



Belgrade, 29 November 2022

JOINT DECLARATION

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 **Laurențiu Plosceanu**, member of the EESC, president of the Romanian Construction Entrepreneurs' Association (ARACO) and vice-president of the General Union of Romanian Industrialists (UGIR), 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, the Serbia report 2022, civil society perspectives on current challenges in EU-Serbia current relations and the overview of the rule of law situation in Serbia.

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

On progress in accession negotiations

- 1.1. The JCC regretfully notes that after the opening of negotiations under cluster 4 on the Green agenda and sustainable connectivity¹ in December 2021, the pace of reform efforts has slowed down, especially in the period between the dissolution of Parliament in February 2022 and the formation of the new government, which only happened in October 2022. The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to resume and reinforce its efforts in demonstrating Serbia's commitment to the accession process.
- 1.2. The JCC takes note of and agrees with the findings and recommendations of the Serbia report 2022 in the framework of the 2022 Enlargement Package². It calls on the Serbian authorities to carefully

¹ Cluster 4 is comprised of four negotiating chapters: chapter 14 - Transport policy, chapter 15 - Energy, chapter 21 - Trans-European networks, and chapter 27 - Environment and climate change

² [Serbia Report 2022 \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/serbia-report-2022)

*All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

analyse the report and establish a clear roadmap for their future action. Serbian civil society should also be empowered to contribute to its efficient implementation.

- 1.3. In that respect, the JCC reiterates its support for the central role of cluster 1 on Fundamentals (functioning of democratic institutions, rule of law, economic criteria and public administration reform), the progress of which impacts all other criteria and defines the dynamics of EU accession negotiations.
- 1.4. The JCC considers that it is of major importance that Serbia aligns, not only with the EU acquis, but also with the EU's common foreign and security policy. It therefore commends Serbia for joining other members of the United Nations from the Western Balkans in voting in favour of the Resolutions on the aggression against Ukraine, the humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine, as well as on Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council and on Russia's 'Illegal Annexation' of Ukrainian Regions. However, the JCC calls for a clear definition of Serbia's strategic direction and alignment with the positions adopted by the EU, as expected under the EU-Serbia Negotiating Framework.
- 1.5. The JCC supports the European Parliament's engagement in the Western Balkans and welcomes the proposal in the New EU strategy for enlargement³ to "step up the involvement of civil society and the local and regional authorities of both EU Member States and candidate countries in the accession process".
- 1.6. The JCC calls on the Member States to continue to be supportive of EU enlargement policy. Moreover, it calls on the current Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as the upcoming Swedish presidency, to keep the accession of our Western Balkan partners high on their agendas, building upon the momentum and progress achieved. The JCC welcomes the decision to hold the EU-WB Summit on 6 December in Tirana under the Czech Presidency.
- 1.7. The JCC supports the establishment of the European Political Community⁴ as reinforced cooperation between democratic countries across the continent complementary to the process leading accession applicants to full EU membership, and not as an alternative to it.

On regional cooperation

- 1.8. The JCC welcomes and supports initiatives related to inclusive regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, including the Common Regional Market and Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. In this respect, it supports and congratulates the latest Berlin Process achievements, namely the three mobility agreements adopted at the Western Balkans Berlin Summit on 2 November 2022⁵. It especially supports the involvement of civil society in the process leading to these achievements through the Civil

³ [New EU Strategy for enlargement rapp. T.Picula \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴ [Meeting of the European Political Community - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵ [Berlin Process | The Berlin Process is coming back to Berlin](#)

Society Think Tank Forum 2022⁶, and of young people through the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2022⁷.

- 1.9. The JCC welcomes the cooperation of the business community in the Western Balkans and the activities of the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF), which represents a cooperation platform with the aim of providing a common voice to the business community in the region and facilitating inter-business contacts and promoting the region as a single investment destination.
- 1.10. The JCC welcomes the strengthening of regional cooperation and the efforts of faster integration of the Region into the single European market. The JCC supports all regional initiatives aimed at bringing the region closer to European values, and agrees that "the Open Balkan initiative launched by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia can play a positive role in the process, provided it is based on EU rules and remains inclusive towards all Western Balkans partners"⁸.

On Belgrade-Pristina dialogue

- 1.11. The JCC reiterates its call for the Serbian authorities to continue their engagement in the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, with the objective of addressing all outstanding issues between the two sides, and to obtain an agreement ensuring the region's stability and European path. The JCC aligns with the EU call on the need to show readiness to seek solutions in a constructive manner and respect their obligations made in the Dialogue⁹. The JCC therefore warmly welcomes the advancement on the licence plates dispute to avoid further escalation and to concentrate on the proposal on normalisation of relations.

On public communication

- 1.12. The JCC commends Serbia for keeping EU integration as one of the major strategic goals. Following the Russia's war against Ukraine, the JCC reiterates its call to Serbia to better communicate the advantages and strengths of a path towards European Union membership to its citizens as opposed to alternative third country partnerships, which often lack transparency and compliance with environmental, privacy and labour standards. The JCC reiterates the importance of fighting against disinformation and false narratives, and invites the Serbian authorities to contribute to this common endeavour. It therefore regrets the launching of the Russia Today multimedia online website in Serbian.
- 1.13. Considering its transformative impact, the JCC believes that EU action in Serbia needs more visibility, and recommends that both EU institutions and the Serbian authorities strengthen their efforts in accompanying EU action with an intensive communication strategy.

⁶ [Berlin Process Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2022 | Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft e.V. \(sogde.org\)](#)

⁷ [Berlin Declaration of the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2022.docx \(westernbalkansfund.org\)](#)

⁸ [Serbia Report 2022 \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁹ [Kosovo/Serbia: Statement by the High Representative on the recent developments | EEAS Website \(europa.eu\)](#)

On energy issues and sustainable development

- 1.14. Recalling that Serbia is a strategic partner for the EU, the JCC welcomes the opening of the REPowerEU Plan to the Western Balkan partners, and commends Serbia for joining the first regional group meeting of the South-East Europe regional task force. The JCC stresses the importance of continuing and reinforcing support to projects leading to security of supply, diversification of energy sources, renewable energy generation, decarbonisation, market liberalisation and energy efficiency.
- 1.15. The JCC reiterates its call on the EU institutions to continue to support Serbia in developing an ambitious national energy and climate plan, and in its implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.¹⁰ In particular, it strongly supports projects regarding transition from coal via the Economic and Investment Plan, including the Trans-Balkan Electricity Transmission Corridor in Serbia.
- 1.16. The JCC calls for Serbia to continue efforts for a just transition to a more sustainable society, to protect the country's rich biodiversity and reduce harmful practices. The JCC aligns with the recommendation to the authorities by the WB2EU Network¹¹ to adopt and operationalise, with wide national consensus, realistic and comprehensive decarbonisation strategies.
- 1.17. The JCC expresses its support for the citizens of Serbia, who have made environmental issues such as rising pollution issues caused by the use of poor-quality coal and other pollutants, and mounting problems concerning waste management, their priority. It is crucial that in efforts made for the green transition authorities ensure that no one is left behind, through the right social policies taking into account vulnerable groups, households and consumers.

2. *On the state of democracy in Serbia*

On elections

- 2.1. Following presidential elections, extraordinary parliamentary elections and local elections for Belgrade and 12 towns and municipalities on 3 April 2022, the JCC notes that improvements have been observed, but also certain shortcomings.¹² It calls on the Serbian authorities to examine and take into account the recommendations of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission¹³ in future reforms of the electoral processes in Serbia.
- 2.2. The JCC notes that the Serbian authorities have applied most of the measures aimed at improving the electoral environment identified during the second phase of the European Parliament facilitated Inter-

¹⁰ SWD(2020) 223 final (COM(2020) 641 final) (6.10.2020) [Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#)

¹¹ [PB-152022.pdf \(wb2eu.eu\)](#)

¹² Preliminary statement of the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM)

¹³ OSCE Report on the elections in Serbia on 3/4/2022 [524385_0.pdf \(osce.org\)](#)

Party Dialogue¹⁴. However, it regrets the delays in their implementation and their insufficiency, primarily in areas of unequal access to media, abuse of public resources and public office. Moreover, the JCC regrets that "the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, responsible for campaign finance oversight, did not effectively respond to alleged violations, at odds with OSCE commitments" and that "despite its mandate to oversee the broadcast media, the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (REM) remained overall passive in the campaign period"¹⁵.

- 2.3. The JCC welcomes the fact that, contrary to the previous election, all relevant political actors took part in the early parliamentary elections, which resulted in a more pluralistic Parliament constituted in August 2022, after over five months of its inactivity. Furthermore, the JCC calls for a more effective use of the code of conduct in the future, to sanction offensive language in the Parliament.

On the judiciary

- 2.4. The JCC congratulates Serbia for the steps taken to adopt judicial laws, but calls on the Serbian authorities to make efforts to complete and implement the reform processes as soon as possible. In addition, the JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to immediately implement the improved process of electing a new Protector of Citizens.

On civic space

- 2.5. The year 2022 was marked by numerous spontaneous public gatherings related to environmental issues. The JCC considers that the reaction of the institutions was not in accordance with the principle of freedom of peaceful assembly, and the Republic of Serbia must continue to refrain from disproportionate restrictions on peaceful protests, in the form of mass initiation of misdemeanour proceedings and excessive use of force.
- 2.6. The JCC greatly regrets that civic space in Serbia remains obstructed¹⁶ and calls on the Serbian authorities to prevent or sanction the identified attacks and smear campaigns¹⁷. It urges the Serbian authorities to secure a real, genuine, enabling environment for Serbian organised civil society and social partners.
- 2.7. Therefore, the JCC is looking forward to the implementation of Serbia's new strategy for cooperation with civil society adopted in February 2022. It should however not interfere with the work of the Social and Economic Council of the Republic of Serbia.
- 2.8. The JCC considers that freedom of expression of human rights defenders and journalists is often jeopardized by manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings. It recommends that Serbia takes the measures for protection of persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings ("Strategic lawsuits against public participation").

14 [Measures to improve the conduct of the electoral process 18 Sept.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

15 OSCE Report on the elections in Serbia on 3/4/2022 [524385_0.pdf \(osce.org\)](#)

16 [CIVICUS - Tracking conditions for citizen action](#)

17 [Informator #9 o napadima i pritiscima na aktiviste i aktivistkinje \(yucom.org.rs\)](#)

On the fight against discrimination

- 2.9. The JCC calls on the Serbian authorities to demonstrate real political dedication in the fight against all types of discrimination, especially against minority populations in Serbia, to start implementing effectively the new action plans on gender equality and Roma inclusion and reinforce Serbian human rights institutions. The JCC particularly stands for the rights of the LGBTIQ community in light of the recent events regarding the organisation and holding of EuroPride 2022¹⁸ in Belgrade.
- 2.10. The JCC welcomes the fact that the Strategy for Deinstitutionalization and Development of Community-Based Services 2022-2026 and the Law on Social Entrepreneurship were adopted, and that the creation of the bylaws is underway. The achievement of their objectives should lead to exercise of human rights and decrease of discrimination for citizens belonging to socially vulnerable groups.

On equal treatment of employers and workers

- 2.11. The JCC urges the Serbian authorities to provide equal treatment for both domestic and foreign employers and workers. It stresses the need for respect of internationally and nationally recognized rules on human rights and social rights of all workers.

On migration

- 2.12. The JCC calls for the Serbian authorities to continue and enhance cooperation with the EU on migration in strengthening its capacity for migration management and prevention of illegal migration.

On media freedom

- 2.13. The JCC also recalls that global media freedom lists, namely Reporters Without Borders' "World Press Freedom Index"¹⁹ and Freedom House²⁰, stated that there had been little or no progress on media freedom, and that independent media are still exposed to pressure and intimidation. The JCC urges the Serbian authorities to address the issues listed in these reports with systemic dedication and unequivocal political determination.
- 2.14. The JCC urges the Serbian government to fully implement the Media Strategy 2020-2025 and the accompanying Action plan without further delays, and encourages more political commitment to secure a safer, freer, more pluralistic and more functional media environment.

On infrastructure projects

- 2.15. The JCC considers that infrastructure projects, whether implemented on national or local levels, must involve all relevant stakeholders, including the local population. Therefore, the JCC recommends that

18 [145 MEPs sign letter to Serbian leadership calling to maintain the organisation of EuroPride 2022 and deploying sufficient police protection – The European Parliament's LGBTI Intergroup \(lgbti-ep.eu\)](#)

19 <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

20 [Serbia: Nations in Transit 2022 Country Report | Freedom House](#)

when adopting strategic documents and regulations, the Law on Planning System is consistently applied, implying that interested parties are consulted in relevant policies.

On social dialogue and labour reforms

- 2.16. The JCC stresses 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 and prosper. Timely involvement of young people in the co-design and co-implementation of social and political changes is extremely important. In line with the EESC's opinion *Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans*²¹, the JCC fully supports all initiatives supporting and consolidation youth policies on all levels and unlocking their full potential, including the ongoing IPA support to establish the Youth Guarantee for the Western Balkans²².
- 2.17. The JCC underlines that to remedy the high youth unemployment rates and their difficult integration in the labour market, the education and training systems need to be aligned with the needs of businesses and growing demand for new skills in digital and green transitions.
- 2.18. The JCC recalls once again the vital importance of recognising the principle of decent work, based on written contracts, safety, as well as decent and timely pay, and of properly addressing labour market issues such as the regulation of teleworking and the informal economy. The JCC calls on Serbia to continue with labour reforms in line with the principles of quality of work and quality of life²³ and the recommendations of the decent work country programme signed with the ILO.²⁴
- 2.19. The JCC reiterates the need for the Serbian authorities and the representative social partners organisations to conduct genuine social dialogue within the Social and Economic Council (SEC), and to consult the National Convention on the EU and other relevant civil society platforms in a more comprehensive and systematic way at all stages and in all relevant chapters of the EU accession negotiations.

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.

21 [Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/key-components-sustainable-quality-work-during-and-after-recovery)

22 [Youth-Employment-leaflet-15-6-b.pdf](#)

23 <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/key-components-sustainable-quality-work-during-and-after-recovery>

24 [About the ILO in Serbia](#)

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 2023. As agreed in the previous meetings, the assessment of enabling environment for civil society and fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria for accession are a permanent part of the JCC's meeting agenda.