contribute to developing a sense of ownership over the reforms among citizens?

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World Café: Planning for Joint Action



The World Café is a powerful social technology for engaging people in conversations that matter, offering an effective antidote to the fast-paced fragmentation and lack of connection in today's world. Based on the understanding that conversation is the core process that drives personal, business, and organizational life, the World Café is more than a method, a process, or technique—it's a way of thinking and being together sourced in a philosophy of conversational leadership.

This is an opportunity for you to delve into deeper conversations about issues that have emerged from the conference over the past day and a half and are important to you.