

# Civil society for democracy in candidate countries

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**Organised by:** Cooperatives Europe, ALDA and the EESC's REX Section

## Report

### **The role and importance of civil society in the EU enlargement process**

All the panellists agreed on the importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the EU's enlargement process.

Ionuț Sibian, member of the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) REX Section, and Executive Director of the Civil Society Development Foundation in Romania, highlighted the EESC's consistent involvement of candidate countries in its work. Based on this initiative, he suggested testing a gradual integration process.

Antonella Valmorbida, Secretary-General of ALDA, stressed the transformative nature of enlargement for both the EU and accession countries. She emphasised the importance of democracy, social cohesion and inclusivity for the enlargement process, and of civil society's role in promoting these values.

Güler Altinsoy, co-founder of IDEMA, Needs Map and INOGAR, discussed the changing role of civil society in Türkiye, which now focused on social cohesion. Nataša Vučković, Vice-President of ALDA and Secretary-General of the Centre for Democracy Foundation, emphasised civil society's role in advocating values such as human rights and the rule of law in candidate countries.

Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel, MEP, advocated efforts to reduce the gap between rural and urban areas, emphasised the importance of civil society as a watchdog for democracy and rule of law, and called for mechanisms to strengthen CSOs as partners to EU institutions.

Michael A. Rupp, Principal Administrator in DG NEAR – Eastern Partnership C.1., and Team Leader for Coordination of Association and Enlargement Processes, reiterated the Commission’s support for enlargement, and added that collaboration with civil society was paramount.

### **Challenges and opportunities regarding EU enlargement**

Mr Sibian addressed the issue of ‘enlargement fatigue’, saying that the EU must prove its credibility as a partner, or it would lose the trust of people in the candidate countries, especially that of the younger populations.

Ms Valmorbidia underlined that the challenges that accession countries were facing (such as migration and security issues) were shared by the EU, and emphasised civil society’s role in resisting division.

Ms Vučković addressed challenges such as the lack of trust from policymakers and a lack of interest among citizens, as well as other issues such as SLAPPs against CSOs. Ms Altinsoy called for better access to funding and more interaction with European CSO counterparts.

Andrius Kubilius, MEP, highlighted the importance of civil society as the backbone of democracy. Through fiscal mechanisms, Lithuania had been able to strengthen civic participation, which had been at an all-time low during Soviet rule.

Mr Rupp highlighted the EU’s consequent financial support for civil society in neighbouring countries.

### **Recommendations**

The panellists agreed on the following recommendations.

- There should be better financial support for CSOs to carry out their actions. Funding needed to be tailored to their needs, and must vary in size and form to be viable for organisations. Financial regulations must allow for more flexibility, as local needs and contexts could change quickly.
- EU institutions should encourage dialogue and facilitate exchanges between civil society organisations in the EU and in the candidate countries. Administrative hurdles such as visa issues or obstacles in legal frameworks must be removed or adapted.
- Accession talks should secure and standardise the role of social partners and civil society on all topics and on both sides. Initiatives similar to those that had been taken by the EESC must be set up to move the negotiations beyond a mere intergovernmental process.