

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025

Western Balkans

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,
Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia

By Balkan Civil Society Development Network





ABOUT THIS REPORT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Initiated in 2001 and formalised in 2009, the **Balkan Civil Society Development Network** (BCSDN) is a regional network uniting 12 CSOs from 9 Balkan countries with a focus on promoting civil society development. We are particularly proud of the work we have achieved in the field of monitoring the enabling environment for civil society through our Monitoring Matrix methodology and our evidence-based advocacy. BCSDN supports regional civil society cooperation towards protecting and expanding the civic space in the Western Balkans, and advocates for financial support to civil society to be responsive to civic space challenges and support the development of a strong civil society.



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Key civic space trends

- 🔍 Legal and political constraints on basic freedoms.
- 🔍 Escalating threats against activists and journalists, including intimidation, defamation, and SLAPPs cases.
- 🔍 Public funding for CSOs remains scarce, opaque and politically controlled.
- 🔍 Deteriorating government-CSO relations, with limited civil society participation in public dialogue and policymaking.

Summary

Civic space in the Western Balkans remains a cornerstone of democratic governance, fostering citizen engagement and safeguarding fundamental freedoms. However, civil society in the region operates only partially in an enabling environment and faces narrowing civic space, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ The shift from an enabling to a partially enabling environment is driven by the lack of effective implementation of legally guaranteed rights and freedoms, an insufficient regulatory and financial framework, and a deteriorating relationship between civil society and the state.

Governments in the region increasingly rely on restrictive measures to suppress civil society, including “foreign agents” laws, smear campaigns, and legal harassment targeting civil society organisations (CSOs), activists, and journalists. In Serbia, arbitrary detentions and heavy-handed policing obstruct protests, while SLAPPs and media censorship escalate threats to independent

journalism. Financial restrictions, such as opaque public funding and burdensome tax regulations, further constrain CSOs, limiting their operational capacity. Weak institutional cooperation sidelines civil society in policymaking, preventing meaningful engagement. Despite these pressures, CSOs persist in advocating for legal reforms, exposing rights violations, and fostering regional solidarity to push back against democratic erosion.

In 2024, the European Commission’s Rule of Law report² included, for the first time, an analysis of the accession countries — Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia — placing them on equal footing with EU member states and underscoring the EU’s commitment to rule of law reforms in the Western Balkans.³ The report highlights persistent challenges for civil society across the region, including administrative and financial obstacles, limited public consultation in policymaking, and increasing restrictions on media and civic space.

Institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape

CSOs in the Western Balkans operated in a complex and often challenging environment in 2024. The institutional landscape presented numerous obstacles, impacting the rule of law, democratic processes, and access to fundamental rights. According to Freedom House, all six Western Balkans countries are categorised as hybrid or

transitional regimes: Serbia is labelled an “autocratising hybrid”, while Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are considered “cyclical hybrids” that oscillate between democratic and autocratic tendencies. Kosovo is the only country in the region designated as a “democratizing hybrid,”

1. According to the CIVICUS Monitor ratings: Albania is rated as “narrowed”, Bosnia and Herzegovina is rated as “Obstructed”, Kosovo is rated as “narrowed”, Montenegro as “narrowed”, North Macedonia is rated as “narrowed” and Serbia is rated as “Obstructed”, see more: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>
2. https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2024-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en
3. https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/96-1-BCSDN-Analysis_Accession-countries-in-EC-RoL-Report.pdf

indicating its commitment to reforms and the strengthening of democratic institutions.⁴ The decline in respect for citizens' rights, the inadequacies in electoral processes, and the threats to media freedom collectively underscore a pressing need for comprehensive reforms.⁵

Election cycles in 2024 shaped political processes and civil society dynamics, exacerbating challenges in governance, reform implementation, and civil society engagement. In Montenegro, elections disrupted decision making and led to rushed legislative changes, often excluding public input. North Macedonia faced a stalemate, with elections dominating government priorities, while a change of government and preparations for the 2025 local elections continued to stall meaningful advancements. In Serbia, extraordinary elections hampered institutional efficiency, while civil society and media faced harassment and smear campaigns. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, local elections maintained entrenched political divides. The elections were overshadowed by severe floods and landslides, which highlighted both the region's vulnerability and the solidarity shown by CSOs and regional governments providing emergency aid.

The EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans advanced in 2024, with Montenegro and Albania making significant progress. Montenegro became the first candidate to receive a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report for the rule of law chapters, and closed three negotiating chapters by December, at the Intergovernmental Conference in Brussels, marking the first such progress after seven years.⁶ However, the lack of final benchmarks to ensure development of civil society is concerning.⁷ With civil society being largely absent from Montenegro's EU accession benchmarks, there is little incentive for the government to strengthen cooperation with CSOs or expand their role in policy making. Albania became the first candidate to open two clusters in two months, while Serbia did not open Cluster 3, due to lack of progress in the rule of law and normalisation of relations with Kosovo. North Macedonia's accession process stalled due to Bulgaria's demands for constitutional amendments, leading the EU to decouple it from Albania. Bosnia and Herzegovina,

the least prepared candidate, saw its reform progress stall mid-year, delaying the opening of accession talks despite initial EU agreement in principle. Kosovo also failed to open talks.⁸

To further support reforms in justice and the rule of law in the region, the EU has introduced new tools for accelerating socio-economic growth in partner countries, such as the €6 billion Reform & Growth Facility for the Western Balkans. However, while these commitments aim to provide tangible benefits for citizens and contribute to a cohesive European future, they risk falling short if not paired with a more consistent and transparent approach to addressing governance challenges and fostering genuine democratic reforms in partner countries.⁹

The effectiveness of the judiciary in protecting fundamental rights varied across the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska's declaration on the inapplicability of Constitutional Court decisions exacerbated the institutional crisis, undermining judicial independence and the country's unity.¹⁰ While there were efforts to enhance judicial capacities, such as bringing together judges and public prosecutors from Kosovo and North Macedonia, challenges persisted.¹¹ The undermining of judicial independence and democratic institutions further restricted the public space available for marginalised groups to exercise their rights and freedoms. Various segments of the population, including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and LGBTQI+ minorities, continued to face challenges in exercising their rights and freedoms both offline and online. The public narrative surrounding civil society and rights defenders was mixed. While CSOs played a crucial role in advocating for democratic reforms and human rights, they often faced governmental oppression. In Serbia, CSOs working on democracy and rule of law issues faced threats, with LGBTQI+ and gender rights groups navigating an increasingly hostile environment. A lack of adequate legal actions or judicial proceedings to investigate and prosecute perpetrators highlights deficiencies in protecting marginalised groups and concerns about access to justice.

4. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/04/11/freedom-house-democracy-deteriorates-in-the-western-balkans-serbia-faces-the-strongest-decline/>

5. <https://crd.org/2024/03/06/decline-in-civil-rights-and-freedoms-in-serbia/>

6. <https://www.gov.me/en/article/montenegro-doubles-the-number-of-closed-chapters-a-landmark-achievement-on-the-eu-path-giving-fresh-momentum-to-the-enlargement-process>

7. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/AD-13-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

8. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/12/28/renewed-eu-enlargement-momentum-and-political-tensions-key-events-in-the-western-balkans-in-2024/#:~:text=The%20process%20of%20EU%20enlargement%20in%20the%20Western,of%20the%20Growth%20Plan%20for%20the%20Western%20Balkans.>

9. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/127-4-BCSDN-Background-Analysis-2024.pdf>

10. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-02-12/dispute-over-justice-system-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

11. <https://www.eipa.eu/news/enhancing-judicial-capacities-in-western-balkan-countries/>

Attacks against LGBTQI+ individuals in the region are escalating, driven by hate speech, violence, and institutional neglect. Pride events in southeast Europe, including Sarajevo and Tirana, faced a surge in online hate, highlighting persistent intolerance. While Belgrade Pride saw no major tensions, Serbia showed no progress on LGBTQI+ rights.¹² In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, dating apps were weaponised to target LGBTQI+ individuals, with underreporting and weak hate crime protections exacerbating the issue.¹³ Despite action plans in Bosnia and Herzegovina, many remain unimplemented, leaving the community unprotected,¹⁴ needing both legal reforms and societal changes.¹⁵ In Banja Luka, city authorities banned the

promotion of LGBTQI+ rights at NGO events. A year after the live-streamed femicide of Nizama Hecimovic, Bosnia and Herzegovina has made no significant legislative changes to address domestic violence or femicide.¹⁶ At the end of 2024, a Proposal on Amendments to the Criminal Law was drafted and is now awaiting parliamentary review. While the proposal introduces stricter penalties, particularly for crimes against children and families, it still fails to classify femicide as a distinct criminal offense. However, the proposal treats femicide as a hate crime. Gender-based violence remains a serious and overlooked issue, demanding all institutions to prioritise protecting women's rights and ensuring their safety.

Regulatory environment for civic freedoms

While the region's countries legally guarantee the three fundamental freedoms — association, peaceful assembly, and expression — in line with international standards, in practice it is far more complex. Violations

predominantly concern freedom of expression, though challenges in the areas of peaceful assembly and association are also increasing, reflecting a gradual erosion of the enabling environment for civil society.¹⁷

Freedom of association

Changes to the main NGO laws in North Macedonia and Montenegro have stalled for over two years, raising concerns about the lack of transparency in the process — particularly in Montenegro — while also affecting CSO financing. Recent changes in Montenegro have resulted in complications for CSOs including longer registration times and increased administrative burdens. In Kosovo the registration process for CSOs was extended, while both Kosovo and North Macedonia exhibited less favourable registration conditions for CSOs compared to businesses, reflecting broader systemic issues. In Albania, registration procedures have become a major challenge for CSOs, as the electronic registration system has not been made functional yet, despite its original deadline being set for the end of 2023.

CSOs across the Western Balkans face challenges under anti-money laundering (AML) and counter terrorism financing (CFT) measures. Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia classify CSOs as high-risk entities, subjecting them to enhanced due diligence and limiting their financial access. In 2024, Montenegro avoided grey-listing by recognising non-profit organisations (NPOs) as low-risk and clarifying that beneficial ownership only applies to executive directors as opposed to founders. In Kosovo, on the other hand, the new Beneficial Owners Registry misclassifies founders of CSOs as beneficial owners, which will continue to create challenges. Additionally, the restrictive rules on cash donation make it almost impossible to raise funds through in-person crowdfunding, while the sectoral risk assessment that started in 2019 remains unfinished. CSOs in Kosovo are currently subject to extensive reporting requirements, but a new draft AML law proposes removing

¹². <https://www.dw.com/en/belgrade-pride-serbias-lgbtq-fight-on-after-no-progress/a-70151493>

¹³. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/20/dating-app-attacks-in-bosnia-serbia-spread-fear-among-lgbt-people/>

¹⁴. <https://soc.ba/en/joint-submission-of-the-bih-civil-society-initiative-for-upr-for-the-4th-universal-periodic-review-on-the-state-of-human-rights-situation-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

¹⁵. <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-femicide-instagram-protest-funeral/32549075.html>

¹⁶. In August 2023, Nizama Hecimović was murdered by her ex-partner in Gradačac, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The killing was live streamed on Instagram, despite her prior reports of abuse. The attacker killed two more people before taking his own life, sparking nationwide protests against gender-based violence. The case sparked widespread protests demanding stronger protections against gender-based violence: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/09/year-on-from-live-streamed-femicide>

¹⁷. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/89-4-Final-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2023.pdf>

this classification, pending approval by the assembly.¹⁸ Bosnia and Herzegovina also passed a law excluding CSOs as obliged reporting entities¹⁹ but continued to indirectly restrict their banking services. Some countries have initiated risk-based approaches, signalling progress towards aligning AML/CFT frameworks with international standards to safeguard financial integrity while preserving CSO operations.²⁰

Governments increasingly deploy selective financial and administrative scrutiny against foreign-funded or critical CSOs, exacerbating the hostile environment. Narratives and legislative proposals in Republika Srpska, Montenegro, and Serbia mirror restrictive “foreign agent” laws, stigmatising CSOs and

undermining their legitimacy. In Republika Srpska, the draft Law on the Special Registry and Publicity of Non-Profit Organisations’ Work, which aimed to impose burdensome reporting and compliance requirements on all CSOs receiving foreign funding,²¹ was fortunately withdrawn from parliamentary procedure in May 2024.²² In Montenegro, a similar proposal was tabled by the right-wing party in the ruling coalition, but did not get support from the other political parties.²³ Similarly, a Serbian MP called for restrictions on foreign funding for CSOs, echoing Russian-style “foreign agents” legislation.²⁴ Although none of these initiatives materialised during 2024, and were strongly opposed by the international community, it shows that these narratives are continuously used to intimidate civil society.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Freedom of peaceful assembly remains relatively protected as peaceful gatherings in most countries proceed largely without interference, except in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Online or digitally mediated assemblies are not recognised in legislation, and this bears an inherent risk of restrictive interpretation of the general rules of assemblies, privacy, and data protection.²⁵ In practice, assembly restrictions particularly target activists, LGBTQI+ groups, political opposition, or groups dealing with sensitive topics, underscoring the lack of consistent protections for the right to peaceful assembly. In Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), authorities cancelled two key peace campaign events aimed at promoting open dialogue and challenging dominant narratives. The Serbian police banned the *Mirdita, Dobar Dan* festival, an event promoting regional dialogue and reconciliation, citing security concerns and potential threats from right-wing activists.²⁶ CSOs condemned the ban as a violation of constitutional freedoms.

The most serious restrictions and violations of the right to peaceful assembly in 2024 were noted in Serbia. While the “Serbia Against Violence”²⁷ protest continued in 2024, the biggest protests were sparked by Rio Tinto’s lithium mining project²⁸ and the Novi Sad train station tragedy,²⁹ both exposing deep-rooted issues of government corruption and repression. Both movements have been met with excessive police force and arbitrary detentions, as well as targeted smear campaigns and intimidation, underlining the gravity of democratic erosion in Serbia, where dissent is met with repression and civic freedoms remain under threat.

Although Serbia saw the most anti-government protests in 2024, Albania also witnessed significant unrest. In October, violent anti-government protest erupted in Tirana with opposition supporters clashing with police, throwing Molotov cocktails at government buildings, and demanding a caretaker government amid accusations of authoritarianism and rising political tensions.³⁰

18. Projekligji-per-plotesim-ndryshimin-e-Ligjit-Nr-05-L-096-per-PPP-LF.pdf; https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/Uploads/Data/Documents/PLperparandali-minepastrimitteparavedheluftiminefinanc.teterorizmit_q6myuRVVNu.pdf

19. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/02/19/bih-adopts-legislation-related-to-the-prevention-of-money-laundering/>

20. <https://balkanstd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/127-4-BCSDN-Background-Analysis-2024.pdf>

21. <https://www.rferl.org/a/republika-srpska-foreign-agents-law-dodik/32890514.html>

22. https://sarajevotimes.com/what-happened-to-the-announced-foreign-agents-law-in-the-republika-srpska/#google_vignette

23. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/727885/ambasada-sad-zakon-o-stranim-agentima-mogao-bi-da-stigmatizuje-nvo-i-omete-kriticki-rad-nezavisnih-medija>

24. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/727885/ambasada-sad-zakon-o-stranim-agentima-mogao-bi-da-stigmatizuje-nvo-i-omete-kriticki-rad-nezavisnih-medija>

25. https://myla.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/DIGITALLY-MEDIATED-ASSEMBLIES-en-FINAL-web.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2QtSp_0O2C-9lkPc4hngOn3Q_JbflFVY1X7vLmM4b0ypp4wwPlcnh9O4Q

26. <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-kosovo-festival-banned-mirdita-dobar-dan-e148ca76fb7021ea10f85498065026a6>

27. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement-neighbourhood/news/thousands-protest-fraud-in-serbia-vote-put-hope-in-european-parliament-debate/>

28. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/serbias-green-activists-rally-against-rio-tinto-lithium-project-2024-06-28/>

29. <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/video-mirni-protest-sarajevskih-studenata-ispred-ambasade-srbije-u-sarajevu-1008898/>

30. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/07/albanian-anti-govt-protesters-throw-molotov-cocktails-clash-with-police/>

Freedom of expression and the right to privacy

Freedom of expression faces systemic threats across the region, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania. Intimidation of journalists and activists, combined with a rising number of defamation charges in Republika Srpska, further undermines freedom of expression and silences critical voices. Legal changes to the Criminal Codes in Bosnia and Herzegovina³¹ and Serbia³² related to slander are worrying and continue to cause problems in 2024. In North Macedonia, there were changes to the law which aimed to enhance protection for journalists by equating attacks on journalists with attacks on public officials. While there has been an improvement in the detection of perpetrators, the overall response to incidents remains unsatisfactory, with investigations being often slow and ineffective, and no indictments being issued against individuals responsible for attacks on journalists or activists. The high level of impunity for these attacks persisted, raising concerns about the safety of civic actors.³³

The decline in press freedom across the Balkans has also been recognised by Reporters Without Borders (RSF),³⁴ which highlights political pressure, attacks on journalists, and media restrictions in the region, with significant concerns over harassment, political influence, and intimidation. The use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) against CSOs, activists, and journalists in the region continued in 2024 with greater intensity, targeting critical voices. This was especially in Serbia, where the investigative news outlet KRIK faces 16 ongoing lawsuits.³⁵ In another case that drew significant public attention, in Montenegro, the businessman Zoran Bećirović sued the NGO MANS and newspapers *Vijesti* and *Dan* over reports on his suspicious transactions. This case received the People's Choice Award in the first Western Balkans SLAPP Contest³⁶.

One year after the re-criminalisation of defamation in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded 130 charges filed under the contentious law, raising significant concerns about its chilling effect on free speech. Journalists and media workers are among

the primary targets, facing accusations ranging from causing reputational harm to publishing sensitive materials. The law has further enabled the misuse of legal mechanisms to silence dissent and suppress critical journalism, posing a serious threat to freedom of expression in the region.³⁷

Concerns over digital rights and freedom of expression were further amplified by Albania's one-year TikTok ban, announced by Prime Minister Edi Rama,³⁸ set to be implemented in 2025, following the fatal stabbing of a teenager allegedly linked to social media disputes. Critics have highlighted³⁹ the lack of transparency, evidence, and stakeholder engagement in the decision-making process, but also warn that the ban endangers free speech. This move is especially concerning given the upcoming May elections, as TikTok is a platform mainly used by the opposition.⁴⁰

The success of EU initiatives promoting structural reforms relies on the region's governments implementing meaningful changes, especially in media freedom and the protection of civil society. In Serbia, media law reforms intended to signal progress were criticised by civil society and media experts who emphasised that legislative changes alone are insufficient without addressing systemic issues like hate speech and smear campaigns by high-ranking officials, which erode trust and independence. Moreover, the two newly adopted media laws in Serbia,⁴¹ passed at the end of 2023 without adequate consultation, were met with strong expert opposition, raising concerns about government influence and diminished media independence.⁴²

Similar media-related challenges have been noted in other countries. In North Macedonia, the 2024 amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services lifted the moratorium on state advertising on private media, a practice that was suspended in 2017 and banned by law in 2018.⁴³ The amendments permit state and municipal authorities to advertise on private broadcasters, sparking worries about potential corruption and undue influence. Kosovo's new law

31. <https://n1info.ba/english/news/bosnias-serb-entity-parliament-adopts-controversial-criminal-code-changes/>

32. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/03/legal-experts-sound-alarm-over-rushed-serbian-criminal-code-changes/>

33. <https://mia.mk/story/znm-calls-for-urgent-resolution-of-proceedings-for-violence-against-journalists>

34. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/03/balkan-states-fall-in-press-freedom-rankings/>

35. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/03/balkan-states-fall-in-press-freedom-rankings/>

36. <https://balkanfund.org/regional-cooperation/the-winners-of-the-first-western-balkans-slapp-contest-in-the-spotlight>

37. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/human-rights-journalist-faces-defamation-lawsuit-exposing-corruption>

38. https://www.politico.eu/article/teens-murder-drives-albania-ban-tiktok-one-year-edi-rama-stabbing-violence/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwY2xjawHWJ7xleHRuA2F1bQlxMQABHe4uRcb7j-HOBgsEOuxH23LX8j-avHdH6hEjwcyjhB9gK4Kf_EEm0tgYqg_aem_LKynH9ftm-CJrq58X4eWOHg

39. <https://scidevcenter.org/2024/12/23/scidevs-statement-regarding-the-decision-to-block-access-to-tiktok-in-albania-for-one-year/>

40. <https://www.europeancorrespondent.com/r/child-safety-or-censorship-albanias-tiktok-ban-raises-concerns/>

41. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/10/26/serbian-parliament-adopts-controversial-media-laws/>

42. <https://rsf.org/en/serbia-must-revise-media-reforms-respond-disinformation-challenges-line-eu-calls>

43. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/29/north-macedonia-ends-ban-on-state-ads-in-private-media/>

on the Independent Media Commission,⁴⁴ passed in July 2024, raised the alarm for undermining media freedom, as it increases government control over media regulation, mandates the registration of online media, and imposes severe fines of up to €40,000 for violations of the law.⁴⁵ In Republika Srpska, concerns have been raised about the lack of transparency in the legislative process for the media law, which is set to be introduced in the first quarter of 2025.⁴⁶ These concerns include proposals to exclude CSOs involved in media projects and those operating portals as media outlets from a proposed media register, a move that could further jeopardise independent journalism and media freedoms.

Journalists across the Western Balkans face increasing threats and harassment, highlighting a troubling decline in media freedom. In North Macedonia, a journalist was detained and allegedly assaulted by police while covering a football match, sparking outrage among media freedom organisations.⁴⁷ In Albania, political pressure continues to compromise press independence,⁴⁸ with

officials threatening journalists over critical reporting and smear campaigns targeting media professionals, including intimidation against women journalists.⁴⁹ In Kosovo, accusations of Serbian influence on local media escalated tensions, as the Kosovo Journalists' Association condemned MPs for sharing an article with propagandist tones, describing the incident as an intimidation campaign against journalists.⁵⁰ Attacks against journalists persist in Montenegro, with the latest attack coming from a businessman connected to political elites.⁵¹ Online harassment of journalists remains a significant issue, particularly in Albania⁵² and North Macedonia, with women journalists facing heightened hate speech and threats on social media.⁵³ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, independent journalism continues to be challenged by ongoing pressures and cyberattacks on media outlets and organisations, along with direct threats targeting journalists. These patterns of hostility undermine freedom of media and expression, emphasising the need for accountability and stronger protection for media workers across the region.

Safe space

Civil society actors in the Western Balkans faced numerous challenges throughout the year, including verbal, physical, and online attacks. For instance, in Kosovo, an online smear campaign targeted individuals critical of the ruling party, Vetevendosje. The campaign was condemned by civil society activists, experts, and politicians across the region.⁵⁴ Government-affiliated actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia continued to create intimidating environments, deterring civic engagement and reinforcing the lack of accountability for threats or attacks on civil society representatives. Activists in Serbia faced escalating arbitrary detentions during protests, often involving plainclothes officers acting without proper identification. Human rights activists have also been increasingly detained at the borders, signalling targeted harassment and intimidation of defenders working on Serbia-Kosovo

reconciliation.⁵⁵ Sofija Todorović, Director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, was detained at Serbia's borders on several occasions, facing prolonged interrogations without explanation — an attempt to intimidate human rights defenders and obstruct their work.

Smear campaigns led by top officials and the publishing of CSOs' financial data in the media have heightened political tensions in Serbia.⁵⁶ Alarming, the national public broadcaster, close to the governing authorities, failed to report on the massive protests, further silencing civil society voices. In Montenegro, negative rhetoric from some government members, including public verbal attacks on CSOs, was documented and openly criticised. The vilification of CSOs as "foreign agents" emerged as a concerning trend. Proposals for a foreign agents law and intensified of this narrative

44. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/11/kosovo-mps-adopt-independent-media-commission-law-despite-misgivings/>

45. <https://www.ecpmf.eu/kosovos-media-law-enables-political-capture-of-media-regulatory-body/>

46. <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/novi-zakon-o-medijima-u-rs-u-jos-jedan-udar-na-medijske-slobode>

47. <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2024/05/10/north-macedonia-we-urge-authorities-to-cess-harassment-of-journalist-furkan-saliu/>

48. https://safejournalists.net/portfolios/safejournalists-concerns-over-decision-made-by-albanian-supreme-court-regarding-case-of-journalist-elton-qyno/?fbclid=IwAR3kaBJwW8mUOVT8qAa3MZ0_nHmrXua4yvpXDCIzBVV_HDA8eTBqvAyy5IM_aem_AQ5TpTvjvc6SH_ySeBGKjZWAZCL9y0M0uq_yLjX1n-zOefzDjQ1Tq55C4nYa0KID0_fbs

49. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/19/albanian-pms-intimidation-of-woman-journalist-condemned/>

50. <https://kossev.info/investigative-journalism-or-intimidation-of-journalists/>

51. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/732248/napad-na-anu-raickovic-i-njenog-sina-vrijedjali-cupali-udarali-i-gusili>

52. <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/32036>

53. <https://safejournalists.net/alert/safejournalists-urgent-call-to-address-online-threats-against-lepa-dzundeva-and-other-journalists-in-north-macedonia/>

54. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/13/smear-campaign-against-critics-of-kosovo-ruling-party-condemned>

55. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/02/serbia-urged-to-stop-illegally-detain-activists-on-borders/>

56. <https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/9711109/nikola-ristic-placanje-inostranstvo>

led to stigmatisation and posed significant challenges to civil society, particularly organisations working on sensitive issues such as LGBTQI+ rights, anti-racism, women's rights, and migrant rights.⁵⁷

Digital freedoms in the region are inconsistently upheld. Cybersecurity remains a concern, yet countries like Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania have made progress by establishing strong frameworks for cybersecurity and communication. Albania's national cybersecurity strategy emphasises safeguarding privacy and fundamental rights, and in September 2024, it became the 36th member of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats to address cyberattacks and disinformation.⁵⁸ Kosovo's amended Criminal Code, published in November 2023,⁵⁹ introduced a chapter on cyber crimes, including provisions on hate speech via computer systems.

Reports of unjustified monitoring in Albania and Kosovo remain limited, reflecting stronger privacy adherence. However, challenges persist. In Republika Srpska, the government proposed — and later withdrew — legislation equating online speech with public speech, highlighting the region's struggle to balance regulation and freedoms.⁶⁰ In Serbia, authorities have been accused of using surveillance technology and digital repression tactics against civil society. Amnesty International reported that Serbia's secret service and police have been spying on journalists and opposition activists by installing spyware on their mobile phones.⁶¹ This has raised serious concerns about state control and repression directed against civil society.⁶²

SLAPPs remain a pervasive issue across the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia, where activists and journalists face numerous cases aimed at silencing dissent. Investigative outlet KRIK and its journalists have been targeted⁶³ with lawsuits demanding financial damages, criminal penalties, and occupational bans for their reporting on judicial transparency, threatening its livelihood and leading to self-censorship.⁶⁴ These lawsuits exemplify the use of legal

intimidation to suppress critical voices and investigative journalism. To address this growing trend, BCSDN conducted the region's first comprehensive research on SLAPPs, highlighting the need for early detection, legal frameworks, and better protections for civil society actors.⁶⁵ As per the report, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia rank among the top ten European countries for SLAPP cases, with Bosnia and Herzegovina reporting 53 cases in 2023 alone, Serbia recording around 250 cases in one year, and North Macedonia seeing defamation lawsuits double between 2021 and 2022.

A promising step forward is the proposed law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which includes anti-SLAPP provisions to dismiss baseless lawsuits early and protect activists and journalists engaged in public debates. The draft law has passed the house of representatives and is currently awaiting a vote in the house of peoples.⁶⁶ Both this development and the dismissal of defamation charges against the eco-activist Harija Čobo in the country marks important progress. Nonetheless, SLAPPs remain widespread across the region due to a lack of specific legal frameworks to recognise and address them, with detrimental effects on civic actors. Many organisations have reduced or redirected their activities due to mounting pressure, with activists experiencing severe psychological stress, burnout, and financial strain.

In North Macedonia, anti-gender movements have gained prominence by opposing gender-sensitive education reforms and LGBTQI+ rights.⁶⁷ These groups, often supported by religious institutions, use disinformation and fearmongering to influence public opinion, portraying gender equality initiatives as threats to traditional family values.⁶⁸ Their tactics include organising protests, disseminating misleading narratives, and pressuring institutions to retract support for gender-related topics. This environment has led to increased harassment of human rights activists and a chilling effect on discussions about gender and sexuality in the public sphere.

57. <https://balkancsd.net/foreign-agents-laws-vs-dynamic-accountability-how-csos-can-defend-civic-space/>

58. <https://scidevcenter.org/2024/09/14/scidev-welcomes-albanias-membership-in-the-european-centre-of-excellence-for-countering-hybrid-threats-hybrid-coe/>

59. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/89-4-Final-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2023.pdf>

60. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/89-4-Final-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2023.pdf>; https://civilnodrustvo.ba/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/88-4-BIH-MM-Report-2023-final_11.10.2024.pdf; <https://civilnodrustvo.ba/kratki-spoj-internet-nije-javno-mjesto/>

61. <https://securitylab.amnesty.org/latest/2024/12/serbia-a-digital-prison-spyware-and-cellebrite-used-on-journalists-and-activists/>

62. https://edri.org/our-work/serbian-authorities-must-prosecute-illegal-hacking-of-journalists-and-activists/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CM-TEAAR1bp-bBlmVgNjdWBybl5B1PveS3zv1_b70Vuytf09-gakfzqgP2f2xyzHQ_aem_HE-k7nTfj3maCvll2ajtRg

63. <https://www.portal-ostro.hr/hr/price/bojana-pavlovic-kada-ste-svima-pozeljni-znaci-da-ne-radite-ovaj-posao-kako-treba>

64. <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/hoces-li-se-izboriti-verice/>

65. <https://balkancsd.net/from-silence-to-strength-bcsdns-report-on-slapps-in-the-western-balkans-is-out-now/>

66. <https://balkancsd.net/new-law-in-fbih-strengthens-citizens-and-activist-rights-2/>

67. <https://ba.boell.org/en/2024/04/19/anti-gender-mobilizations-north-macedonia-transnational-tool-kit-domestic-actors-against>

68. <https://meta.mk/en/when-medical-students-apologize-the-impact-of-the-anti-gender-movement-in-the-public-sphere>

Financial viability and sustainability of civil society

Across the Western Balkans, CSOs are navigating a complex landscape of regulatory changes, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and financial uncertainties, posing substantial limitations on their operations and development. While some progress has been made in enhancing operational conditions for non-profits, significant hurdles in the tax framework, public funding reforms, and transparency remain.⁶⁹

Tax-related challenges are a recurring issue for CSOs in the region.⁷⁰ In Albania, the introduction of a 0% VAT policy for foreign-funded projects, intended to streamline operations, has instead increased administrative burdens due to complex registration requirements and cumbersome procedures for every purchase.⁷¹ This has raised operational costs and hindered CSOs' work. Efforts to address these challenges are underway, with potential amendments expected in 2025. In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, hidden taxes such as inflated bank charges on international donations reduce grant income. Similarly, unclear guidelines and cumbersome procedures for tax incentives discourage corporate and individual giving, leaving CSOs underfunded.

In most countries, the existence of laws or national policies specifically dedicated to public funding for CSOs is either inconsistent or incomplete. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recent draft law on NGO financing has been criticised for untransparent development processes and provisions that overlap with existing legislation. Efforts are underway to develop unified and transparent criteria for public funding allocation across ministries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, addressing inconsistencies and lack of access to information. Similarly, efforts to amend the financial and legal framework for civil society are ongoing but notably delayed in North Macedonia. Montenegro is the only country where there is a legally stipulated percentage of 0.5% of the state budget that should be allocated to CSOs. Nevertheless, allocations often fall below this threshold (e.g. 0.23% in 2023, with

additional funds released only after public pressure), which not only undermines reliability and predictability, but also violates the Law on NGOs.⁷²

Of further concern is the lack of transparency and accountability in the distribution of public funds across the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, CSOs have raised concerns about politically aligned or phantom organisations benefiting from public funds. In North Macedonia and Kosovo, on the other hand, a significant portion of the state funds has been directed to sports associations,⁷³ as well as services or even political parties, blurred within the broader transfer lines dedicated to NGOs.

CSOs in Serbia filed a criminal complaint over a year ago regarding the misuse of millions of euros from public tenders by the family care and demography ministry,⁷⁴ but no charges have been brought yet, despite evidence of misuse. According to the coalition "Open about Tenders," while there has been a rise in funding allocations, these disproportionately benefit a select few organisations — some of which lack transparency, expertise, or public visibility. Concerns include favouritism, mismanagement, and the absence of proper oversight, all of which undermine the equitable and effective use of public resources.⁷⁵

Due to the inadequacy of public funding forces, many CSOs have to depend on foreign donors, whose project-based approaches often involve lengthy approval processes and are less adaptable to immediate needs. Private funders and local foundations, on the other hand, provide more flexible support, including general and institutional grants — funding notably missing from the state support to CSOs. These funders also maintain dedicated emergency funds accessible to a broader range of organisations; however, access to such support remains limited. Finally, local foundations and re-granting organisations provide a balanced

69. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/89-4-Final-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2023.pdf>

70. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/89-4-Final-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2023.pdf>

71. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Monitoring-Matrix-on-Enabling-Environment-for-CSOs-Development-Country-Report-for-Albania-2023.pdf>

72. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/636534/crnvo-predlogom-zakona-o-budzetu-grubo-se-krsi-zakon-o-nvo?fbclid=IwAR2uNndASy1V7P3txKlsbyZlodF-2kO9xyYkjbXDPa7EjtlhHaDFjZ3HA>

73. https://mcmds.mk/mk/vesti-i-javnost/vesti/2586-finansiranjeto-na-gragjanskite-organizacii-od-opshtinskite-budzheti-najmnogu-fokusirano-na-sportskite-zdruzhenija.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawE0Cy9leHRuA2FbQlxMAABHXIN-VPI94VUbouM55vrKws6wKtC0mCcsTR-gpf-B8mLZYU7ofodimOS-rQ_aem_ntb_1VzywUGXNtvQIKSFeg

74. <https://www.gradjanske.org/godinu-dana-nicega-milionske-zloupotrebe-na-javnim-konkursima-nevidljive-za-tuzilastvo/>

75. <https://www.gradjanske.org/kako-vlast-trosi-novac-gradjana-na-konkursima-sredstva-za-udruzenja-rodbine-i-prijateljia/>

model, offering general or institutional support while also maintaining dedicated funds that are accessible to a wider range of organisations.⁷⁶

Finally, although human capital is vital for CSO sustainability, most countries lack legislative frameworks that actively support or regulate volunteering and employment in the sector. While discussions on labour rights, such as establishing civil sector unions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are ongoing, countries like

Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania are making progress with policies and strategies to promote volunteer engagement. Notable steps include Albania's draft law on voluntarism, which requires further refinement, Kosovo's ongoing volunteering policy development, and Montenegro's pledge within the youth strategy to introduce a volunteer registry and youth-focused initiatives.⁷⁷ However, progress remains uneven, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where labour law consultations excluded CSOs from official processes.

Civil dialogue and the right to participation

Over the years, the participation and meaningful involvement of civil society in public dialogue and policymaking processes in the Western Balkans have steadily declined, threatening to undermine democracy and restrict civil society's ability to advocate for social change. Strategies for civil society development and cooperation exist in all countries, yet their implementation is largely unsatisfactory, with ineffective monitoring frameworks.

In addition to the ongoing consultations on the first-ever strategy for an enabling environment for civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, new strategies are currently under consultation in Albania and Kosovo, despite the fact that progress in implementing existing strategies is limited. In Albania, civil society has raised concerns over the vague language, unclear timelines, and inadequate consultation processes of the new strategy, compounded by limited dialogue with CSOs and a lack of public reporting on implementation. Similar challenges persist in Montenegro and North Macedonia. In Serbia, despite the adoption of its first CSO-focused strategy in 2022, difficulties in collaborative policymaking remain due to the lack of consistent implementation and monitoring. These setbacks underscore a broader regional trend where civil society development is not prioritised by Western Balkans governments.

Intersectoral cooperation and trust remain stagnant. In Montenegro and North Macedonia, councils for state-CSO cooperation have been non-functional for nearly three years.⁷⁸ In Montenegro, efforts to reactivate the council have failed due to low CSO participation and a lack of trust in the council's efficacy.⁷⁹ A significant deterrent has been the interpretation of anti-corruption laws, equating CSO representatives with public officials, creating reporting and administrative burdens. In North Macedonia, CSOs have boycotted the Council since March 2022.⁸⁰ However, the new government has initiated consultations on reactivating the Council, with a draft decision underway, while an open call for selection of 14 members of the Council representing CSOs was launched at the beginning of 2025.⁸¹ Amendments to the main law on CSOs are expected to define the roles and responsibilities of the Council, but the working group tasked with this effort remains inactive.

Serbia's establishment of the Council for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society, once promising, has stagnated due to delays linked to snap elections and delayed membership appointments. Civil society participation in Serbia is often symbolic, with CSOs included in consultations and working groups as a formality, but their input largely disregarded.⁸² CSOs are seldom recognised as key actors, with data and insights on the beneficiaries targeted by specific legislation. Civil society actors are even labelled as political opposition in some cases, further marginalising their role.

76. https://peacenexus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Supporting-Activism-in-Times-of-Crisis_Final.pdf

77. <https://balkanccd.net/key-civil-society-developments-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkiye-insights-from-2023-and-2024/>

78. <https://balkanccd.net/key-civil-society-developments-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkiye-insights-from-2023-and-2024/>

79. <https://balkanccd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Monitoring-Matrix-on-enabling-environment-for-civil-society-development-Country-Report-Montenegro-2023.pdf>

80. https://balkanccd.net/novo/wpcontent/uploads/2024/11/Country_Report_for_2023_MM_in_North_Macedonia.pdf

81. <https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk/?q=mk%2Fnode%2F1030>

82. <https://balkanccd.net/new-bcsdn-policy-brief-why-civic-space-must-be-an-eu-accession-priority/>

Across the region, national consultations reveal common obstacles: short timelines, restricted access to information, and inadequate feedback mechanisms.⁸³ In Kosovo, once a regional leader in civil society inclusion, participation has sharply declined due to accelerated legislative processes as the government nears the end of its term. Additionally, CSOs have been excluded from working groups, and the online consultation platform has been non-functional, further obstructing engagement. In Montenegro, public participation in policymaking has suffered due to rushed legislative changes linked to the EU accession process. Poorly managed consultations at both national and local levels resulted in low participation, with the EU's focus on benchmarks rather than inclusive processes reducing pressure on governments to engage CSOs.

Legal and procedural barriers continue to hamper access to public information for civil society and citizens across the region, with bureaucratic obstacles

and a lack of transparency impeding timely access to information and informed participation in public affairs. Meanwhile, digital tools for civic participation have gained traction, with the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA)⁸⁴ highlighting their potential to enhance inclusivity and transparency. However, the effectiveness of these tools remains uneven, as digital literacy gaps and unequal internet access pose barriers for certain groups.⁸⁵

The presence of “government-organised non-governmental organisations” (GONGOs) further complicates the landscape. There are concerns that these entities, often seen as extensions of governmental influence, are undermining independent civil society efforts, particularly in advocacy for women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights. By promoting state-aligned narratives, GONGOs risk marginalising genuine advocacy initiatives, while draining public funding allocated to NGOs.

Civil society resilience

Despite growing state restrictions that obstruct the work of CSOs and affect the level of public trust in civic actors, the resilience of civil society continues to drive efforts to advance democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. Joint initiatives by CSO coalitions at national and regional level have enhanced information sharing, strengthened joint advocacy efforts, and provided mutual support to counter threats to civic space and protect fundamental freedoms.

Collaboration, networking, and coalition-building within the sector have seen encouraging progress, with CSOs increasingly working together across various thematic areas. Initiatives such as North Macedonia's Civica Mobilitas programme,⁸⁶ Serbia's Act programme,⁸⁷ the regional Engaged Democracy Initiative by the European Fund for the Balkans, and SMART Balkans, provide strategic and rapid support to CSOs, strengthening their efforts to protect civic space. In Serbia, Civic Initiatives launched an urgent support programme to

strengthen civil society resilience and offer immediate assistance in response to adverse changes affecting civil society.⁸⁸

A variety of global, regional, and local donors offer emergency support to activists, informal groups, and organisations in the Western Balkans region. However, information about such support is often scattered and accessible only through personal networks, making it difficult for activists in crisis to obtain it. Activists and organisations facing emergencies often lack the time, knowledge, or skills to navigate these resources. While support for physical relocation due to attacks is less common, there is a growing demand for assistance with digital and cyberattacks, as well as legal aid, particularly in response to the rise of SLAPPs.⁸⁹ Recognising the severity of this issue in Serbia, a national anti-SLAPP coalition was formed, inspiring BCSDN to launch the first regional anti-SLAPP coalition aimed at resource sharing, collaboration, and communication, following a regional multi stakeholder conference on the topic.⁹⁰

83. <https://balkanicsd.net/new-bcsdn-policy-brief-why-civic-space-must-be-an-eu-accession-priority/>

84. <https://respaweb.eu/0/news/703/respaweb-panel-at-the-egpa-2024-conference-insightful-discussion-about-the-potential-of-digital-tools-in-enhancing-inclusivity-and-transparency-across-the-policy-making-in-the-western-balkans>

85. <https://respaweb.eu/0/news/703/respaweb-panel-at-the-egpa-2024-conference-insightful-discussion-about-the-potential-of-digital-tools-in-enhancing-inclusivity-and-transparency-across-the-policy-making-in-the-western-balkans>

86. <https://civicamobilitas.mk/en/>

87. <https://act.org.rs/en/#:~:text=ACT%20addresses%20the%20challenges%20of%20civic%20activism%20in,relations%20with%20citizens%20and%20enhancing%20their%20networking%20capacities.>

88. <https://www.gradjanske.org/otvoren-fond-za-urgentnu-podrsku/>

89. https://peacenexus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Supporting-Activism-in-Times-of-Crisis_Final.pdf

90. <https://balkanicsd.net/united-against-slapps-strategies-for-defending-freedom-of-expression-in-the-western-balkans-2/>

The first Western Balkans SLAPPs contest was organised in November 2024 to raise awareness on SLAPPs and foster a culture of accountability by drawing attention to those who misuse legal avenues to repress civic actors.⁹¹

The resilience of civil society in the region is evident in grassroots mobilisation and advocacy efforts, particularly in Serbia, where citizen-led movements have pushed for transparency and accountability on national and EU level. In 2024, grassroots groups like Polekol and Svice continued mobilising citizens and organising mass protests against electoral irregularities, corruption and anti-democratic practices. These have been supported by initiatives like Borba, Proglas, CRTA, and campaigns such as “Ferka” and “Dokle više,” which boosted civic engagement and voter participation. Attention to the issue of electoral transparency was brought from street-level demonstrations to the institutional level, with Serbian CSOs leading advocacy efforts in Brussels.⁹² This contributed to a European Parliament resolution addressing election procedural deficiencies.⁹³ In October 2024, BCSDN facilitated high-level advocacy meetings with EU institutions in Brussels, highlighting the crackdown on civic freedoms following massive protests⁹⁴ and urging the EU to stand with Serbian citizens demanding accountability.⁹⁵ Civic Initiatives provided activists participating in the protests with legal and emergency aid through tools such as the ŠTIT Activist Card.⁹⁶

National civil society initiatives underscore the importance of cooperation and collective action. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, CPCD organised CIVILKA to strengthen the legitimacy and representation of civil society,⁹⁷ and co-organised the “Now is the Right Time” meeting with the Institute for Development and EU Integration (IREI), to mobilise efforts towards EU integration.⁹⁸ This resulted in a declaration, signed by over 90 stakeholders, emphasising the need for high-quality reforms to accelerate EU negotiations. Civil society resilience and mutual solidarity were also evident following devastating floods that claimed 27 lives and displaced many. CSOs led by humanitarian organisations provided monetary aid and emergency services, fostering unity in the face of tragedy, supported by regional governments.⁹⁹

At the regional level, BCSDN called for CSOs to support the continuation and expansion of the Enlargement Candidate Members’ Initiative (ECMI), a European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) pilot project integrating civil society voices from EU candidate countries into EU decision-making processes, while also advocating for Kosovo’s inclusion in future phases.¹⁰⁰ The initiative gained more than 100 signatures across the region.

91. <https://balkanfund.org/regional-cooperation/the-winners-of-the-first-western-balkans-slapp-contest-in-the-spotlight>

92. <https://balkancsd.net/civic-uprising-resilient-response-to-electoral-challenges-in-serbia/>

93. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240202IPR17327/serbia-did-not-fulfil-its-commitments-to-free-and-fair-elections-say-meps>

94. <https://balkancsd.net/serbian-csos-urge-government-to-end-repression-against-csos-and-activists-and-respect-basic-freedoms/>

95. <https://balkancsd.net/bcsdn-leads-high-level-advocacy-visit-to-brussels/>

96. <https://www.gradjanske.org/prijavi-se-za-aktivisticku-karticu-stit/>

97. <https://civilnodrustvo.ba/treca-civilka-u-fokus-stavila-reprezentativnost-i-legitimnost-u-civilnom-sektoru/>

98. <https://civilnodrustvo.ba/potpisite-deklaraciju-civilnog-drustva-zelimo-korak-dalje-ka-eu/>

99. <https://balkancsd.net/bcsdn-solidarity-after-the-devastating-floods-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

100. <https://balkancsd.net/wbt-csos-call-for-the-continuation-and-expansion-of-eescs-initiative-that-formally-involves-csos-from-eu-candidate-countries/>

Recommendations

TARGETED RECOMMENDATION

- **Urgently institutionalise systematic and meaningful consultation processes, ensuring CSOs' mandatory structured participation in EU integration and reform agendas through functional mechanisms in all countries.**
- **Implement binding benchmarks to assess the enabling environment for civil society, including fundamental freedoms and financial viability, as integral elements of the enlargement process.**
- Ensure that freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression are legally guaranteed.
- Repeal restrictive laws and “foreign agent” narratives, and ensure national legal frameworks align with international standards to protect fundamental freedoms.
- Implement measures to enhance basic freedoms, protect activists and CSOs from harassment, smear campaigns, and cyberattacks, and publicly condemn restrictive legislation and violations of civic freedoms to reinforce commitment to democratic principles.
- Take steps to address SLAPP lawsuits through anti-SLAPP legislation, in line with the EU's Anti-SLAPP Directive and Council of Europe recommendations.
- Implement a risk-based approach to AML/CFT regulations to improve CSO access to banking services without imposing undue restrictions.
- Take steps to strengthen the financial viability of civil society through transparent public funding mechanisms that prioritise institutional support over project-based funding, simplified tax systems, alleviation of VAT burdens, and the finalisation and implementation of supportive financial laws, such as those on donations and sponsorships.

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025



About European Civic Forum

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

civic-forum.eu



About Civic Space Watch

CivicSpace Watch is an online platform that gathers data and reports on developments in civic space at the national and EU level and analyses national and European trends in civic space. Powered by the European Civic Forum, it collects findings through regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground, as well as ongoing media and social media monitoring.

civicspacewatch.eu



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