

## **BCSDN Calls for Kosovo's Inclusion in the EESC ECM Initiative**

In light of the newly established and earnestly welcomed Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative (ECM) by the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC), the Balkan Civil Society Development Network urges the EESC to reconsider the exclusion of Kosovo from this initiative.

The EESC has become the first institution of the EU that demonstrates in practice how countries that have a clear accession perspective can be gradually integrated into the EU even before they become formal members of the bloc. However, because the formal condition for eligibility for this initiative set by EESC was that countries are candidates for membership in the EU, representatives of social partners from Kosovo have been left out of EESC ECM Initiative. We consider that utilizing the absence of candidate status as a rationale for excluding participants from Kosovo from this initiative is not in line with the general spirit and goals that EESC promotes within the European community, and the inclusive approach of EESC prior to this initiative. Moreover, by being the first initiative from an EU institution piloting such a participatory approach beyond formal EU Member States, this sets a troubling precedent for excluding Kosovo from other regional initiatives tied to the EU.

The EU and its Member States have consistently voiced their unwavering support for the European perspective of the entire Western Balkans region, Kosovo included. In various official documents, such as the Enlargement Strategy and annual reports, Kosovo is not singled out from the rest of the Western Balkans. Despite specific issues with non-recognition from five EU Member States, Kosovo is a formal part of the EU Integration Process. Kosovo has demonstrated its commitment to implementing reforms and aligning with EU standards and norms, as part of its active engagement in the Stabilization and Association Process. It has also applied for the EU Candidate Status, clearly demonstrating its strategic direction towards the EU. When it comes to democracy, including social dialogue and civic space, Kosovo has made significant progress over the last couple of years. The EC communication "A credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans" highlights that countries advancing on reform priorities should expect "phasing-in" and closer integration with the EU. Kosovo's efforts towards this end should not be disregarded simply because it lacks the formal candidate status.

Finally, excluding Kosovo from this initiative directly contradicts EESC's commitments and recommendations communicated specifically towards Kosovo. Namely, the EESC mission report from the last hearing with civil society representatives from Kosovo highlights the challenges faced by Kosovo's civil society organizations in joining regional and international networks because of its status and suggests exploring ways to facilitate the integration of Kosovo's civil



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society into broader networks to enhance collaboration and cooperation. Furthermore, recommendations from the EESC Opinion on EU-Kosovo Relations emphasize the need to support the creation of civil society networks in Kosovo “in view of easing the dialogue with the authorities and connecting to the existing European civil society platforms”.

We reiterate that Kosovo's exclusion from the EESC Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative is untenable and undermines the EU's professed commitment to the Western Balkans' European perspective. The Balkan Civil Society Development Network urges the EESC to rectify this oversight and extend eligibility to participants from Kosovo within the current pilot phase, thereby fostering greater collaboration, cooperation, and inclusivity in the region's journey towards European integration.