

**Regional Ministerial Conference “Social Dimension Initiative” (SDI) for WB:  
“Leaving no one behind in the process of EU integration”  
November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Belgrade**

**CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS**

The Western Balkan (WB) region has the potential to fulfill generations’ dream and establish space of freedom, peace and prosperity. To do so, the WB should decisively embark on important and necessary reforms in the political, economic, social and legal sphere.

The EU must maintain credible enlargement process for the WB providing political, technical and expert support, financial assistance and timely/early inclusion in EU’s future debate and all policies. EU continues to be in the process of making and the WB should be able to shape common future.

However, aside crucial reforms in the rule of law and persistent need for increased and improved regional cooperation, there are many other issues that burden the region - questions that cannot be solved, or are difficult to solve alone, without help from European friends. European idea is one of solidarity and values and one of decent life for all. This aspect of EU integration is the most important for WB citizens.



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The level of development of the WB countries is low compared to the EU. They face budget deficit and high level of public debt, challenges like unfavorable demographic situation, brain drain (in the last two decades 5 million people emigrated from the region – almost 25% of the population<sup>1</sup>), significant number of population face poverty or are at risk of poverty, unemployment rates are high, especially among youth and women...

All this, coupled with protracted process of EU integration, leads also to rising of the EU-skepticism and decreasing support for the EU membership as well as democracy across the region. The EU integration process must be beneficial for all law abiding citizens, including those most vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged.

SDI aims to bring social policy in the focus of regional cooperation and EU integration and creates platform for dialogue on the future of social policies in the WB. Social policy and

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank 2015

economic empowerment of the most vulnerable groups is factor of economic growth and development in the WB. The Opening conference gathered the ministers in charge for the first time and marked aspirations to implement European social model in the WB with assistance of the EU and integration process.

### **To the European Union**

EU and WB need each other. But we must communicate better what the EU stands for especially values like solidarity, being there for each other, decent jobs and decent life and, what it is offering to the citizens of WB.

The EU integration process must be beneficial for all citizens, including those most vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged. The EU integration process is successful only if *nobody is left behind*.

The EU must maintain credible enlargement process for the WB providing political, technical and expert support, financial assistance and timely/early inclusion in EU's future debate and all policies. The latest Enlargement Communication is a promising step in this direction, especially it's socio – economic flagship initiative. In this context, social policy is seen as the core of economic development and growth. But, the EU, not only governments in the region, should focus more on the social policy.

Introducing principles of the European Pillar for Social Rights in the Enlargement policy and engagement of the DG EMPL and DG NEAR in concerted effort in this respect is valuable for detecting Social Europe in WB's European aspirations.

Social policy also should not be the victim of, equally important, employment policy and greater investment and funds should be allocated for resolving social problems and more inclusive policies in the next EU financial framework.

The EU should support timely and appropriate preparation of all stakeholders for the effective use of future funds, build institutional capacities and prepare civil society for ESF and other cohesion and structural funds.

### **To the Western Balkans**

Problems in the region are shared and the cooperation is welcome and needed. The ministers, gathered for the first time in this format within SDI, exhibited political vision and perceptiveness and clear commitment by signing Declaration on improving the social policy in the region.

SDI helped by providing support for issues of common interest to achieve the objectives, deepen reforms in the social protection system and capacity building of the local government. It will also help identify gaps in existing policies and needs for future funding.

Establishing regional fund for resolving social issues with the support of EU and other international partners should be considered.

RCC continues to play important role in strengthening regional cooperation and could additionally foster growth based on inclusion and care for the marginalized. Unemployment, especially among the youth and income inequality continue to present the biggest challenges for WB economies and societies and regional initiatives are instrumental in overcoming these problems and in sharing valuable experiences.

Timely institutional preparation, but also of the CSOs, for absorption of the future structural funds is essential if we want to bridge the gap between EU and WB. The governments must commit to this end. Also, using of the EU assistance for novel services and policies is much smarter than for funding regular services and measures one country needs to implement.

Improving available data and statistics in the region is crucial for smart and successful policy making and implementation.

Wide, regular and inclusive dialogue that would gather all social partners and CSOs together with the authorities at all levels is the most important aspect of successful social (and any other) policy.

CSOs are experienced, flexible and close to the citizens which puts them in ideal position to deliver best tailored services to those in need, in close cooperation with local authorities. We need to work together and re-build trust between public and private sector. Cooperation between public and private sector is crucial for successful policies and delivery of quality services to the beneficiaries.