

JOINT STATEMENT

“The Economic and Social Councils as drivers for sustainable solutions to new challenges towards Southeastern Europe’s integration”

Social Dialogue Summit 2023

20 March 2023

Thessaloniki, Greece

The Social Dialogue Summit 2023 on “The Economic and Social Councils as drivers for sustainable solutions to new challenges towards Southeastern Europe’s integration” organized by the ESC of Greece and held on March 20th, 2023 at the Thessaloniki Concert Hall, with the participation of various representatives of CSOs, the state, European and international organizations and the scientific community from the countries of SE Europe, is an important initiative that could act as a catalyst towards the deepening European cooperation and the development of social dialogue institutions in the countries of South Eastern Europe (SEE).

The international and the European community have recently been on the verge of significant challenges, as a result of different successive crises that have arisen over the last decade. The countries of SE Europe were primarily confronted with the effects of the economic and fiscal crisis of the 2010s, which had a slowing effect on the prospects of growth, institutional integration and social dialogue.

Lately, SEE countries faced the challenge to respond to the impact of the refugee crisis and administer the large volume of refugee flows coming from war zones, while at the end of the 2020s, the combination of the pandemic crisis and climate change led to major restructuring and transformations in the models of organization of economic and social life.

Today, along with the consequences of the respective crises, the EU and the member countries are called upon to contribute decisively to the process of peace resolution, working for a definitive end to the protracted war conflict in Ukraine, in accordance with the requirements of international law and within the UN framework of respect for borders.

The current inflationary crisis, which coexists with the energy crisis, is shaping a new framework of priorities in the EU that affects green and digital transition policies, alters the policy framework for businesses and vulnerable households, postponing the same time key economic and social policy decisions for the future.

The contributions in the Summit confirmed the need for SE Europe, which is the typical and historical hub of communication between East and West, to become a strategic liaison and guarantor of security, cooperation and mediation at multiple levels concerning the European Common Policy and Market, in strategic fields such as energy sector, just green transition, regional development and technological cooperation.

SE Europe is called upon to utilize its perennial geopolitical and strategic advantages to highlight the importance of economic cooperation, solidarity, sustainable development and European integration. The recent advances in the energy sector are particularly important. In this sector, coordinated policies are required to ensure the adequacy, production, efficient utilization of existing natural energy resources and technological upgrade of energy sector.

The development of tools and institutions for the reinforcement of the social dialogue, the establishment of communication mechanisms between counterpart stakeholders and the exchange of good practices are undoubtedly critical steps of the Economic and Social Councils' agenda to achieve the strategic goal of European integration and the convergence of the countries of SE Europe, such as described in declared EU policies.

European Commission's initiative to continue the accession dialogue with the states of the Western Balkans, as well as the constant orientation of the Economic and Social Committees and Councils to promote cooperation in the European region have created the conditions for undertaking an integrated and coordination policy for SE Europe.

The situation is particularly favorable for SE Europe, since the conditions for wider consensus and cooperation have been already formed. Actually, today strong productive and development dynamics and opportunities in critical sectors of economy such as energy, infrastructure and networks, green economy, tourism and commerce have emerged. Along with the promotion of strategic cooperation in the fields of energy, infrastructure and networks, it is considered equally important to develop synergies in the field of private-public investments, businesses, knowledge, innovation and diplomacy. Besides, the sector of energy and energy cooperation touches almost all economic and investment activities, being the key sector to the development prospects of the region.

In conclusion, the main policy recommendations that have been reported during the Social Dialogue Summit in Thessaloniki focus on the following:

- The importance of SE Europe as a modern region of economic and local development and its role as an investment and commercial hub with an emphasis on investments in the energy sector, network and infrastructure is fully recognised.
- The reorientation of the strategic objectives the Resilience and Recovery Fund at the European level is positively evaluated, in order to lead to more inclusive policies for sustainable development, energy security and social welfare.
- A more intensive use of the existing tools and policies is acknowledged for the joint response to climate and environmental challenges, with the establishment of harmonized and effective civil protection and emergency response mechanisms.
- Economic and social councils have expressed common agreement regarding the necessity to achieve a minimum level of energy autonomy in Europe, serving the goals of energy sufficiency and alleviation of energy poverty.
- The need to strengthen and highlight the role of institutional social dialogue at national, international and European level is acknowledged as a crucial parameter for

the promotion of common objectives on the field of energy cooperation and network development.

- The need for institutional upgrading of the social bodies that represent the social dialogue is highlighted and inter-institutional cooperation is supported at European, national and supranational level.
- The upgrading of economic, cultural and institutional cooperation between the states of SE Europe is emphasized, with actions and dialogue initiatives that will serve the purpose of security, constructive cooperation and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The European institutions are encouraged to design and implement targeted programmes, which will provide the countries of SE Europe and the Balkans with the possibility of accelerating social and economic convergence. Social partners and other civil society organisations, both at EU and national level, must be effectively involved in the whole process of European integration.

In order to meet the above mentioned objectives, it is necessary to secure financial resources and initiate tools to promote social and investment programs for Sustainable Development, access to affordable energy and more economical consumption within the framework of the SDGs 2030 Agenda. It is essential to strengthen the possibilities of cooperation between social partners and civil society organizations through the provision of technical and financial assistance, mainly by facilitating access to European and national funding resources (European Commission, European Investment Bank, EBRD, etc.). In similar context and in accordance with European strategy for the next decade, it is also important to strengthen the ties with peripheral institutions that work towards the further integration of Mediterranean, Balkan and SE region to European affairs (such as Union for Mediterranean, or other counterparts/ stakeholders).

The above conclusions constitute an indicative outline of the most important contributions and proposals submitted by all the participants in the Summit.

We believe that the European Summit in Thessaloniki can be a critical starting point for deepening and strengthening the social dialogue at a regional and institutional level in SE Europe. International cooperation for a coordinated and unified response to the current and future challenges faced by civil society and the countries of the region, especially on the field of energy cooperation and sustainable development, is generally acknowledged to be a common fundamental goal.