European Economic and Social Committee

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on

The role of civil society in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans

(exploratory opinion)

On 8 April 2003, in connection with the activities of the Italian presidency of the European Union, the permanent representative of Italy to the European Union requested by letter an exploratory opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on

The role of civil society in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 21 November 2003. The rapporteur was **Mr Confalonieri**.

At its 404th plenary session (meeting of 10 December 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 110 votes to one, with one abstention.

1.   **Background**

1.1   The raison d'être of this document comes from the Italian presidency's requests for exploratory opinions and specifically an exploratory opinion on the role of civil society in the new European policy towards the Western Balkans, with the aim of establishing how civil society can contribute to implementing the Thessaloniki agenda in the countries of the region and the European Union.[1]

1.2   Reference should be made here to the Commission Communication of 21 May 2003 on *The Western Balkans and European Integration*.[2] The EESC would also stress its continuing commitment to supporting the creation and organisation of associations and bodies representing civil society and of non-governmental organisations, which are crucial to the development of democracy at regional, national and European level.[3]

2.   **Introduction**

2.1   The role of organised civil society within the new strategy for the Western Balkans is to guarantee, over the complex and structured process of the five countries' cohesion and integration

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[1]   Information memo DI 80/2003 of 31 July 2003, point 2. The countries of the Western Balkans are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro; the area also includes the Kosovo region.

[2]   Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament – COM(2003) 285 final.

[3]   For more on the context of central and south east Europe, see the EESC opinion on *Economic and social consequences of enlargement in the candidate countries* (OJ C 85 of 8.4.2003, p. 65) and the EESC opinion on *Promoting the involvement of civil society organisations in south east Europe – Past experiences and future challenges* (OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003, p. 82).

with the EU, the realisation of specific objectives relating to social development[4] that are important for the Balkans and the whole of Europe.

2.2 The Thessaloniki agenda[5] sets out the basic action areas which governments should focus on: support for building democratic institutions; economic development; the fight against organised crime and corruption; and regional integration and political cooperation, both within the region and with the EU.

2.3 The European Commission proposal presented and ratified at the Thessaloniki summit[6] sets out the strategy for consolidating the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and moving towards pre-accession agreements with the Balkan countries, on the basis of mechanisms that have proved successful with the other candidate countries. The politically innovative element of Thessaloniki is that it enhances the cooperation programme by establishing partnerships for European integration.[7]

2.4 In this new framework for relations and cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans, the role of organised civil society concerns:

– modernising laws and institutions to promote participatory democracy, social and civil dialogue and better governance;

– consolidating and creating a healthy and innovative socio-economic and productive environment;

– establishing new socio-cultural conditions, promoting and consolidating the rule of law, a spirit of community and intercultural dialogue, political pluralism and a view of Europe that includes the Balkans.

2.5 The Thessaloniki agenda demonstrates that Europe has assimilated its experience with the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) and that the EU intends to apply some important lessons learned from that experience. Much progress can be made towards establishing democratic systems and the market economy, but a democratic form of government is not in itself a guarantee of democracy. A complex network of institutions and formal and informal processes are required. Many democratic institutions in the countries concerned by this opinion are still in their

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[4] On the subject of social development, cf. the Copenhagen Declaration, *Commitments 1-4*. C. Turi, *The international community and social development: recent trends*. In: <u>*La Comunità Internazionale,*</u> quarterly publication of the SIOI (Italian Society for International Organisation), Vol. LVI, No. 1, 2001, pp. 53-74, Editoriale Scientifica, Naples 2001.

[5] *The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European integration.* General Affairs and External Relations Council, 16.6.2003.

[6] *EU – Western Balkans Summit – Declaration – Thessaloniki,* External Relations Directorate-General, 21.6.2003.

[7] Assistance policies for the Balkans focus on cohesion objectives, going beyond the reconstruction strategy, as suggested by the document of the Greek presidency *Working Document: Greek Presidency Priorities for the Western Balkans* of January 2003.

infancy and show what might be considered "anti-democratic" tendencies, such as the tendency to centralise information and decision-making processes. All this underlines the importance of cooperation for constructing democracy, increasing awareness of social problems and implementing social and economic initiatives in local communities.[8]

2.6 The present opinion will dwell not only on key problems and dangers that could lead to pessimism and defeatism, but will also take a critical look at the opportunities and strengths that can be exploited with a view to bolstering the role of organised civil society in the Western Balkans.

2.7 More specifically, the Committee obtained a comparative picture of the "possibilities, limits and perspectives" regarding social dialogue in south east Europe through the findings of the 2002-2003 Phare project on the *Promotion of the culture and practice of social dialogue and of the participation of civil society and related networks in the South East Europe region*, which was managed by the European Training Foundation (ETF). This project demonstrated how direct dialogue and mutual understanding can provide a cast-iron basis for devising realistic strategies that meet the partners' real needs[9].

2.8 Two critical questions emerge for the EU in relation to the situation in south east Europe: how to define clear parameters for establishing governance and the welfare state, on the basis of European countries' shared values; and how to promote the principles and values enshrined in Europe while facing the challenge of enlargement and the risks that globalisation brings for economic and industrial systems, labour markets and thus quality of life in Europe, including the candidate countries, and its neighbouring regions.[10]

2.9 The present opinion focuses initially on three macro-level aspects of organised civil society's role - the political and institutional, economic and cultural importance of civil society with respect to all its different components – and describes certain current features of organised civil society in the countries of the Western Balkans. The opinion then presents an interpretation of the Thessaloniki agenda from the perspective of civil society's role. And finally, some ways of strengthening organised civil society are considered, from a regional, national and European angle.

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[8] *The reality of cooperation, 1997-1998. Development assistance in the annual reports of international NGOs,* section on *Western assistance for the ex-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe*, pp. 212-220. Published by Movimondo e Manitese, Rosenberg e Sellier, Turin 1998.

[9] The comparative study, by **Darko Marinkovic**, is available from the ETF. At the end of the project, on 3-5 .3.2003 in Zagreb, the social partners of south east Europe endorsed the relevant conclusions and recommendations.

[10] These are very complex issues, also from the perspective of EU legal frameworks. One of the most significant developments in the EU integration process has been the adoption of the EU Charter of Fundamental Human Rights. The importance of this document lies in its aim of clearly and unequivocally entrenching the political, civil, economic and social rights of Europe's citizens. For an analysis comparing this charter with the European Social Charter and the Council of Europe Social Security Code, see Bertozzi, S., *Socio-economic rights of European citizens in the 21st century* in *La Comunità Internazionale*, Vol. LVII, No. 2, 2002, quarterly of the SIOI, Editoriale Scientifica, Naples, 2003, pp. 233-244.

3.   **Macro-level features of organised civil society's role**

3.1   As a complex entity with a wide and diverse membership, organised civil society has a crucial role to play in the current stage of the Stabilisation and Association Process and in the new Thessaloniki strategy to which the Balkan countries and the European Union have committed themselves.

3.2   Organised civil society must play an active role in order for EU development, cohesion and integration programmes to have a significant impact for their final and effective beneficiaries – the citizens who are, wish to be and will wish to be Europeans.

3.3   Governments and public authorities must be totally, transparently and consciously committed if international programmes are to become meaningful for citizens. The development of participatory democracy and the social and economic fabric is largely a political issue, and not merely a technical one.

3.4   The importance of organised civil society playing an active role can be summed up in the following terms:

–   **socio-political and institutional**, organised civil society being the condition *sine qua non* for building social and civil dialogue and participatory democracy;

–   **socio-economic**, organised civil society being the key factor for ensuring economic growth that is compatible with human development of local societies;

–   **socio-cultural**, in so far as organised civil society drives and nurtures new cultural developments and forms of action that are open to pluralism in all its social forms and in line with the principles of the European Union and international cooperation, i.e. civil dialogue, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the quest for peace and better democracy, and sustainable development.

3.5   For each of these macro-level features, civil society expresses itself, and is therefore regarded as, a complex whole composed of different elements. Organised civil society can be understood as a heterogeneous entity, comprising[11]:

–   workers' and employers' organisations;

–   organisations representing other social and economic players, e.g. sectoral, business, industrial, professional and cooperative associations;

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[11]   For a summary of the criteria used to define civil society organisations recommended by the EESC for the relevant authorities, see the opinion to be found on page 82 of OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003. The definitions used in the present exploratory opinion are also consistent with those adopted by the UNDP and the ETF.

- non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which bring together people with shared concerns, such as environmental, charitable and welfare, consumer, human rights, cultural and education/training organisations;

- so-called grassroots organisations, through which groups of citizens (women, young people, families, the elderly) can participate in the life of their local communities;

- faith-based organisations.

3.6   Thus organised civil society encompasses virtually all spheres of action between the level of individuals and that of the state. The social and cultural identity of each element of civil society is linked to its modus operandi, which is not to simplify the role actually played and responsibility held.

3.7   A broad vision of social dialogue can also include all these elements, to give a definition of social dialogue as pluralist and multilateral, though social dialogue in the countries concerned by this opinion is in practice limited to discussions (not always recognised) between government authorities and employment-related organisations, i.e. trade unions and employers' organisations.

3.8   The problem of how independent the economic and social partners are from governments and public administrations, and from financial interests that are incompatible with the objectives of social dialogue, already arises at this level of social dialogue and tripartite consultation.

3.9   Within the extremely diverse context of the five Western Balkan countries, the most established tradition of social dialogue lies with the trade unions. The dialogue has mainly been engaged with government authorities and in the context of large state-owned enterprises, whereas employers' organisations are complete newcomers on the socio-economic scene and are mainly linked to small- and medium-sized enterprises. Chambers of Industry and Commerce, where they exist and are active, fulfil the functions of employers' organisations, but they are fully implicated in legal and institutional issues regarding real independence, autonomy and representation of interests.[12] The Economic and Social Councils of the Western Balkans are also a new phenomenon, a result of the Stability Pact and the Stabilisation and Association Process, and in line with ILO guidelines.[13]

3.10   With respect to the elements of organised civil society that are not key players in the world of work and industrial relations, the situation in the Western Balkans is rather complex and difficult to analyse. In fact a substantial civil society fabric has emerged from a decade of

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[12]   **D. Marinkovic**, *Social dialogue in south east European countries*, in: *Collection/textbook for Trade Union education*, published online by **Dragan Djuric**, June 2003, pp. 15-18.

[13]   For a comparative analysis of social dialogue in the various national contexts, see dossier published by the ETF, Belgrade, July 2002.

international cooperation to promote human rights and disadvantaged groups, but also and concurrently from technical measures to support civil society and local communities (numerous measures aimed at capacity-building, empowerment, transparency, accountability, sustainability training, etc.).

3.11 This actual civil society overlaps considerably with NGOs operating at grassroots level. However, these independent organisations cannot be seen as a product of locally-rooted social movements, nor do they operate on the basis of a local capacity to identify needs and autonomously frame responses to those needs. Many NGOs function as suppliers of social services, but they are generally dependent on large international donors (the international financial institutions or IFIs, United Nations agencies and the large international NGOs linked to them) and tend to provoke competition between each other on the private welfare market. NGOs are virtually a self-perpetuating system of service delivery.[14]

3.12 The real challenge for local society is therefore to transfer the skills and service capacity of NGOs active in the various regions concerned to autonomous social organisations and institutions, so as to create and reinforce independent civil society organisations.

3.13 In order to summarise the current position of organised civil society in the countries of the Western Balkans, it is necessary to revisit the process of transition they have all been through: a transition that is not just post-Communist, but post-war, during which they had to build structures that never previously existed and to reconstruct those that were violently destroyed by war, hatred and crime.

3.14 Organised civil society itself is the most salient example of all this. The five countries must make up for the absence of a civil society independent of the state and the absence of political, social, economic and human rights suffered under totalitarian regimes. At the same time all the social costs of the economic transition process are in evidence, and emancipation from national ethnocentrism and concepts of ethnic identification is only just beginning to emerge in the social fabric and everyday life of local communities.

3.15 In short, four mutually-reinforcing factors currently determine the position of organised civil society in the Western Balkans and the strengthening of their role in political and social democratisation, namely:

– the autonomous capacity of social and economic players to modernise and consolidate in the context of the reforms undertaken in the various countries as part of the transition process;

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[14] For updated information on this subject see the work on *Civil society* on the independent website of the *Observatory on the Balkans*. Of particular interest is the paper on *The role of NGOs and civil society in European integration*, published by **Claudio Bazzocchi**, January 2002.

– developments produced by the difficult confrontation of the various countries with EU policies (and with the guidelines provided by the ILO and the Economic and Social Councils);

– developments produced by concrete experiences of international cooperation and of the independent capacity to modernise and consolidate all the strands of civil society other than the economic and social partners;

– the ability of governments and public authorities not just to respond to these different demands, but to actually implement institutional, economic and social reforms that effectively meet needs and satisfy the expectations of local communities.

4.   **Organised civil society, democracy and institutional development**

4.1   The concept of *social governance* can be defined as the means by which civil society takes part in the decision-making processes[15] that are vital to a country.

4.2   However, the relevance and efficacy of social participation in political decision-making processes does not depend solely on the existence of a dynamic, well-structured organised civil society which is supported by an adequate legislative framework that sets out remits and spheres of activity. These things also depend on:

– the degree of administrative and political decentralisation in effect at local level;
– peace, or rather the absence of conflict;
– respect for human rights and basic freedoms by governments and also by other players in the international community (in the context of cooperation programmes these might be foreign or local NGOs working on behalf of international bodies or agencies).

4.3   This brief account is intended to draw attention to **two critical factors**, noted in several quarters, relating to the current state of social participation and dialogue in the countries of the Western Balkans and the possibility of achieving a strategic improvement in these areas with a view to future adoption of Community policies.

4.4   The **first critical factor** is the attitude of governments and public authorities towards organised civil society and its components: "This was identified as the key deficiency hindering (social and) civil dialogue. Few cases were found where the authorities were prepared to include CSOs (civil society organisations) in real consultations or of authorities who recognised the need to do this. In some cases a better legal basis for CSOs is necessary."[16]

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[15]   This definition is drawn, for example, from the *Human Development Report – Albania 2002. Challenges of Local Governance and Regional Development*, published by the Human Development Promotion Center (HDPC) in Tirana on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Section 5, "Democratic Governance Framework", p. A1.

[16]   EESC opinion in OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003, p. 82.

4.5   It is important that this attitude should be completely dropped by governments and public authorities in the countries of the Western Balkans, on the basis of a new awareness and guided by the EU. The role of organised civil society in democratic processes must not be seen to be ideologically opposed to, or to replace the functions of, state administrations or institutions; rather, organised civil society must develop a complementary, synergistic role based on preferential forms of consultation and negotiation between the various parties and by virtue of its representation of collective interests, its specific or sectoral competence, or terms of reference, and its direct knowledge of the needs of individuals and social groups.

4.6   That organised civil society should be autonomous and independent of governments and public bodies is an important democratic principle, but also a value that must be promoted in material and non-material ways. The possibility of organised civil society growing and achieving its full potential is to a large extent dependent on a virtuous circle of economic, fiscal and social policies at every level of planning and implementation, and on the existence of open political debate.

4.7   The **second critical factor** concerns the mutual suspicion between the main representatives of employment and industrial relations, i.e. the very parties to social dialogue currently existing in the countries of the Western Balkans.[17]

4.8   This second factor is closely linked to the more general problem of the absence of a uniform welfare state model and of clear norms and guidelines for achieving social dialogue. The obvious effect, in public opinion and experience, is that a number of political interpretations and practical approaches co-exist, which are also conveyed by the various strands of organised civil society.

4.9   The Committee has already expressed its views about the urgent need to pay more attention to such critical issues, by improving the coordination of Community guidelines and supporting the implementation and development of social systems that adhere to unambiguous principles and respond to the real needs of the individual countries.[18]

4.10   More generally speaking, in terms of public awareness and opinion, it is important that high-quality public information programmes should speak more openly and impartially of the social costs of transition, not just in the countries of the Western Balkans, but also within the European Union.

4.11   Here too, civil society is the key, and above all those elements of it that promote the right to information and have good media contacts.

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[17]   See **D. Marinkovic**, *op. cit.¸* pp. 11-18.

[18]   EESC opinion in OJ C 85 of 8.4.2003, p. 65.

5. **Organised civil society, economic growth and human development**

5.1 The most modern and widely accepted definition of development considers it as a global economic, social, cultural and political process which aims to continuously improve the well-being of the whole population and all individuals through active, free and substantial participation in this process and the fair distribution of resulting benefits.[19]

5.2 Development as a human right is dependent on the combined operation of civil society and social dialogue – not only of those components representing the world of work and industrial relations, but of all the other strands of civil society too. Civil society's significance in terms of development is illustrated by the UNDP, which defines it as "the provision for human development in society".

5.3 Economic growth, which is an important factor in human development, can only turn into human development if the increase in private income is fair and if economic growth generates public investment in human development, schools, basic services, health care and social services. Human development also depends on "unpaid" work by men and women within the family or the community, providing assistance or carrying out activities of general interest or value, for the environment and the natural and cultural heritage.[20]

5.4 Organised civil society is an active entity. It is a sign of a healthy socio-economic and political context, which promotes innovation, change, entrepreneurial creativity and internationalisation. Development, cohesion and integration programmes between the EU and the Western Balkans should aim to reflect this.

6. **Organised civil society, cultural pluralism and international cooperation**

6.1 The scale of the socio-cultural change faced by the Balkan countries over the last ten years extends far beyond the simple transition to a market economy and the development of pluralistic and liberal socio-political legislation. The Western Balkan population has been acutely exposed to:

- ✓ the risk of political and social instability;
- ✓ poverty;
- ✓ abuse of the law and fundamental rights;
- ✓ the brutality of organised crime;
- ✓ the extreme demographic imbalance caused by the drastic, enforced relocation of entire communities due to conflict, uncontrolled urbanisation, and large-scale emigration of the workforce;

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[19] Copenhagen Declaration – preamble on the right to development, which confirms the indivisible and independent nature of the individual aspects of the development process. For further information see: **C. Turi**, *op.cit*, p 55.

[20] UNDP, 10th Human Development Report: Globalisation, Rosenberg and Sellier, 1999, p 61.

✓ the aggravation of "ethnic" differences, i.e. the cruel manipulation of historical-cultural facts: different languages, religions, traditions and disparate values, memories and lifestyles.

6.2   The heritage of the past and the present has been shaken and twisted for base political and material ends through conflict, oppression, widespread violence and denial of the spirit of community and of respect for cultural diversity. The investment of resources and competences required to remedy the damage caused should not be considered less than that earmarked for the development and the economic and institutional liberalisation of the Western Balkans.

6.3   Much progress has been achieved in terms of the stability of local institutions and economic growth, although this differs considerably between the different geographical areas. However, much still remains to be done for the whole of the Balkan civil population, with due respect for their various cultural values and local traditions, in addition to guaranteeing democratic life and the rule of law for the whole region. A single factor could tip the balance and place the whole region in serious danger.

6.4   These changes, even less so than the others, **cannot be imposed from the top-down**, but should develop within the population itself, in the daily life of the community. The idea of a new civil society is today running through the whole Balkan region, based on the promotion and defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the capacity to rebuild civil dialogue and social participation to solve local problems irrespective of ethnicity. This idea can be seen in the initiatives of many NGOs and international secular or religious voluntary organisations, involved in work for communities and local institutions, and in particular to improve the rights of the underprivileged, young people and women.

6.5   The experience, knowledge, direct operative capacity and power of cultural arbitration demonstrated by these civil society organisations should no longer be used in isolation for urgent cases, but be institutionalised and benefit the social and democratic life of local communities. Here the Committee would again stress the important role which real political decentralisation[21] can play in the exercise of grassroots democracy.

7.   **The importance of harnessing the experience gained in international cooperation for the benefit of civil society and local communities**

7.1   The Thessaloniki agenda cuts across a key issue: the relationship between international aid, local resources and cultural approaches.

7.2   In the Western Balkans, a positive relationship needs to be rebuilt between the people and the authorities, between individuals and communities, and between local residents and their region, to counter excessive reliance on humanitarian aid and an irresponsible expectation of foreign investment.

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[21]   In the sense of regional branches of government and local authorities.

7.3   The role of organised civil society is crucial here.

7.4   Alongside the weaknesses and the vulnerability of organised civil society outlined in point 3 of the present opinion, there are also **strengths and opportunities** forged by ten years of international cooperation for civil society organisations and local communities in the Western Balkans[22].

7.5   Such schemes involve "bottom-up" implementation of competences and good practices to strengthen the democratisation process; economic development based on local residual resources and the shared use of external resources; and developing social and human capital, in all its diversity.

7.6   An interesting case is provided by Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) for south east Europe, and the approach they use to boost democratic life and local communities.

7.7   There are currently 11 LDAs, which are part of an organisation set up in Strasbourg in 1993, with the approval of the Council of Europe and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. LDAs work within a network to strengthen the stabilisation and regional development process in the context of the stability pact. They promote decentralised cooperation programmes by establishing partnerships with European and Balkan local authorities, NGOs and other civil society organisations.[23]

7.8   The above is an instance of decentralised cooperation. It is not possible to describe all the types of international cooperation project run by civil society organisations in the Balkans, but increasingly precise lines of action are open to them, such as:

–   institution building,
–   local development,
–   training and empowerment of human and social capital, with regard to equal opportunities,
–   peace and a spirit of community, intercultural dialogue and active respect for cultural differences,
–   immigration and mobility, as well as the specific problems of refugees, deportees and evacuees.

7.9   All this is to be carried out in a context of horizontal cooperation between the various countries in the area, and vertical cooperation with Europe.

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[22]   Documentation: Guide to central and eastern European and Balkan countries. Politics and economics yearbook, CeSPI, Il Mulino, Bologna; **C. Bazzocchi**, *The role of NGOs and civil society in European integration*, on the website: http://auth.unimondo.org, 07/02/2002.

[23]   The LDAs carry out projects in a variety of fields: economic development, EU integration and cross-border cooperation, local institution building, humanitarian support and support for human rights. More detailed information can be found on the website: http://www.idaonline.org. Also available on this website: 10-year report on activities, May 2003.

7.10 **The cooperation of civil society and local institutions can have an important strategic role within the broader and more systematic Thessaloniki agenda if it is properly supported and harnessed by national and international institutions**. This form of cooperation essentially takes the form of an ongoing dialogue, with the setting-up of mechanisms for networking between civil society bodies with first-hand experience of the socio-economic, political and cultural problems of the various regions concerned.

8. **The role of organised civil society with regard to the Thessaloniki agenda**

8.1 Analysing civil society's role in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans means considering European integration not only as a matter for governments and public administrations, but as a challenge to be embraced by all social interest groups.

8.2 Among the broad fields of action outlined in the Thessaloniki agenda, there are therefore specific fields of action for European and Balkan civil society organisations.

Institution building

8.3 In the context of the technical assistance provided by the Technical Assistance Information Exchange Office (TAIEX) to adapt legislation to the acquis, and in twinning schemes (in which officials from Member States can pass on their expertise in the field of public administration to the Balkan countries), the role of organised civil society is to pass on information and check that these types of technical interventions and exchanges lead to tangible processes which establish innovative expertise locally that will have a positive impact on the various levels of governance.

The fight against organised crime and corruption - establishing the full rule of law and political cooperation

8.4 Within the cooperation provided for by the Common Foreign and Security Policy, in justice and home affairs and for establishing the rule of law, organised civil society has an active role to promote and spread the culture of the rule of law at all levels of society, to strengthen the public's confidence in the authorities, and to represent the true demands regarding free movement of people and goods, immigration policy and the return of refugees. It can report on the progress made as well as any failures.

Economic development

8.5 Involvement of organised civil society is the only way to ensure that macroeconomic and infrastructure measures do not overlook economic and social development objectives that are rooted in the local area and bring clear improvements for local communities and individual citizens.

Access to Community programmes

8.6   Organised civil society obviously has a role to play in EU cooperation schemes in the Balkans in the fields of education, training, energy resources and non-renewable resources, such as water. However, the Committee stresses the urgent need to provide high-quality information on the arrangements and conditions governing access to Community programmes for the various civil society organisations and partnerships.

Horizontal lines of action

8.7   Another major role is to spread information and knowledge and raise awareness of the path undertaken by the EU and the Western Balkans, as well as the difficulties and opportunities this involves.

9.   **Suggestions for strengthening organised civil society**

9.1   With a view to strengthening cohesion and the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU, it is important to overcome the main obstacles to active, effective involvement of the various strands of civil society. The Committee has already stressed the need to ensure greater participation and consultation of the social partners and other civil society groupings in order to guarantee a social and civil dialogue which is truly constructive for the Western Balkan countries[24]. This can be done by:

–   developing **international partnership**, guaranteeing continuity to the initiatives in terms of financing, resources and competences as set out in the Thessaloniki agenda action programmes. The success of the Thessaloniki agenda will depend to a large extent on galvanising civil society organisations to promote/implement projects under Community programmes with regional and European partnerships;

–   overcoming ideological suspicion and differences between the working methods of organised civil society and national and local authorities, and promoting **communication and systematic links between civil society groupings**, both within and between the various countries, in the form of a regional network. At the same time, there should be a drive to implement common cohesion and social governance models, in accordance with EU guidelines;

–   **promoting networking activities** between European organisations and organisations in the various Balkan countries.

The World Bank and the IMF should also participate in strengthening the organisations of social partners and civil society in cooperation with the EESC and other EU institutions as well as the ILO.

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[24]   EESC opinion in OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003, p. 82.

9.2   The Committee suggests that the role of organised civil society in the local environment could be strengthened by **promoting and supporting cooperation and systematic links between its various members, in order to**:

a) ***strengthen the consultation and support capacity of the socio-economic partners,*** *developing independent support for the needs of citizens and local communities by forging systematic links with other civil society groupings, such as community-based and welfare organisations, and NGOs involved in local development projects;*

b) ***stress the importance of civil society groupings other than the socio-economic partners*** *(i.e. groupings which are more independent from centralised state institutions than the socio-economic partners are, but more likely to operate in isolation and rapidly run out of opportunities for action) by forging systematic links with the socio-economic partners, to help to build up information about the true needs of citizens and local communities, as well as successful experiences and practices.*

Cooperation between civil society groupings is thus mutually beneficial and can boost the empowerment and self-reliance of civil society as a whole vis-à-vis public and centralised authorities, primarily by:

– *providing better representation of collective interests;*

– *guaranteeing respect for citizens' rights and free access to social and civil dialogue, political participation and mutual support;*

– *boosting the capacity for consultation and negotiation, and for putting forward proposals, between the various players in political and civil life.*

9.3   The Committee would also suggest promoting adherence to the European models of cohesion and social governance. This underscores the need to support the role of organised civil society **by implementing and monitoring dialogue and coordination mechanisms, both at national/regional level and with the EU.**

10.   **Developing mutual understanding, dialogue and active cooperation**

10.1   With the prospect of EU accession now a certainty, organised civil society must set itself precise, quantifiable objectives regarding the social aspects of integration, so as to achieve tangible results at national, regional and European level.

10.2   While the goal for all the Western Balkan countries is the same, their paths for achieving it will be very different, as each country will need different timescales and solutions. Within the new European strategy for the Western Balkans, one can envisage medium to long-term processes

culminating in institutional accession agreements, and short to medium-term processes aimed at pre-accession agreements and focusing on a number of Community reference policies.

10.3   At the current stage of the Stabilisation and Association Process, the present opinion has sought to highlight the importance of mutual understanding and awareness of cultural differences and of the specific ways in which local society is organised.

10.4   Passing now from general suggestions to practical cooperation proposals, the Committee will focus on two spheres of action that can help to improve information and make for more effective practical relations between civil society organisations in the EU and the Western Balkans.

10.5   In line with the possibilities offered by the Thessaloniki agenda, the first sphere of action concerns:

–   education and vocational training at all levels, spanning all the key roles in civil society organisations (trade unions, employers, other interests, NGOs);

–   exchanges of experience and good practice between EU civil society organisations and their Balkan counterparts, in cooperation with local authorities and institutions;

–   public and sectoral information and communication.

10.6   Experience to date provides some ideas that can be put into effect immediately. First and foremost, it is necessary to address the fact that investment in human resources takes some time to produce results and requires a clear commitment to harness intangible resources such as the knowledge, expertise and knowhow of the civil society professions – the professions that are the civil expression of democracy.[25]

10.7   The second sphere of action concerns the use of joint consultative committees (JCC), as already established with other EU candidate countries. The JCC system (arrangements, scheduling) should be adjusted to meet the differing requirements of the Western Balkan countries[26].

10.8   Here too, the challenge is how to pursue EU cooperation with the individual countries, in line with their particular needs and local situations, while also promoting regional cooperation that has a real European dimension and strategic importance.

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[25]   See the conclusions and recommendations of the document approved by the social partners of south east Europe on 3-5.3.2003 in Zagreb (Appendix B to opinion CESE 594/2003) and the documents drawn up and updated by the ETF.

[26]   In the case of Slovenia, these are covered by Article 115 of the association agreement.

10.9   In this context the Committee would highlight the need to establish broad forums for multilateral consultations between the civil society organisations of the EU and the Western Balkans. These should cover the main cross-sectoral issues regarding integration and enlargement, such as trade and production activities, transport and environmental sustainability, conflict reduction and international security, local development and the fight against poverty.

10.10   It is important to involve civil society players in consultation and cooperation forums which can mobilise their respective expertise and organisational capacities in multilateral partnerships and networks for the conduct of large-scale cooperation projects.

11.   **Conclusions**

11.1   This exploratory opinion makes it clear that organised civil society provides the only opportunity to ensure that international cooperation and intervention programmes are truly significant for their final beneficiaries. Developing the organisation and coordination of civil society in the EU and candidate countries (inter alia through the use of joint consultative committees) increases this opportunity to benefit all citizens of the EU and of its neighbours. Civil society organisation have a vital role to play both in the Western Balkans and in Europe as a whole, not least in the face of the major threats the public sees today, with uncontrolled globalisation and other generalised risks:

–   the vulnerability of Europe's economic and production systems and labour markets;
–   the uncertainty of social protection and security policies;
–   cultural miscomprehension of the European tradition of participatory democracy;
–   the distortion of development objectives: these should focus on human and sustainable development, not merely increasing economic growth without social progress.

11.2   The EU can offer a large variety of prospects for the Western Balkans, in the form of pre-accession agreements that introduce key conditions geared to each country and encourage the individual countries to target their efforts on a single European reference point, thereby lessening the risk of serious institutional or cyclical problems preventing the five countries from achieving convergence towards the European average.

11.3   In conclusion, the Committee hopes to see the launch of well planned and targeted initiatives to ensure a regular and meaningful dialogue between civil society representatives from the EU and the Western Balkans. This should include:

–   follow-up to the activities undertaken by EESC working groups, including an update on the implementation of the Thessaloniki agenda and the partnerships foreseen therein;

–   moves to set up joint consultative committees (JCC), with appropriate scheduling and arrangements for the different countries. This means strict respect for the Commission and Council guidelines on the progress of the EU's institutional agreements with each country, following the practice used for the other applicant countries;

–   measures to support a European strategy of targeted conditions covering agricultural, trade and security policies, as regards regulatory reference frameworks and in the transport and energy sectors;

–   the holding of an international summit on the role of civil society in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans, highlighting both the key role of civil society organisations and the priorities for action. The summit should focus on the various accession and pre-accession processes, and should hold a wide debate on the priority issues surrounding EU integration and enlargement: social cohesion and democratic institution-building, economic development and sustainable development.

Brussels, 10 December 2003.

The President	The Secretary-General
of the	of the
European Economic and Social Committee	European Economic and Social Committee

Roger Briesch   **Patrick Venturini**

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N.B.: List of abbreviations overleaf.

Abbreviations:

EESC – European Economic and Social Committee
EU – European Union
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
CEEC – Central and Eastern European Countries
SAP – Stabilisation and Association Process
ETF – European Training Foundation
SIOI – Italian Society for International Organisation
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
ILO – International Labour Organisation
IFI –International Financial Institutions
LDAs – Local Democracy Agencies
TAIEX - Technical Assistance Information Exchange Office
JCC – Joint Consultative Committee

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