

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

### **Regaining the enlargement momentum**

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“There will be no new enlargement in the next five years” – this (in)famous sentence of Jean-Claude Juncker from July 2014 caused a stir among the various stakeholders involved in the process of the Union’s enlargement. Perceived by many as a statement summarizing the well-publicized “enlargement fatigue” the Union is purportedly facing it would appear to match well with the “reforms’ fatigue” experienced on the other side of the negotiations by the candidate countries of the Western Balkans.

In response to this apparent lack of momentum and to the castigation of many not involved in the process, the European Commission (DG NEAR) came up with new plans to support the candidate and potential candidate countries on their path towards EU membership. This involves working closer together on meeting EU regulatory standards, further alignment with the EU *acquis* and other necessary reforms. A further aim was also to convince the societies of the (potential) candidate countries that the enlargement negotiations are being given the same priority, as was the case with the previous Commission.

### **Multiple crises, numerous challenges**

The recent EU Membership application submitted by Bosnia and Herzegovina, a year ahead of the indicated schedule, shows that the enlargement ambitions of countries in the region have not been dimmed either as a result of the above mentioned causes, or due to other recent challenges to the Union. That said, many external observers have been quick to place scorn on this move, by suggesting that the application is simply a ruse to cover ongoing troubles in the country.

With European integration being questioned more often nowadays, further improvement of the accession preparations of the Western Balkans and Turkey should go hand in hand with the actions taken at the EU level to resolve the crisis. This means deepening engagement with civil society organizations to overcome the challenges posed by the economic crisis, enlargement fatigue, growing populism and Euroscepticism. Further strengthening of ties is needed in light of the ongoing refugee crisis, which first strikes the Western Balkans, putting it at the forefront of the migration route.

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In order to work through these numerous challenges civil society and experts in the Balkans have, more than ever, an important role to play. The accumulated expertise and lessons learned throughout the multifarious stages of the EU accession process to date can be used to regain the enlargement momentum, increase public trust both within the EU and the region, and to communicate the importance of the enlargement and reform processes for citizens.

### European Movement and the Balkans

Building upon the European Movement International's Montenegro Congress (21-23 November 2013), "Fostering Civil Society in the Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries", and two preceding congresses in Slovenia (Ljubljana Congress, 2009) and Turkey (Istanbul Congress, 2011), the European Movement International in cooperation with the European Movement in Serbia, and with the support of TACSO, is again organizing a conference to discuss these issues. The 2-day event, "Civil Society and Beyond – a Joint Dialogue on the European Path", will draw upon examples of best practice and look at the challenges and experience shared by regional actors involved in the negotiation process. Over 150 representatives from civil society, the European Institutions and the national authorities will gather together on the 25 and 26 February to discuss the development of the role of civil society in the public debate, the process of national reforms and the advocacy role of CSOs. Participants will have the opportunity to talk about the much needed political strategy that will further develop alliance-building and the development of cooperative processes between European CSOs and civil society in the candidate and potential candidate countries.

In order to further develop civil society and to move beyond what has already been achieved, all actors within the region need to cooperate in order to ensure that civil society is given a strong and central voice in the accession process.

Petros Fassoulas

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