

For attention of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the European Commission on
the

Draft Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration

Almost a year after the initial publication of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and more than ten months after the Sofia Declaration, we are relieved to see the Action Plan for its implementation finally taking shape.

Under the auspices of the NGO Forum we have been invited to provide comments on the draft document. We have been given a week to agree on comments between 30+ civil society organisations who have expressed interest in participating in the work of the Forum so far. It is not realistic to come up with and agree on detailed comments within such a timeframe. We are, therefore, limiting our comments to a small number of general observations on the document and are calling on the authors of the Action Plan to amend the part of the plan that refers to extensive consultations with civil society, as these have not in fact taken place.

We need to underline our frustration that for ten months we have received no substantial information on the Action Plan, only to be now given a week to comment on the draft. If the EU and Regional Cooperation Council are serious about encouraging an active civil society and public participation in decision-making in the region, they need to lead by example. As civil society organisations we have much to offer in terms of knowledge about the region, needs for improvement and ways to realise them, and we stand ready to participate. But we need adequate time to read, comment, coordinate and agree on draft documents.

As for the document itself, we believe it **still needs substantial improvements, and does not currently live up to the title of 'Action Plan'**.

- The Action Plan is trying to cover both the regional level and national level, and does not fully succeed in either, as it **does not clearly delineate** between the responsibilities of the European Commission, national governments and other actors.
- It needs to clearly state **how civil society will be consulted about implementation on the national level**, not only the regional level.
- The **timelines need to be clearer**. From our experience with the Energy Community Treaty implementation, we know that even when deadlines are clear and legally binding, they are not always respected. Setting up an Action Plan with "Indicative timeframes" is setting it up for failure.
- The **Roadmap section of the document needs to consistently include steps to be taken over time, to achieve all the goals of the Green Agenda**. Some thematic topics indeed contain clear steps, while others merely reiterate actions already taken and mix the problem description with the way forward, or state desired states or goals but without giving specific tasks or deliverables.
- The European Commission must hold governments accountable for implementation. The governance model **must not be dependent on self-assessment** by bodies mostly composed of government representatives. We understand that objective indicators of progress are proposed, together with an annual progress report, but we also know from experience that similar annual reports by the European Commission

and Energy Community are not enough to make the countries act. It needs to be made clear **what will happen if countries do not make sufficient progress** with implementing the Green Agenda, otherwise there will be no incentive to do so.

- Also, there is no clarity on the **costs and funding sources** that will enable Western Balkan economies to implement this Action Plan. Financing from IPA III must be clearly conditioned on countries' compliance with EU legislation and policy alignment with the goals of the Green Agenda. Also, a transparent assessment of costs and funding sources for the implementation of the Action Plan should be done as a first next step, immediately upon the Action Plan adoption.
- The Action Plan is set to be regularly updated. Such updates must take account of **new commitments at EU and international level**, including new targets and legislation.

Finally, we need to express our serious concerns about whether the Regional Cooperation Council has the **capacity** to lead this process in the way envisaged. The time it has taken to prepare the draft Action Plan is not encouraging in this respect. We therefore call on the European Commission to take more leadership on this process.

We thank you for your time and look forward to seeing an improved version of the Action Plan in the near future.

Association Biom, Croatia

Association of Young Ecologists of Niksic, Montenegro

Aarhus centar u BiH, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Center for Ecology and Sustainable Development (CEKOR), Serbia

Center for Environment, Bosnia and Herzegovina

CEE Bankwatch Network

Centar za ekologiju i energiju, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe

Coalition for sustainable mining in Serbia (KORS), Serbia

EuroNatur, Europe

European Environmental Bureau

Eko-Forum Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Institute for Nature Conservation in Albania, Albania

Kolektiv Z, North Macedonia

LIR Evolution, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Nature Conservancy in Europe

Young Researchers of Serbia, Serbia