

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Situation of civil society in the Western Balkans

(2006/C 195/23)

By letter dated 14 June 2005, Ms Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an opinion on the *Situation of civil society in the Western Balkans*.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 27 March 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Dimitriadis.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17-18 May 2006 (meeting of 17 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 95 votes, nem. con. with one abstention.

The following opinion is in line with Article 9 of the Protocol of Cooperation between the Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee and meets the request of European Commission Vice-President Ms Margot Wallström for an opinion on the situation of civil society in the Western Balkans as a contribution to its strategic deliberations under the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP).

The purpose of the present opinion is to:

- give the best possible assistance to the Commission and the Council in framing and implementing sound policies to support realistic and measurable objectives;
- enable European public opinion to gain a better understanding of these policies and hence of the positive elements of the EU and give the policies its informed support;
- make it easier to assess and, consequently, to improve or revise the applied policies and measures when required, insofar as their objectives are clear and uncontroversial, particularly with regard to their direct beneficiaries;
- boost the EU's international image and weight, especially in the troubled Western Balkans, by demonstrating that it is sensitive to the real and urgent needs of the region's peoples, offering them know-how to help them achieve prosperity;
- explain the role the EESC can play in the region as a bridge between European civil society organisations and the corresponding local organisations.

1. Summary

1.1 The EESC's comments

- The EU lost a large part of its credibility at international and local level during the Yugoslav crisis, with the result that it is perceived in the region as a politically weak inter-

national actor which is still not fully aware of the real situation in the Western Balkans and is still unable to coordinate its various agencies.

- In a number of regions of the Western Balkans, and especially in Kosovo, a feeling of security has not been established while ethnic disagreements lead to extreme animosity in the region.
- The Union of Serbia and Montenegro does not meet the expectations for the expected democratic federation of states.
- Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are constructed political entities which have been imposed by international organisations, and there is no certainty that they will be viable in the long term.
- The Copenhagen criteria are regarded as fundamental and non-negotiable.
- The best way of developing a relevant integrated European strategy is through civil society — which has tentatively begun to play its role — and its organisations.
- The countries of the Western Balkans need constant direct and substantial support both in terms of know-how and in economic terms (support for direct and indirect foreign investments).
- There is a need for a many-voiced and many-sided social dialogue, and to establish a democratic legal operating framework for civil society.
- An immediate priority is stamping out corruption and making the judiciary a mainstay of society.
- Civil society organisations need to be financed.
- The EESC considers it necessary to establish Joint Consultative Committees with all the Western Balkan countries when the conditions are favourable.

1.2 *The role and responsibilities of the EESC*

- The EESC, with its substantial know-how and considerable human resources, regards itself as particularly suitable to play a more active role in the development of the above policies, as evidenced by its major initiative of organising a Forum in 2006 at its headquarters with the participation of civil society organisations of the Western Balkans.
- It intends to offer its good offices as required to bring the civil society organisations of the Western Balkans into contact with their EU counterparts.
- It can be used by the Commission to organise local information meetings with civil society on subjects of special interest and form a bridge of communication between civil society and international organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank, the EIB, etc.
- Systematic analyses-studies on the social situation in the Western Balkans and the progress of civil society should be planned, implemented and supported in cooperation with the European Commission.

1.3 *The EESC recommends and proposes:*

A) To the national and regional political forces of the Western Balkan countries:

- that they align themselves more closely with the Community acquis, and that their governments accelerate their efforts at democratisation;
- that all the parties concerned show special respect for national and religious minorities.

B) To the political bodies of the Union:

- the Commission should intensify efforts to complete procedures on the stabilisation and association agreements with the remaining states of the region and show stronger political will and better coordination to enable its political and consultative bodies to promote all the subjects on the Thessaloniki Agenda;
- the EESC regards education as the most important field for supporting and developing society in the Western Balkans;
- a definitive settlement of the constitutional status of Kosovo is of vital importance for security, peace and stability in the region;

- the EU should assess the statutes and aims of the social partners' organisations.

C) To the Member States of the Union bordering on the Western Balkans and the European civil society organisations:

- the Member States of the EU should take measures to support civil society.

2. **Historical background to the situation of civil society in the Western Balkans**

2.1 This opinion looks at civil society⁽¹⁾ in the Balkans, focusing on the following countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, FYROM and Serbia and Montenegro, and including Kosovo in accordance with Resolution 1244 of the Security Council of the United Nations.

2.2 At the summit meeting in Thessaloniki (June 2003), the EU reaffirmed its commitment to integration into the Union of the countries of the Western Balkans⁽²⁾ when the situation allows. The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) was enhanced with new instruments to support the reform process. Short-term and medium-term priorities were identified, and the first set of European Partnerships was approved in 2004.

2.3 However, the political situation in the region is still unstable: the final status of Kosovo has not yet been resolved, relations between Serbia and Montenegro are in flux, and the slow progress in Bosnia-Herzegovina could stop at any moment.

2.4 The missions of the EESC Contact Group to Croatia, to Bosnia-Herzegovina (21-22 March 2005), to Serbia and Montenegro (26 May 2005), to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and to Albania reported a positive response to the Civil Society Forum organised by the EESC. However, they also highlighted the difficulties in achieving constructive social dialogue and dialogue involving civil society organisations given that there is no real representative participation of the social partners, and that certain organisations claiming to represent civil society lack legitimacy⁽³⁾. Interaction between governments and civil society has gradually increased, but it has not yet reached the level needed in practice to produce substantial results and cooperation.

⁽¹⁾ The definition of civil society here is the same as in previous EESC opinions, i.e.: (1) organisations of employers and employees, (2) organisations representing other economic and social interests, (3) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), (4) grassroots organisations, (5) religious associations.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on *Promoting the involvement of Civil Society Organisations in South-East Europe (SEE) – Past Experiences and Future Challenges* (rapporteur: Mr Wilkinson, OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003, p. 82).

⁽³⁾ EESC opinions on *The role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe* (OJ C 329 of 11.11.1999) and on *Organised civil society and European governance: the Committee's contribution to the drafting of the White Paper* (OJ C 193 of 10.7. 2001).

2.5 The weakness of democratic institutions, the political environment and the security situation in the countries of the region have so far prevented structured social dialogue with independent and representative social partners, which must be based on internal discussion among the social partners and should continue to be supported by the EU with its rich experience and expertise.

2.6 This opinion is based on the follow-up to the summit meeting in Zagreb (November 2000), the Thessaloniki Agenda (June 2003) and all other EU initiatives on this region, focusing on economic, political, social and cultural issues.

2.7 The current situation of civil society organisations has not changed significantly from that described in the EESC's opinion on *The role of civil society in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans* ⁽⁴⁾. The situation can be summarised as follows:

- ongoing and strenuous efforts by trade unions to establish their new role in free-market economies and societies in which the private sector now contributes to growth;
- efforts to release employers' organisations from the strictures of state control, due to previous public ownership; the situation has changed now because after the collapse of the old regimes, the state played a special role in setting up new businesses and helping people to become entrepreneurs, who have received generous support from international investors;
- diverse — but in certain cases ineffective — efforts which require more coordinated cooperation.

2.8 The social situation more generally in the Balkans remains problematic. Despite steps forward, social and political institutions and structures are not yet consolidated. The war created very deep rifts which have not yet been bridged. This means that the efforts of international and European organisations have not had the expected impact, which is due among other things to the lack of a single model of social dialogue and dialogue involving civil society organisations in which the various groups and organisations of civil society should play distinct, very clear roles in terms of their rights, remits and obligations.

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinions on *The role of civil society in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans* (rapporteur: Mr Confalonieri, OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004, p. 158) and on *Promoting the involvement of Civil Society Organisations in South-East Europe (SEE) – Past Experiences and Future Challenges* (rapporteur: Mr Wilkinson, OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003, p. 82).

3. General situation of civil society organisations

3.1 Social partners

With the conclusion of free-trade agreements in the Balkans it is now necessary to establish formal representation of the social partners in the region and at the same time establish integrated representational structures at national level.

The European capacity-building programmes ⁽⁵⁾ are essential, in relation especially to trade unions' and employers' associations operating on the periphery. Best practice is needed for inter-regional cooperation since the social partners should address regional issues through cooperation in the run-up to a single Free Trade Agreement in 2006.

Engaging the public sector in the countries concerned is often a struggle, and public-private dialogue must be ensured and promoted.

3.2 Other organisations

Existing civil society organisations in the Balkans can be grouped into four general categories: (a) organisations set up to oppose the old regimes, (b) NGOs whose operations are depend entirely on donations and which were set up to implement international development aid programmes, (c) highly specialised organisations which usually work with the most vulnerable groups and (d) farmers' unions.

Sustainability and donor independence are the most important issues that must be addressed in the immediate future. Since organisations of the first type have generally existed for longer and are directly involved in the political debate, they have become widely recognised. However, they are facing serious difficulties in ensuring financial sustainability. Organisations in the second group are much less visible and very numerous, and seem to have been set up to meet the wishes of the donor community. The majority of these are certain to disappear owing to lack of donors.

Capacity-building and inter-NGO and regional cooperation must be addressed, but the most important issue is how to bridge the critical gap as international funds are reduced and local funding is not yet available. There is a risk that much of the social capital built up by civil society will be lost and that there will be a return to violence.

⁽⁵⁾ CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation), Council Regulation (EC) No 2666/2000 of 5 December 2000.

4. Structural problems of the Western Balkans and their effect on the development of organised civil society

4.1 Corruption

This is the most serious structural problem, and is due to inefficient public administration, the lack of a serious and effective institutional and legal framework, the absence of an independent judiciary, the unfavourable economic conditions, poverty and the absence of substantial action by civil society organisations.

4.2 Violation of human, individual and social rights

Despite the efforts of international organisations — which are not always successful — violations of individual rights by the authorities are still regularly observed. The biggest problem, however, is that the judiciary appears quite unaware of the role it should play here.

The countries' accession in principle to the institutional framework of the Council of Europe is a positive development. However, in many situations the absence of a political will to see implementation through, and the intrusion of minority and religious divisions into the social dialogue, make it particularly difficult to achieve a broad climate of *rapprochement* and communication.

4.3 Ineffective governance — public administration

The political and social instability caused by radical internal political conflicts is the main cause of poor governance in the region, manifest in serious malfunctioning of public administration, which in turn encourages lack of accountability and corruption. International and European efforts to modernise public administration have not yet brought about any significant improvement.

4.4 Absence of dialogue with civil society

Social dialogue ⁽⁶⁾ with civil society organisations requires not just a legal framework, but also mutual respect between the parties concerned and efforts to understand and moderate opposing views, and above all a culture of conflict resolution. The Western Balkans region has never had real social dialogue because of the authoritarian regimes and sham organisations which were strictly controlled by the state. Undoubtedly, sufficient time must be allowed to achieve the necessary quality and depth in social dialogue.

4.5 Need for authenticated, representative civil society organisations

The plethora of civil society organisations raises legitimate questions as to the actual social situation in the region. Many of the organisations in question were set up at the request or insistence of international bodies, which fund them, and often

⁽⁶⁾ Conference on Strengthening Social Dialogue in the Western Balkan Countries, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 6–7 Oct. 2005, Skopje.

provide the social welfare and assistance that should be delivered by the state. Yet others were set up on the initiative of international civil society organisations and other NGOs, which also directly influence their activities. And some are the result of local initiatives that conceal party-political, ethnic, minority or religious interests.

5. Comments of the EESC on the social, political and economic situation in the Western Balkans and the European strategy

5.1 The EU lost, at international and local level, a large part of its credibility in the Yugoslav crisis and in the course of the war in the formerly united Yugoslavia, because of its lack of specific intervention policies.

5.2 In the context of the stabilisation and association process, the European Commission will need to define a clearer political strategy to confirm its presence in the region. The European Commission will need to increase its commitment to improving the quality of its actions and its image in the region.

5.3 It should be pointed out that in a number of regions of the Western Balkans, and especially in Kosovo ⁽⁷⁾, a feeling of security has not been established and peace has not been consolidated, because of ethnic tensions; the Union of Serbia and Montenegro does not meet the criteria for the creation of a democratic Union of States ⁽⁸⁾.

5.4 Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are constructed political entities which have been imposed by international organisations and there is no certainty that they will be viable in the long term. There is therefore an immediate need for their political problems to be substantially solved in ways which will guarantee economic prosperity, protection of the rights of minority and religious groups and the strengthening of democratic structures guaranteed by international organisations. The of multilateral negotiations which started in 2005 under UN auspices, on the future of Kosovo, constitutes the only hope of solving this intractable problem.

5.5 The EESC believes that the EU should increase its presence in the region through strong, practical information and communication policies, and that it should clarify on the one hand its policy in the region, and on the other the cost for the countries concerned of their integration into the EU ⁽⁹⁾.

5.5.1 The Copenhagen criteria should also be regarded as fundamental and non-negotiable for the countries of the Western Balkans which wish to accede to the EU. However, for the process to make substantial progress and for these criteria to be met, the EU will need to use its mechanisms to intervene directly not only in the institutional frameworks of the countries concerned, but also in putting the Community *acquis* into practice.

⁽⁷⁾ EP Resolution P6_TA(2005)0131: Regional integration in the western Balkans – EP resolution on the state of regional integration in the Western Balkans.

⁽⁸⁾ The Austrian EU Presidency 2006 – Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs – 23 November 2005 – European Foreign Policy.

⁽⁹⁾ EESC opinion on *The role of civil society in the new European strategy for Western Balkans*, 10 December 2003 (rapporteur: Mr Confalonieri, OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004, p. 158).

5.6 In this context, the best way to develop a relevant integrated European strategy is through civil society and its organisations. More specifically, organised civil society provides a unique opportunity to ensure order in the long-term transition process and to guarantee that the cooperation and intervention programmes will prove to be genuinely effective for their final beneficiaries.

5.7 The information available to the EESC and the relevant knowledge it has acquired about the region — especially after the setting up of the Western Balkans contact group — lead it to make the following conclusions and comments:

5.7.1 Racial and ethnic disagreements can at any moment lead to extreme animosity in the Western Balkans; the tension is smouldering under the surface and can suddenly flare up.

5.7.2 Civil society⁽¹⁰⁾ has tentatively started to play its role, but this is usually based on foreign financing while know-how and credibility are absent in some cases.

5.7.3 Acceptance of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights is a basic precondition which should be accepted by all the states of the region which wish to join the EU.

5.7.4 The countries of the Western Balkans need constant direct and substantial support, both in economic terms and in terms of know-how, in order to strengthen their newly established institutions and acquire the necessary democratic sensitivity. Provision of this assistance will need to be better coordinated and, in the case of the EU, require closer cooperation between the European Agency for Reconstruction and the EU delegations in the area.

5.7.5 Basic preconditions for putting the social and economic life of the countries concerned back onto a normal footing are to strengthen the many-voiced and many-sided social dialogue and to create a democratic legal operating framework for civil society which will be applied in practice.

In particular, strengthening the social dialogue requires:

- a) recognising the role of the social partners;
- b) recognising the role of the autonomy of the social partners;
- c) respect for the right of the representative organisations to be well informed, to be consulted and to express a view on all economic and social subjects.

5.7.6 There is also a need to stamp out corruption by establishing strict but, as far as possible, simple rules and to adhere to them rigorously through the use of new technologies.

5.7.7 Finally, civil society organisations need to be financed; this is the greatest problem for their development and particularly for the development of the dialogue.

5.7.8 The judiciary must become a mainstay of society. To that end it must be particularly supported and strengthened so that it can play its institutional role according to European models.

5.7.9 Economic cooperation between the states of the area is the key to an overall integrated process of transition to the Community *acquis*. This cooperation will also help substantially to reduce tensions and create further opportunities for development and prosperity.

5.7.10 The intercultural, interfaith and interethnic dialogue will facilitate the creation of channels for *rapprochement* and communication between the countries of the Western Balkans. The religious leaders of the area are called upon to play a vital role in this field, defusing tensions and supporting attempts to strengthen the dialogue.

5.7.11 The EESC takes the view that the economic development of the area can be achieved through support for direct foreign investment and the necessary privatisations which will transfer capital and know-how, will help to reduce the public sector and will constitute the beginning of substantial positive developments for all the remaining social and political problems. For this aim to be achieved, it is necessary for the banking sector, as well as the institutional framework, to operate reliably, applying the recognised and certified international rules, in order to stamp out corruption in all its forms (money laundering, smuggling etc.).

The European Central Bank and the EIB are called upon to play a special coordinating role in the area.

5.7.12 International organisations (IMF, World Bank, ILO, UN, etc.) need to cooperate more closely with the representative organisations of civil society to strengthen their role within each society in the Western Balkans area.

5.7.13 The EESC notes that the coordination between various EU bodies in the area has improved substantially. The European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR) manages programmes involving hundreds of millions of Euro, some of which depend on or lead to the development of human resources or more specifically workforce training. Mention should also be made of the work of the European Training Foundation (ETF) and CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training), which, thanks to its excellent cooperation with the ETF and its direct proximity, could put its rich experience and know-how at the disposal of the countries of the region. In addition to the EU agencies, the role of the Stability Pact should also be emphasised, although its future remains unclear, and this could weaken its influence in the region.

⁽¹⁰⁾ EP Resolution P6_TA(2005)0131.

6. Proposals and recommendations of the EESC

6.1 Role and responsibilities of the EESC

With a view to bringing the economic, social and cultural reality in the Western Balkans closer in civil society terms to the corresponding Community *acquis*, a new view of the process is required. First and foremost, the experience acquired in the major enlargement through the Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) must be put to good use, and there should be greater involvement of organised civil society in all stages of formulation and development of the relevant policies. Also needed is a more systematic and clearly institutional involvement of organised civil society from both sides in the political negotiations between the EU and the Balkan Governments. Finally, integrated measures are required according to region and objective.

6.1.1 With its considerable human resources and important know-how⁽¹⁾ acquired during the EU accession negotiations of the ten new Member States in the Joint Consultative Committees, but also in the Joint Consultative Committees with Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey which are still operating, the EESC feels it is particularly well-placed to play a more active role in the development of the above policies in conjunction and in cooperation with the Committee of the Regions and through the joint organisation of initiatives in the region.

6.1.2 The EESC has good information and contacts, particularly since the setting-up of the Western Balkans contact group and the visits of some of its members to the region; this information and these contacts enable it to serve the aims of the Thessaloniki Agenda on the more important economic, social and cultural subjects on which more active and more rapid adoption of European rules and positions in the countries of the Western Balkans is needed.

6.1.3 In line with the above, the EESC attaches importance to its initiative for a Forum with the civil society organisations of the Western Balkans, to be held at its premises in 2006, because it will bring all the major civil society organisations of the Western Balkans into direct contact with the EESC and European bodies in general. It calls upon the Commission to

⁽¹⁾ The EESC has so far made the following contributions on the Western Balkans: (1) Information report on *Relations between the European Union and certain countries in south-east Europe*, adopted on 23.7.1998 (rapporteur: Mr Sklavounos, CES 1025/98 fin), (2) Own-initiative opinion on *Development of human resources in the Western Balkans* (rapporteur: Mr Sklavounos, OJ C 193 of 10.7.2001, p. 99), (3) Action plan 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*, in cooperation with the European Institute for Vocational Training (EIVT) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), (4) Own-initiative opinion on *Promoting the involvement of Civil Society Organisations in South-East Europe (SEE) – Past Experiences and Future Challenges* (rapporteur: Mr Wilkinson, OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003, p. 82), (5) Exploratory opinion on *The role of civil society in the new European strategy for the Western Balkans* (rapporteur: Mr Confalonieri, OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004, p. 158), (6) EESC Opinion on a *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours* (rapporteur: Ms Alleweldt (OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004, p. 148).

support this particular initiative by every suitable means, to back up its initiatives in support of representative civil society organisations at national and regional level and to take due account of the results of the Forum.

6.1.3.1 The EESC is prepared, if asked, to make its services available to put civil society organisations in touch with their European counterparts, for the purposes of transferring know-how and making their activities in the Western Balkans more productive.

6.1.3.2 The EESC is specifically interested in those civil society organisations that are in financial difficulty and have trouble covering their operating costs with their own funds. It therefore also supports their reinforcement as part of the implementation of the Stability Pact.

6.1.3.3 The EESC is similarly interested in the problems of agricultural communities in the Western Balkans. For this reason, it urges the Commission to pay greater attention to these issues and offer the appropriate know-how and expertise necessary to bring the primary sector up to date.

6.1.3.4 The EESC takes the view that the promotion of economic reforms and economic development in the region is a very basic factor in solving structural problems. Support for SMEs⁽²⁾ via their representative organisations is a basic precondition for the economic prosperity of the region and can be achieved through the application of best practice already applied in the EU Member States. The EESC has the necessary know-how and human resources to back any such efforts.

6.1.3.5 In this respect and in cooperation with the European Commission, the EESC could participate in national and local information meetings with civil society.

6.1.3.6 The EESC could contribute to the dissemination of information on the activities of international organisations in the region which are linked with civil society organisations. In addition, in the context of the joint declaration between the Director-General of the ILO and the President of the EESC, it could develop joint activities with the ILO in the region, particularly to strengthen the social dialogue.

⁽²⁾ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: *The Western Balkans and European integration*. COM(2003) 285 final – 21.5.2003.

6.1.3.7 The European Commission and the EESC should plan, initiate and support systematic analyses of the social situation in the Western Balkans and the progress made by civil society, centring in the main on the 'investment effort/effectiveness' relationship. 'Performance indicators' can be used (or new ones designed where none exist) for both hard and soft investment, so as to pinpoint any weaknesses or gaps in current EU policies and actions and make the necessary improvements or adjustments; for instance classifying the various civil society organisations according to certain basic characteristics (e.g. their *raison d'être*, aims, articles of association, geographical cover, operating methods and controls, sources and level of funding, etc.).

6.2 The EESC is prepared to set up Joint Consultative Committees with all the states of the region as soon as conditions allow.

6.3 The EESC, on the basis of the relevant experience and knowledge it has acquired through its contacts with civil society organisations in the countries of the Western Balkans, urges and recommends the following:

6.3.1 Recommendations to the national and regional political forces of the countries of the Western Balkans:

6.3.1.1 The EESC recommends to the countries of the Western Balkans that they pursue their alignment with the Community *acquis* more actively, and particularly that part of it which concerns protection of individual, social and collective rights, through provisional National Development Plans comparable to the plan prepared by Turkey, in order to be ready to absorb assistance from the EU in future.

6.3.1.2 The EESC calls upon the governments of those countries to intensify their efforts in favour of democratisation, and to support social cohesion by strengthening the dialogue with civil society organisations.

6.3.1.3 The EESC calls upon all the parties involved to show respect particularly for national and religious minorities, safeguarding their individual, religious and political rights and protecting religious and cultural monuments.

6.3.1.4 The EESC welcomes the progress towards completion of the procedures with all the countries of the stabilisation and association agreements.

6.3.2 Recommendations to the political bodies of the Union:

6.3.2.1 Given that the absence of know-how and of a legal framework leads to considerable problems of gender equality, environmental protection, and protection of consumers and disadvantaged groups in the region, the EESC calls upon the Commission to help the countries of the Western Balkans to achieve the necessary modernisation in a shorter time.

6.3.2.2 The EESC calls upon the Commission to initiate procedures for further strengthening of links between the EU and the states of the region following on from the individual stabilisation and association agreements concluded with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and with Croatia, to step up efforts to complete the procedures also with the remaining states of the region and to demonstrate stronger political will and better coordination to promote all aspects of the Thessaloniki agenda ⁽¹³⁾.

6.3.2.3 The EESC regards the Thessaloniki agenda as an important text on cooperation which, however, requires constant updating.

6.3.2.4 The EESC regards education as the most important field in which the EU should support the societies of the Western Balkans. Better education and reducing illiteracy can substantially mitigate the strong ethnic, religious and minority differences and, in conjunction with economic prosperity and the strengthening of democratic institutions, can lead the peoples of the Western Balkans to better levels of governance. The Commission can play an exceptionally important role in the field of education and culture, especially by developing support programmes for exchanges between scientific staff and training of new scientists.

6.3.2.5 In this context it is necessary to draw particular attention to the EU's growing geopolitical, economic and social blind spot due to the absence of the Western Balkan countries from its structures.

6.3.2.6 The EESC therefore recommends complete incorporation of the Western Balkans in the development strategy of the EU, through the strengthening of the Stabilisation and Association Process and further measures if necessary, because of the region's special difficulties.

6.3.2.7 By the same token, better coordination between the political institutions of the Union is recommended, as well as between its consultative bodies (EESC and Committee of the Regions) with the aim of creating conditions for more effective development of the programme in question.

6.3.2.8 The EESC takes the view that the definitive settlement of the question of Kosovo's sovereign status is of vital importance for security, peace and stability in the region, and calls upon the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament, in keeping with their respective responsibilities, to contribute to the efforts of the UN and of the UN Secretary-General's Special Mediator.

6.3.2.9 The EU should provide special visas for the representatives of organised civil society and those of representative organisations, and display greater general flexibility ⁽¹⁴⁾.

⁽¹³⁾ The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Extracts from successive General Affairs and External Relations Council, 16 June 2003.

⁽¹⁴⁾ EP Resolution P6_TA(2005)0131.

6.3.2.10 The EU must proceed with an assessment of workers' and employers' organisations in order to assess their articles of association, goals, organisation and working practices, sphere of activity (public or private sector), level of representation (among all businesses and workers or by sector), etc., with a view to the European Union having reliable organisations with which to cooperate. Analyses of this kind would be further facilitated were the EU to make the compilation and publication of the necessary data (i.e. transparency) a precondition for the approval of each type of support granted to public and private organisations and representative organs of civil society.

This work could be conducted internally, i.e. by the institutional bodies of the EU (Commission, EESC, etc.) or, where necessary, entirely or in part by an external agent.

6.3.3 *Recommendations to EU Member States bordering the Western Balkans and European civil society organisations*

6.3.3.1 The EESC recommends that EU Member States (such as Italy, Hungary, Slovenia and Greece) act to strengthen civil society there, particularly regarding strategy, making the most of human resources, management and the Europeanisation of institutional and legislative structures.

6.3.3.2 At the same time, the EESC calls for greater awareness and dynamism on the part of European employers' and workers' organisations and European organised civil society more generally regarding the need to involve corresponding organisations in the Western Balkans in relevant European structures and operations.

6.3.3.3 This means that both the action taken by Member States surrounding the Western Balkans and the corresponding work of European civil society organisations must tie in with the above-mentioned medium- to long-term programme of economic, social and political development.

6.4 **Financing**

6.4.1 The EU possesses a range of financial tools aimed at strengthening civil society in the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, other international organisations and countries grant development aid to a number of civil society organisations in the region. Although this type of aid is generally a good thing, there are a number of dangers relating mainly to the way in which it is given. The main problems with the application of foreign development aid in the Western Balkans are the following:

6.4.1.1 International aid to the Western Balkans may be relatively substantial in economic terms but more often than

not it is tied to priorities laid down by the donors that do not take into account the interests of local stakeholders and confuses initiatives for institutional change with isolated initiatives that do not tie in with the existing power and social structures or the interests and traditions of the countries receiving help. Frequently, all the work is given to NGOs in the countries receiving assistance and those NGOs are entirely dependent on the international aid programmes and propose initiatives that tie in with the priorities of the donors rather than the beneficiaries' needs.

6.4.1.2 The performance of international development aid programmes in the Western Balkans is undermined in particular by the lack of coordination between the various donors and the extremely short time-scale of programmes often funding one-off initiatives. In many cases initiatives that are starting to show positive results are abandoned because donors have suddenly changed their funding priorities, basing their programming on much smaller time-scales than those really needed in the countries of the Western Balkans. The funding mechanisms of the EU and the other international organisations must take on board the fact that the frequent changing of funding priorities is not effective. Training and capacity building programmes usually fall within this category. Similarly, support for institutions is increasingly piecemeal, often involving conferences and small seminars rather than genuine technical assistance.

6.4.1.3 Many NGOs work on social initiatives in order to generate an income. This has lessened the ability of such NGOs to forge real links with society and achieve their stated goals. Many NGOs mistake their role for that of technical support programme managers and operate on the basis of private-sector economic criteria aiming to secure greater funding.

6.4.2 In view of the need to address the above-mentioned problems so as to provide civil society organisations with more practical support, the EESC recommends the following with regard to the funding of such work:

6.4.2.1 The EU must target current development aid programmes and those planned for 2007-2013 mainly at the areas of democratic governance, economic administration and environmental management.

6.4.2.2 The governments of the Western Balkans must develop clear operational programmes to empower civil society, and these programmes must be discussed with the EU. It is therefore proposed that regular contact should be established between the Commission, the EESC and local governments for the development of such programmes.

6.4.2.3 A particularly robust system is needed to monitor the results of development aid programmes in the field of civil society. The EESC could play a major role in such a system.

6.4.2.4 The planning of development aid programmes must be tailored to the practical needs of civil society. Development aid aimed at the creation of new civil society institutions could make extensive use of EESC technical support.

6.4.2.5 After the Forum on the Western Balkans to be organised by the EESC, a permanent management working group could be set up by the EESC Contact Group and representatives of organised civil society in the Western Balkans. This group would help civil society organisations shape their strategies and operational agenda, and would supply best practice and know-

how to bolster civil society in the EU Member States and the countries of the Western Balkans.

6.4.2.6 In the EU's Financial Perspective for 2007-2013 the 'territorial cooperation' objective must give consideration to the financial means earmarked to assist third countries. Financing mechanisms for third countries must be simplified, without of course sacrificing existing transparency, and be strengthened in neighbourhood policies. The experience of programmes such as CADSES must be put to use and propagated.

6.4.2.7 While planning development aid programmes for civil society, the EU must take into account the development programmes of other international organisations. Cooperation with the programmes and special services of the UN should be deepened and extended to operational level.

Brussels, 17 May 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the EU campaign to conserve biodiversity: position and contribution of civil society

(2006/C 195/24)

In a letter dated 13 September 2005, the Austrian presidency, acting under Article 262 of the EC Treaty, asked the European Economic and Social Committee to draw up an exploratory opinion on the: *EU campaign to conserve biodiversity: position and contribution of civil society*.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 26 April 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Ribbe.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 May 2006 (meeting of 18 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 125 votes to none, with four abstentions:

1. Summary of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations

1.1 Biodiversity is the foundation and guarantee of life on our planet. Economic self-interest alone dictates that humanity must strive to keep ecosystems stable. We also owe a debt of responsibility to the natural world to maintain species diversity. Protecting biodiversity is not some 'luxury' to be indulged in or dispensed with at will.

1.2 Humanity itself is the greatest beneficiary of biodiversity; yet it is humanity that is, at the moment, the main cause of its decline.

1.3 As the EESC sees it, biodiversity in Europe remains under extreme threat. EU action to date has not been enough to halt the decline of the past few decades.

1.4 The EESC welcomes the commitment of all the European institutions and, as contracting parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, of the EU Member States not only to halt but also to reverse this decline.

1.5 That said, however, the EESC laments the huge gulf that has grown up between ideal and reality: public authorities have so far failed to make the contribution to conserving biodiversity that might have been expected of them. In fact, in this field, it is their duty to be role models; instead, planning decisions and support schemes are often instrumental in imperilling biodiversity still further. Moreover, in the 2007-2013 funding period, particular savings are to be made in precisely those EU policy areas that are of key importance for biodiversity protection.