Belgrade, 17 November, 2023

**JOINT DECLARATION**

**EN**

The EU-Serbia Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) is one of the bodies set up under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Union and Serbia. The JCC enables civil society organisations (CSOs) from both sides to monitor Serbia's progress towards the European Union, and to adopt recommendations for the attention of the government of Serbia and the EU institutions. The JCC understands the notion of civil society as encompassing organisations of employers, trade unions and other economic, social and civic interests.

The JCC is made up of 18 members, nine from each side, representing the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and Serbian civil society. During its current term, the JCC is co-chaired by **Tasos Yiapanis,** general secretary of Panagrotkis Farmers Union and **Boško Savković**, secretary-general of the Serbian Association of Employers.

The meeting was held in Belgrade. The JCC discussed the current state of play in EU-Serbia relations and accession process negotiations with the EU, challenges for the civil society in Serbia and an overview of the rule of law situation in Serbia.

# ***On the state of play in EU-Serbia relations and the accession process***

*On progress in accession negotiations*

## The JCC notes with regret that no new clusters have been opened or chapters closed since the opening of negotiations under cluster 4 on the Green Agenda and sustainable connectivity[[1]](#footnote-1) in December 2021. The JCC is looking forward to the expected opening of cluster 3 – *competitiveness and inclusive growth.* The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to seize the current EU enlargement momentum by demonstrating their unequivocal commitment to the EU accession path and by accelerating the pace of genuine reforms. Those reforms should be enforced by effective legislation and implementation.

## The JCC congratulates the EESC on being the first EU body to open its doors to *Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs)[[2]](#footnote-2)*, who will, starting from 2024, participate in an advisory capacity in important EESC activities focusing on enlargement. It is extremely important that the Serbian ECMs be selected in such a way to reflect the genuine voices of the Serbian civil society. The JCC also congratulates the EESC for the success of its Western Balkans Civil Society Forum[[3]](#footnote-3) and agrees with its declaration.

* 1. The JCC takes note of and agrees with the findings and recommendations set out in the 2023 Serbia report[[4]](#footnote-4), in the framework of the 2023 Enlargement Package. The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to carefully analyse the report and establish a clear roadmap for action to take in the future. Serbian civil society has to be empowered to contribute to its efficient implementation.

## The JCC welcomes the announcement of president Von der Leyen on the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans[[5]](#footnote-5). Its objective is to encourage economic integration to the EU through the Common Regional Market, in accordance with EU rules and standards, which will impact the growth of WB economies, by opening parts of the EU single market upon the delivery of specific reforms facilitated by EUR2 billion in grants and EUR4 billion in loans, all conditional upon delivery. The JCC strongly believes that making progress on the *Fundamentals* cluster remains crucial and non-negotiable.

## The JCC calls on the Member States to continue to be supportive and credible on EU enlargement policy and in parallel, to ensure that the EU has the capacity to accept new Member States and function effectively.

## The JCC also calls on the Serbian authorities to maintain EU integration as a major strategic goal and to, through more active communication, raise citizens' awareness of the benefits and strengths of EU membership, as opposed to alternative third country partnerships, which often lack transparency and compliance with environmental, public procurement, labour and privacy standards

## The JCC reminds in this regard that the European Union has been by far Serbia's main trade partner, its largest investment partner and donor, be it through the Economic and Investment Plan, inclusion in the Digital Europe Programme, the energy crisis support, the Single Market Program, the modernisation of the Corridor X railways, improving Serbia’s connectivity and competitiveness.

## The JCC encourages all initiatives allowing to unleash greater potential of regional cooperation, based on EU rules and standards, but also to speed up the accession process. In that sense, it congratulates the involved actors on the success of the Berlin Process, including the Berlin Process Summit[[6]](#footnote-6) and the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF)[[7]](#footnote-7).

# ***On current challenges in EU- Serbia relations***

*On security issues in Serbia and the region*

## The JCC considers that Serbia has an important role to play in ensuring security, stability and prosperity of the region. It therefore has to clarify its foreign policy stances, and resolve its outstanding regional issues.

## The JCC calls on both Serbia and Kosovo\* to work together in overcoming antagonism holding back both sides’ progress, in line with the discussions in the margins of the European Council on 26 October 2023[[8]](#footnote-8). The JCC strongly condemns the events of 24 September 2023, and calls the authorities to investigate them and work together on preventing future escalation. It is necessary to break with the narratives that incite hatred and prevent further normalisation of relations, which also come from the negotiators themselves.

## The JCC stresses that Serbia has to genuinely adhere to the EU values and principles, and therefore align its foreign policy and rhetoric accordingly, namely as regards Russia, China, Iran, or other anti‑democratic regimes. The JCC considers that Chinese and Russian presence and influences, be it through trade agreements or gas, oil and mining industries, could in the long run prove to be harmful for Serbia's economic, environmental or political interests.

*On rise of violence in Serbia*

## The JCC expresses deep concerns about the rise of violence in Serbia, culminating with the mass shootings in Belgrade and Mladenovac in May, and a number of issues they revealed, including consistent promotion of violence and normalisation of hate speech in the dominant Serbian media.

## The JCC notes the amplitude ofthecitizens’ protests in Serbia as a manifestation of the need for a profound change in the Serbian society. It regrets the response of the Serbian authorities, including criticism of the protestors, verbal attacks on participants, which could only further increase tensions.

## The JCC takes note of the deep discontent of the Serbian citizens expressed through past and current protests, and calls on the Serbian authorities to open and promote inclusive and genuine dialogue channels instead of referring to institutional and non-institutional intimidations and threats.

## The JCC entirely agrees with the EESC's statement strongly condemning the arrest of its co-chair, Mr Boško Savković[[9]](#footnote-9). The fundamental values of freedom of expression and assembly cannot and should never be compromised.

*On media freedom*

## The JCC stresses that the Media Strategy and the accompanying action plan should improve the Serbian media landscape. In that respect, it considers that the recently adopted Law on public information and media and the Law on electronic media diverge from the objectives of the Media Strategy and could seriously threaten already weak media pluralism and freedom of information, as they do not provide transparency in media ownership and legalise state ownership of the media, nor full independence and accountability of the Regulatory Electronic Media Body (REM).

## The JCC calls on the European institutions to support and to the Serbian authorities to urgently proceed to the attribution of the fifth national frequency with the objective to obtain media pluralism necessary in the current media landscape.

## The JCC notes that cases of threats and violence against journalists remain a major concern, with insufficient protection mechanisms. The JCC strongly condemns the growing problem of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) targeting journalists, human rights defenders and civil society representatives and their organisations, putting great pressure on the media's financial and human resources capacities. It calls on the authorities to improve the capacity of the Serbian judiciary to apply international and regional standards on freedom of expression in defamation and SLAPP cases.

*On upcoming elections*

## The JCC calls the Serbian authorities to ensure free and fair parliamentary and local elections to be held on 17 December 2023, by enhancing legal certainty and providing equal opportunities for electoral contestants, through allowing independent verifications of electoral registers, equal access to media and to public resources, transparent electoral process, adequate campaigning, just media coverage, and prevention of fraud and manipulation. It calls on the Serbian authorities to implement the ODIHR recommendations and agrees with the ODIHR's Needs Assessment Mission Report [[10]](#footnote-10) on the need for a large-scale ODIHR election observation activity.

## The JCC calls on the authorities of EU countries, as well representatives of EU institutions, to refrain from public displays of support towards incumbents during the prelection period. Moreover, the JCC calls on all political actors in Serbia to refrain from spreading fear and threats as regards potential election results[[11]](#footnote-11).

# ***On the situation of civil society and rule of law in Serbia***

## The JCC strongly regrets that civic space in Serbia remains obstructed[[12]](#footnote-12) and calls on the Serbian authorities to prevent or sanction the identified attacks on representatives of civil society and smear campaigns[[13]](#footnote-13). The JCC urges the authorities to spare no effort in securing a real, genuine, enabling environment for organised civil society and social partners in Serbia.

*On fight against discrimination*

## The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to demonstrate real political dedication in the fight against all types of discrimination, including minority and vulnerable groups in Serbia. The JCC also calls on the Serbian authorities to effectively implement the action plans on gender equality and Roma inclusion, and to strengthen Serbian human rights institutions.

## The JCC considers that the adoption of the Strategy of de-institutionalization and development of social protection services in the community for the period 2022-2026[[14]](#footnote-14) and the Law on Social Entrepreneurship[[15]](#footnote-15) were steps in the right direction. However, it deeply regrets that the action plan for the implementation of the Strategy has not yet been adopted. The JCC calls for their immediate implementation, because the realization of their goals should lead to the realization of human rights and the reduction of discrimination against socially vulnerable groups.

*On the judiciary*

## The JCC supports Serbia in the adoption of laws and bylaws in the field of justice with a view to strengthening the independence and effectiveness of judiciary, but expresses concern as regards insufficient transparency of the work of High judicial council in practice.

*On social dialogue and labour reforms*

## The JCC stresses once again the importance of youth for the future of Serbia and therefore the importance of taking concrete measures to create prospects and opportunities for young people, enabling them to stay in the country and prosper.

## The JCC underlines that, to remedy high youth unemployment rates and young people's difficulties in integrating in the labour market, the education and training systems need to be aligned with the growing demand for new skills in the digital and green transitions.

## The JCC highlights once again the vital importance of recognising the principle of decent work, based on written contracts, safety, and decent and timely pay, and of properly addressing labour market issues such as the regulation of teleworking and combatting informal economy. The JCC calls on Serbia to continue with labour reforms in line with the principles of quality of work and quality of life[[16]](#footnote-16) and the recommendations of the decent work country programme signed with the ILO[[17]](#footnote-17).

## The JCC urges once again the Serbian authorities to ensure that the rights of both domestic and seconded/foreign employers and workers are fully respected. It stresses the need for respect for internationally and nationally recognised rules on human rights and social rights for all workers.

## The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities and the representative social partner organisations, in the framework of the Social and Economic Council (SEC) and in consultation with the National Convention on the EU and other relevant stakeholders, to speed up their action in implementing the action plan for Chapter 19 on Social policy and employment.

## The JCC once again calls on the adoption of a new Labour Law entirely aligned with EU acquis, with the aim of promoting the social dialogue and collective bargaining. The JCC underlines that social partners must be actively involved in the process of creation of the new Labour Law.

\*\*\*

The JCC instructs its co-chairs to forward this joint declaration to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Council, the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission and the government of Serbia and all relevant ministries.

\*\*\*

In accordance with the EU-Serbia JCC's Rules of Procedure, the present joint declaration was adopted unanimously.

\*\*\*

The next JCC meeting is to be held in Brussels in the first half of 2024. As agreed in the previous meetings, the assessment of an enabling environment for civil society and fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria for accession are a permanent part of the JCC's meeting agenda.

1. Cluster 4 comprises four negotiating chapters: chapter 14 (transport policy), chapter 15 –(energy), chapter 21 (trans-European networks), and chapter 27 (environment and climate change). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [EU Enlargement: The EESC is the first EU institution to involve EU candidate countries in its work, turning a political priority into reality | European Economic and Social Committee (europa.eu)](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/eu-enlargement-eesc-first-eu-institution-involve-eu-candidate-countries-its-work-turning-political-priority-reality) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/9th-western-balkans-civil-society-forum> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Serbia Report 2023 (europa.eu)](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2023_en) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Commission presents a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans including €6 billion in grants and loans to accelerate economic convergence with the EU (europa.eu)](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-new-growth-plan-western-balkans-including-eu6-billion-grants-and-loans-2023-11-08_en) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-is-coming-back-to-berlin> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://wb-csf.eu/publications-csf> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [Joint statement by the President of the French Republic, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and the President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic on the EU-facilitated Dialogue on normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia (bundeskanzler.de)](https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-de/aktuelles/joint-statement-by-the-president-of-the-french-republic-the-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-the-president-of-the-council-of-ministers-of-the-italian-republic-on-the-eu-facilitated-dialogue-on-normalisation-of-relations-between-kosovo-and-serbia-2233766) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/statement-european-economic-and-social-committee-arrest-mr-bosko-savkovic-serbia> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/8/556494.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [Minister calls opposition liars, chaos mongers (n1info.rs)](https://n1info.rs/english/news/minister-calls-opposition-liars-chaos-mongers/) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [Serbia - Civicus Monitor](https://monitor.civicus.org/country/serbia/) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [Informator #9 o napadima i pritiscima na aktiviste i aktivistkinje (yucom.org.rs)](https://www.yucom.org.rs/informator-9-o-napadima-i-pritiscima-na-aktiviste-i-aktivistkinje/). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [Strategy of deinstitutionalization and development of social protection services in the community for the period 2022-2026. | UNEP Law and Environment Assistance Platform](https://leap.unep.org/en/countries/rs/national-legislation/strategy-deinstitutionalization-and-development-social-protection#:~:text=The%20strategy%20of%20deinstitutionalization%20and%20development%20of%20social,of%20citizens%20who%20use%20home%20care%20services%20accommodation.) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [2505-21.pdf (parlament.gov.rs)](http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/predlozi_zakona/2021/2505-21.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/key-components-sustainable-quality-work-during-and-after-recovery>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [About the ILO in Serbia](https://www.ilo.org/budapest/countries-covered/serbia/WCMS_468114/lang--en/index.htm). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)