

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2026

Western Balkans

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

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Development Network (BCSDN)





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 Trends

-  Escalating threats against activists and journalists, including physical violence, surveillance, SLAPPs, and smear campaigns.
-  USAID funding freeze caused abrupt programme cancellations, ignited “foreign agent” disinformation and CSO raids.
-  Public funding scarce, opaque, and politically controlled; heavy donor dependency exposed.
-  Relations between governments and CSOs deteriorate, with limited and increasingly procedural participation in policymaking.
-  Civic safe space shrinks, marked by fear, self-censorship, gender-based violence and harassment, and the absence of protection for targeted actors.

Summary

Civic space varies among Western Balkans countries. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, civic space is “Narrowed” in **Albania**,¹ **Kosovo**,² **Montenegro**,³ and **North Macedonia**,⁴ “Obstructed” in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**,⁵ and “Repressed” in **Serbia**.⁶ The European Commission’s 2025 Rule of Law Country reports included references to civic space concerns across most Western Balkan countries.

In 2025, civic space across the Western Balkans further deteriorated, marked by legal restrictions, a shrinking funding landscape, escalating intimidation, and an increasingly hostile operating environment for civic actors, in particular critical watchdog organisations and actors working on anti-corruption, minority rights, LGBTQI+ rights or environmental justice.

Governments and ruling parties intensified pressure on civil society organisations (CSOs) and media through smear campaigns, Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), selective inspections, surveillance, police raids, and physical violence, often met with impunity. The abrupt suspension of USAID funding triggered widespread programme closures and exposed donor dependency and simultaneously fuelled “foreign agent” narratives that legitimised raids, stigmatisation and restrictive legislative initiatives. Public funding remained scarce, opaque, and politically controlled, favouring government organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) over independent watchdogs. Participation in decision-making became increasingly procedural, with weakened consultation mechanisms and civil dialogue.

1. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/albania/>

2. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/kosovo/>

3. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/montenegro/>

4. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/macedonia/>

5. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/bosnia-herzegovina/>

6. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/serbia/>

Freedom of Association

Freedom of association across the Western Balkans is constitutionally protected and broadly aligned with international human rights standards, enabling CSOs to operate within a formalised enabling legal framework. Yet in practice, implementation is shaped by incomplete legal reforms, expanding regulations, and ongoing administrative and political pressure on the sector. In **Montenegro**, a draft NGO law was opened for public consultation but has not yet been adopted.⁷ In North Macedonia, a draft law published at the end of 2025 seeks to strengthen the civil society framework through clearer rules on public support, CSO participation in decision-making, non-profit principles, transparency, and institutional co-operation with public authorities.⁸

CSO registration frameworks saw ongoing reform efforts but were constrained by procedural and administrative barriers. In **Albania**, the electronic registration system is not yet operational. In December 2025, the draft law “On the Registration of Non-Profit Organisations” was approved. While the law largely reflects the Constitutional court’s ruling,⁹ it includes administrative sanctions of up to approximately 60,000 Albanian Lek (ALL) for submitting false data or failing to report changes. Concerns raised by CSOs regarding the application of these sanctions were not addressed in the final adopted law.¹⁰ Similar concerns emerged in **Montenegro**, where proposed legislative changes expanded oversight powers and sanctions, increasing administrative burdens for CSOs, and introduced vague formulations which could potentially be abused.¹¹ In **Kosovo**, the amendments to 2022 Administrative Instruction on the Registration, Operation, and Deregistration of NGOs aligned NGO registration rules with the legal framework. The changes clarify requirements for foundations, operationalising fines for delayed updates, and introduced a second-instance appeals body in the case of deregistration.¹² At the same time, the process of drafting of the amendments excluded civil society participation and extended administrative review deadlines to 45 days, raising concerns about efficiency. In **North Macedonia**, conditional

registration requirements, notably the obligation to obtain prior approval from the Commission for the Use of Names before an organisation can register, created procedural bottlenecks when the commission was not fully operational.¹³ In **Serbia**, CSO registration and participation continued to be shaped by a broader hostile environment for civil society. The new law on the Central Register of Beneficial Owners entered into force on 1 October 2025, extending mandatory registration to CSOs without taking into account the specifics of the sector. The law did not clearly prescribe procedures and thus requires additional clarifications from the ministry. CSO representatives were not involved in the drafting process, creating uncertainty regarding required documentation and increasing the administrative burden on organisations.

Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Terrorism Financing (AML/CFT) frameworks expanded compliance obligations for CSOs that often exceeded risk- and proportionality-based assessments. In **Albania**, proposed AML/CFT amendments introduced the wording “non-profit organisations considered as high-risk,” -terminology that is inconsistent with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Recommendation 8, which refers to applying risk-based, proportionate measures that do not unduly disrupt or discourage legitimate non-profit activities.¹⁴ In **Kosovo**, the implementation of the Register of Beneficial Owners, advanced through draft administrative byelaws, largely transposed commercial-sector concepts onto NGOs. It introduced ownership-related requirements incompatible with non-profit governance structures, and terminology inconsistent with the Law on Freedom of Association, raising concerns about proportionality and legal certainty.¹⁵ In **Serbia**, AML/CFT measures were used to access the financial records of critical activists and CSO representatives, raising concerns about selective enforcement and the chilling effect.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council adopted guidelines aligning judicial handling of AML/CTF cases with

7. <https://resursnicentar.me/konsultativni-sastanak-o-izmjenama-zakona-o-nvo-okupio-predstavnike-institucija-i-civilnog-sektora/>

8. https://ener.gov.mk/Default.aspx?item=pub_regulation&subitem=view_reg_detail&itemid=73921

9. The Constitutional Court abolished the requirement for a 30-day registration deadline at Tirana Judicial District Court, provisions expanding chancellor powers (now limited to the court), and administrative fines for false data or delays; the new amendments, however, reintroduce proportionate fines up to 60,000 ALL.

10. <https://konsultimipublik.gov.al/Konsultime/Detaje/832?utm>

11. <https://resursnicentar.me/konsultativni-sastanak-o-izmjenama-zakona-o-nvo-okupio-predstavnike-institucija-i-civilnog-sektora/>

12. <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ADMINISTRATIVE-INSTRUCTION-GRK-NO.-02-2025.pdf>

13. This requirement stems from amendments to the Law on Associations and Foundations and the establishment of a government-linked body tasked with reviewing and approving the use of certain names. Observers have raised concerns that giving such a body a role in registration can affect the timeliness and predictability of the process: <https://rcgo.mk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/report-macedonia.pdf>

14. <https://resourcecentre.al/legal-opinion-on-the-amendment-of-the-draft-law-on-some-additions-and-amendments-to-law-no-9917-dated-19-5-2008-on-the-prevention-of-money-laundering-and-financing-of-terrorism/>

15. <https://lds.rks-gov.net/ByLaws/ByLawsPreparation>

16. <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/uprava-za-sprecavanje-pranja-novca-kritici/>

the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) standards,¹⁷ while in **Montenegro**, authorities maintained structured dialogue with civil society on risk assessment and safeguards for NPOs.¹⁸

As part of broader government efforts to silence dissent and target independent CSOs, media, and opposition voices in the Republika Srpska entity, the National Assembly reintroduced and adopted the controversial Law on the Special Registry and Transparency of the Work of Non-Profit Organisations, commonly referred to as the “foreign agents” law. The law introduced mandatory registration of CSOs receiving foreign funding, labelling them as “foreign agents” and imposing restrictions on their activities, including on public participation and policy debates.¹⁹ Following national and international pressure, along with regional advocacy, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina suspended the law, citing violations of the right to freedom of association.²⁰ In January 2026, the Constitutional Court of Republika Srpska²¹ suspended constitutional review proceedings on the law.²² This comes following a request submitted by the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Banja Luka, CAPITAL, and Dejan Lučka from Laktaši, noting that the law had already ceased to be in force after the earlier ruling of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While this suspension is a positive development, the

law would significantly expand state control over civil society and contribute to a hostile environment for independent organisations if re-instated.

Similar patterns of pressure were also evident in **Serbia**, where independent CSOs and activists continued to face smear campaigns, institutional harassment, and intrusive action from law-enforcement. In February, members of the Criminal Police Directorate raided the premises of several prominent Serbian CSOs, including Civic Initiatives, the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), the Centre for Practical Politics, and the Trag Foundation, citing alleged misuse of USAID funds. The raids followed weeks of co-ordinated smear campaigns in pro-government media and public accusations by senior state officials²³ linking civil society to a so-called “coloured revolution.”²⁴ In parallel, the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering requested banks to provide detailed financial data of several leading CSO representatives, without specifying concrete criminal acts. All targeted organisations and individuals were known for their critical stance toward the government.²⁵ In parallel, foreign and regional activists participating in civil society activities in Belgrade were detained and expelled without evidence or due process,²⁶ using security narratives to restrict cross-border civic engagement. This reinforces the broader chilling effect on civil society and fundamental freedoms.²⁷

Access to funding

Public and international funding availability for civil society in the Western Balkans deteriorated, as politicised domestic funding practices coincided with major disruptions in international assistance. Legal and policy frameworks governing state support to civil society across the region remained fragmented, with reforms largely stalled or absent. In **North Macedonia**, the lack of progress on amending the Law on Donations and Sponsorships left CSO funding dependent on individual institutions and

municipalities, resulting in inconsistent practices. This contrasts with the 2025 Government Work Programme and the prime minister’s commitments to dedicated civil society funding, including a guarantee fund to cover co-financing for EU programmes such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), Horizon Europe, and Digital Europe. While these commitments were formalised through amendments to the Law on Associations and Foundations, they are yet to be implemented in practice. In **Montenegro**, proposed

17. <https://detektor.ba/2025/05/08/usvojene-smjernice-za-postupanje-u-predmetima-pranja-novca-i-finansiranja-terorizma/>

18. <https://rtnk.me/drustvo/mjere-protiv-finansiranja-terorizma-ne-smiju-ugroziti-rad-nvo/>

19. <https://balkancsd.net/bcsdn-concerns-over-the-adoption-of-the-foreign-agents-law-in-republika-srpska-deepening-repression-on-civil-society/>

20. <https://publications.civicius.org/publications/foreign-agents-laws-report/2024-2025-foreign-agents-laws-go-global/>

21. Republika Srpska is one of two entities that comprise Bosnia and Herzegovina.

22. <https://odgovorno.ba/i-ustavni-sud-rs-potvrdio-neustavnost-obracuna-vlasti-u-rs-sa-nezavisnim-medijima-i-nevladinim-organizacijama/>

23. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/02/25/serbian-authorities-raid-critical-csos-cite-trump-administrations-statements-on-usaid/>

24. “Coloured revolutions” refer to a series of largely non-violent protest movements in post-Soviet states and Eastern Europe during the early 2000s (e.g., the Rose Revolution in Georgia 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine 2004), and often also the “Colourful Revolution” protests in North Macedonia in 2015–2016), typically sparked by disputed elections and driven by civil society, youth groups, and Western-backed NGOs demanding democratic reforms against authoritarian rule. In Serbia’s context, pro-government narratives frame them as foreign-orchestrated coups to delegitimise domestic opposition and CSOs, portraying USAID-funded groups as tools for destabilising regimes akin to these events.

25. <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/uprava-za-sprecavanje-pranja-novca-kriticari/>

26. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/01/22/foreign-civic-activists-interrogated-and-banned-from-representing-a-security-risk/>

27. <https://balkancsd.net/serbian-crackdown-crossing-borders-join-the-civil-society-alert-against-vucics-oppression/>

amendments aimed to improve the NGO environment by increasing public funding from 0.5 to 0.6 per cent of the state budget and digitalising registration and funding procedures. At the same time, the government proposed to remove the legal guaranteed budget share of 0.5 per cent, which could risk greater dependence on ministerial decision-making.²⁸ Additional concerns include increased financial uncertainty, reduced transparency, and the risk that funds may not be allocated through open calls.²⁹ In a positive development, **Kosovo** adopted a new regulation on public financial support for the independent cultural scene to strengthen transparency, procedural clarity, and merit-based oversight.³⁰

Access to public funds continues to be undermined by limited transparency and accountability, due to political influence and favouritism. In **Serbia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, public resources continue to be channelled towards GONGOs, sidelining independent watchdogs.³¹ In **North Macedonia**, fragmented and poor accountability in funding procedures negatively impact on independent and critical CSOs, particularly in the culture and social services sectors. Consequently, this has led to service disruptions, including the suspension of shelters for survivors of gender and sexual orientation-based violence.³² Similarly, the National Youth Council of Macedonia raised concerns over a public funding call by the Social Policy, Demography, and Youth ministry, citing an extremely short application deadline and a lack of transparency and consultation, placing youth organisations at a disadvantage. In **Kosovo**, transparency and oversight of public funding for civil society deteriorated due to technical failures including the subsequent shutdown of the online reporting platform, incomplete reporting by public institutions and municipalities, and the absence of the legally required annual report. This left funding data incomplete and limited public scrutiny. In **Albania**, while accountability, monitoring, and reporting procedures for public funding for CSOs are clearly defined in law, the results are not made publicly available, which limits the transparency on the impact of state-funded projects. While the overall framework remained largely unchanged in **Montenegro**, the government took a modest, positive step by introducing

institutional grants for professional artists' associations through the culture and media ministry.³³

Programmes across the Western Balkans supporting humanitarian aid, development, democracy, the rule of law, and vulnerable groups were disrupted following the US administration's executive order suspending most foreign assistance, including USAID funding. The abrupt freeze forced CSOs and independent media to halt activities, reduce staff, and scale back public engagement amid growing pressure on civic space. Right-wing and nationalist actors exploited the decision to intensify smear campaigns and disinformation to undermine CSOs credibility, particularly targeting organisations working on human rights, gender equality,³⁴ LGBTQI+ rights and with marginalised groups.³⁵ These developments exposed deeper structural vulnerabilities, including heavy reliance on a single donor and the absence of coordinated approaches to phasing out support, further weakening the long-term sustainability of civil society. Rather than being offset by alternative funding sources, the gap has widened, as other international and bilateral donors have not prioritised long-term civil society development and have redirected resources toward defence, support to Ukraine, and migration.³⁶ While the EU remains the main anchor for democracy support through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), its funding is largely project-based and centrally managed, limiting flexibility. Sweden and Switzerland, continue to provide trust-based core and multi-year support, respectively, despite reducing overall funding, while Norway maintains³⁷ However, this does not apply to Albania, where the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has phased out its bilateral aid until 2028.

Alongside growing global financial constraints, legislative initiatives across the region point to a broader pattern of efforts to stigmatise and control critical civil society actors. In one example in the Republika Srpska entity, authorities have again failed to bring into force the Russian-style "foreign agents" law,³⁸ which would institutionalise heightened state control over foreign-funded CSOs. However, its anticipated re-introduction continues to create legal uncertainty and a chilling effect. Similar dynamics are evident in Serbia, where

28. <https://resursnicentar.me/konsultativni-sastanak-o-izmjenama-zakona-o-nvo-okupio-predstavnike-institucija-i-civilnog-sektora/>

29. <https://institut-alternativa.org/ia-komentari-na-nacrt-zakona-o-nvo>

30. <https://telegrafi.com/en/New-regulation-for-financial-support-of-the-independent-cultural-scene-approved/>

31. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/110-3-BCSDN-Research-on-Shifting-Donors-Policies.pdf>

32. <https://www.facebook.com/safehousesk/posts/pfbid0TfiS67u64rVz4hs142RcpY2V7VzacRkZ36MpFbjucyJNS8d4TN74kQ78mq6mkebvI>

33. <https://www.gov.me/clanak/javni-konkurs-jacanje-strukovnih-udruzenja-u-kulturi>

34. <https://prizma.mk/marginaliziranje-na-udar-po-krateneto-na-pomoshta-od-usaid/>

35. <https://monitor.civicius.org/explore/csos-working-with-marginalised-groups-forced-to-suspend-operations-due-to-us-funding-cuts> ; <https://balkancsd.net/fallout-of-the-us-funding-freeze-puts-western-balkans-civil-society-under-attack/>

36. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/110-3-BCSDN-Research-on-Shifting-Donors-Policies.pdf>

37. Ibid.

38. <https://balkancsd.net/bcsdn-concerns-over-the-adoption-of-the-foreign-agents-law-in-republika-srpska-deepening-repression-on-civil-society/>

a draft “foreign agents” law proposed in late 2024 by the pro-Russian Movement of Socialists (PS) party, led by former deputy prime minister Aleksandar Vulin, remains stalled in parliamentary procedure. However, it is regularly referenced by individual members of parliament (MPs) during periods of intensified smear campaigns against CSOs.³⁹

Government measures across the region to support the civic sector remained fragmented and insufficient, combining isolated regulatory or funding initiatives with continued delays and institutional blockages that constrained CSOs’ financial sustainability. To improve CSO sustainability, social entrepreneurship has been promoted across the Western Balkans in recent years through donor-funded programmes, capacity-building initiatives, and incubator schemes that encourage CSOs to develop income-generating activities alongside their social missions. In 2025, this was reflected in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina,⁴⁰ where a draft Law on Social Entrepreneurship entered public consultation, prompting CSOs to raise concerns about gaps in the framework such as limited alignment with European standards, insufficient systemic support amid declining social enterprise activity.⁴¹ While **Albania** has a legal framework on social enterprises to which only CSOs can apply to obtain, limited fiscal incentives, combined with restrictive and unclear provisions, remain a persistent challenge.

Human capital is also critical for CSO sustainability, yet most countries lack legislative frameworks that support or regulate volunteering and employment in the sector. In December 2025, the new Volunteering Law was approved in Albania, following long-standing civil society efforts to improve the legal framework. The previous 2016 law was largely unimplemented and hindered the work of CSOs and informal groups. While the law aims to promote an enabling environment for volunteering, CSOs raised concerns regarding problematic provisions, including the lack of a clear definition of volunteering as a public service distinct from employment, which risks repeating past implementation challenges that resulted in tax and insurance obligations for CSOs. There are additional concerns related to the introduction of a centralised volunteer registration system that may increase bureaucracy, and administrative sanctions which risk creating a

restrictive and punitive environment. Although CSOs submitted consolidated comments drafted by a legal expert, not all recommendations were reflected in the final adopted law.⁴² In **Montenegro**, public consultations on the new strategy on volunteerism highlighted the need for clearer implementation, stronger coordination with CSOs, and better recognition of volunteering, particularly at the local level and among youth.⁴³ In **Kosovo**, progress on volunteerism stalled due to the caretaker government and post-election legislative delays.

Non-financial support to CSOs through access to public or state-owned property remained largely stalled, with no meaningful legislative progress and persistent institutional blockages. In **Kosovo**, long-pending legislation on the allocation of immovable municipal property did not advance, while in **North Macedonia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, opaque governance of state assets, dysfunctional or politicised institutions, and the absence of transparent, participatory decision-making continued to limit CSOs’ equitable access despite existing legal frameworks.⁴⁴ In a positive development in **Albania**, social-re-use of confiscated assets from organised crime to CSOs,⁴⁵ particularly for the protection and rehabilitation of victims of organised crime, has been in practice since 2020.

Measures affecting access to funding disproportionately impacted rights-based CSOs, reflecting their watchdog role and critical engagement with public authorities. In **Serbia**, public smear campaigns against civil society targeting foreign funding continued. Leading civil society organisations, including CRTA, Civic Initiatives, Centre for Practical Politics and the Trag Foundation were subjected to inspections and police raids without warrants as part of an alleged investigation into USAID funding. During these actions, documents related to USAID-funded projects were copied from the affected organisations, including materials containing personal data.⁴⁶ In the Republika Srpska entity, the attempted introduction of the “foreign agents” law targeted foreign-funded organisations and risked restricting their access to resources before being suspended by the Constitutional Court. In **Kosovo**, the application of AML/CFT measures could potentially increase reporting burdens and reputational risks for

39. <https://publications.civus.org/publications/foreign-agents-laws-report/2024-2025-foreign-agents-laws-go-global>

40. Not to be confused with the country, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of two confederal entities that comprise Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other being Republika Srpska.

41. <https://6yka.com/ekonomija/reagovanje-na-nedostatke-u-izradi-zakona-o-socijalnom-drustvenom-preduzetnistvu-u-bih/>

42. <https://www.cna.al/english/aktualitet/njohja-e-kontributit-vullnetar-te-rinjte-e-shqiperise-dhe-kosoves-lob-i447376>

43. <https://www.gov.me/clanak/nacrt-strategije-razvoja-volonterizma-2025-2029-s-akcionim-planom-2026-2027>

44. <https://objavi.ba/civilno-drustvo-i-strucnjaci-drzavna-imovina-nije-samo-politicko-pitanje/>

45. <https://en.ata.gov.al/2025/12/15/official-social-reuse-of-seized-assets-helps-tackle-inequality-discrimination/>

46. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/02/25/serbian-police-raids-reputable-ngos-over-usaid-money/>

rights-based CSOs, indirectly affecting their access to funding.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

State constitutions and laws in the Western Balkans broadly align with international standards on peaceful assembly,⁴⁷ generally requiring prior notification rather than authorisation across most jurisdictions and recognising spontaneous gatherings. While **Albania**, **Kosovo**, and **Serbia**'s regulatory frameworks closely adhere to human rights conventions, **North Macedonia** imposes excessive liability for organisers through high fines, and **Montenegro** enforces location restrictions on assemblies near government buildings. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, there is fragmentation: Brčko District upholds robust standards, while the Republika Srpska entity enables politically motivated prohibitions. Persistent implementation gaps undermine protections: **Albania** and **Serbia** lack explicit counter-assembly provisions which creates practical ambiguities, while the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina offers limited effective remedies for appealing politically motivated ban, and online assemblies remain unrecognised region-wide.⁴⁸ This legal patchwork enabled restrictive legislative trends to advance in 2025. **Montenegro's** parliamentary majority introduced amendments to the Law on Public Assemblies,⁴⁹ explicitly banning all road blockades, targeting a range of protest actions. This included student-led mobilisations and demonstrations by the families of the Cetinje massacre victims,⁵⁰ which authorities framed as harmful to tourism and the economy. The proposal, advanced through irregular parliamentary procedure without governmental endorsement,⁵¹ triggered fierce backlash from domestic opposition and civil society. International organisations, such as the Council of Europe and United Nations, claimed that the proposal violates of Article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly the principles of necessity, proportionality, and protection of peaceful assembly. Although the proposal was withdrawn by

late July amid mounting pressure, it signals a troubling precedent using restrictive legislation to crackdown on protest. **Serbia** simultaneously proposed amendments to the Criminal Code to criminalise blockades with up to one-year imprisonment, framed by the justice ministry as responding to "needs of practice" following sustained protest disruptions.⁵²

The protection of freedom of assembly varied sharply across jurisdictions, with **Serbia** and the Republika Srpska entity marked by systematic interference, while others remained comparatively generally respected. **Serbia's** repression apparatus peaked during protests against the 2024 Novi Sad train station collapse and the Rio Tinto lithium project, where authorities deployed sonic weapons against Belgrade demonstrators in March, prompting the ECHR to issue interim measures prohibiting their further use.⁵³ In **Kosovo**, several protests, including strikes, women's rights demonstrations against gender-based violence, and the country's ninth consecutive Pride Parade, all proceeded peacefully without restrictions. One example was a symbolic action by CSOs in front of the parliament, using empty chairs, alarms, and clocks to draw attention to parliamentary paralysis and the normalisation of the post-election institutional crisis.⁵⁴ In **North Macedonia**, protests over air pollution,⁵⁵ Kočani fire demonstrations⁵⁶, Skopje nightclub trial rallies faced delegitimising rhetoric that portrayed the protests as politically orchestrated, but they were not formally banned or interfered with by the authorities.

Police responses revealed stark disparities in proportionality and accountability. Environmental activists and anti-corruption protesters were targeted through fines, detentions, and excessive policing, with limited follow-up for accountability. In **Serbia**, 47 environmental protest detentions and 48 anti-corruption arrests featuring plainclothes officers operating without

47. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/63-3-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2024.pdf>

48. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/63-3-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2024.pdf>

49. <https://institut-alternativa.org/en/proposed-amendments-to-the-law-on-public-assemblies-represent-a-serious-violation-of-human-rights/>

50. On 1 January 2025, gunman Aleksandar Martinović killed 12 people, including two children aged 8 and 13, in a shooting spree across five locations near Cetinje, Montenegro, before shooting himself. A 13th victim died of their injuries on 9 January, marking the deadliest mass shooting in the country's history and the second in Cetinje after 2022. By May 2025, four months later, public outrage grew over stalled investigations, weak gun laws, and government inaction amid widespread possession of illegal firearms in the Balkans. ;

<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/06/four-months-after-second-mass-shooting-in-montenegro-public-demands-answers/>

51. <https://radiobijelopolje.me/en/crna-gora/66038/poslanici-danas-o-zabrani-blokada-kljucnih-saobracajnica>

52. <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/what-is-changing-in-the-criminal-code-and-does-it-have-anything-to-do-with-the-protests-in-serbia/>

53. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/app/conversion/pdf/?library=ECHR&id=003-8218363-11546489>

54. <https://kossev.info/en/120-praznih-stolica-i-alarm-organizacije-civilnog-drustva-kritikuju-poslanike-zbog-blokade-u-kosovskoj-skupstini/>

55. <https://telegafi.com/en/In-Skopje--there-was-a-protest-against-the-relocation-of-the-water-factory--and-citizens-complained-about-air-pollution/>

56. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/16/thousands-rally-in-n-macedonia-ahead-of-trial-over-deadly-nightclub-fire>

identification, were documented by civil society. In addition, police deployed tear gas against protestors, while counter-protestors supporting the governing Serbian Progressive party (SNS) were afforded protection, despite the fact that some of them threw unknown liquids and bricks at peaceful protesters. Undue protester treatment escalated region-wide, with over 1,000 arrests⁵⁷ recorded in **Serbia** since November 2024, alongside verbal abuse, intimidation,⁵⁸ and physical violence from both police and pro-government groups. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

recorded excessive force during Orašje agricultural demonstrations, while the 2023 attacks on pride in the Republika Srpska entity yielded successful lawsuits but no broader accountability.

Surveillance concerns shadowed assembly rights, with **Serbia** flagged for potential facial recognition and drone deployment. Regionally, digitally-mediated assemblies remain unprotected by specific legislation, exposing participants to privacy and data protection risks due to the absence of clear legal safeguards.

Freedom of Expression

In each Western Balkan country, the constitution guarantees freedom of expression through comprehensive media laws and civil liability frameworks designed to meet European human rights standards. **Kosovo**, **North Macedonia**, and **Montenegro** lead with the complete decriminalisation of defamation.⁵⁹ These frameworks explicitly shield reasonable public-interest journalism and reinforce the media's role as a societal watchdog. By contrast, **Serbia** retains criminal insult provisions that enable politically motivated prosecutions. **Albania** and the Republika Srpska entity maintain criminal defamation frameworks, although **Albania** does not ensure imprisonment. In December 2025, legislative efforts in Albania to advance the decriminalisation of defamation included draft amendments to the Criminal Code, accompanied by a public consultation process with active civil society engagement. The adoption is expected in 2026. Despite these formal legal guarantees, implementation remains uneven in Serbia, with the use of criminal insult provisions, continuing to systematically silence dissent.

Legislative developments affecting media freedom followed a restrictive trajectory, increasing risks of institutional capture across the region.⁶⁰ **North Macedonia** dismantled its 2018 prohibition on state advertising to private media outlets, reversing the years of enforced separation between public funds and private broadcasters, prompting concerns of corruption and undue political leverage. In March 2025, the North Macedonian government adopted draft amendments to the Law on Media, introducing a legal framework for online media for the first time, citing the growing reliance on

digital sources for public information. The amendments aim to regulate the registration of online portals, encourage self-regulation and competitiveness, and align media governance with EU standards.⁶¹ CSOs in **Albania** raised concerns over the vague mandate of the established Special Disinformation Committee formally targeting foreign interference,⁶² and called for robust safeguards. **Kosovo's** 2024 Law on the Independent Media Commission, which introduced online media registration and sweeping sanctions, was annulled by the Constitutional Court in 2025, citing fundamental flaws in appointment processes and dismissal criteria that jeopardised institutional independence.⁶³ The elections for the council of **Serbia's** Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), which took place in November 2025, exemplified democratic decay.⁶⁴ The parliamentary committee responsible for conducting the election failed to apply the relevant legal provisions correctly, thereby enabling undue political influence by the ruling party over the selection process. The procedure was marked by the systematic disregard of the substantive merits of candidates' applications, multiple breaches of the prescribed selection rules, and a troubling public campaign discrediting independent experts and civil society nominees. These practices were aimed at ensuring that candidates aligned with the ruling party would secure seats in the newly appointed council. The process ultimately concluded with the resignation of four independent council members after the parliamentary plenary deliberately voted down candidates in one of the categories, once it became apparent that the ruling party would not be able to exercise majority

⁵⁷. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/08/15/in-serbia-hundreds-arrested-in-violent-anti-government-protests-amid-reports-of-police-brutality_6744412_4.html

⁵⁸. <https://www.bgnes.com/society/police-chief-accused-of-torture-abuse-and-rape-threats-against-protesters-in-belgrade>

⁵⁹. <https://balkancred.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/63-3-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2024.pdf>

⁶⁰. <https://balkancred.net/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-a-leading-threat-to-press-freedom/>

⁶¹. <https://plusinfo.mk/onla-n-portalite-vleguvaat-vo-regulativa-vladata-go-donese-predlog-zakonot-za-izmenuva-e-na-zakonot-za-mediumi/>

⁶². <https://albaniantimes.al/albania-special-commission-disinformation/>

⁶³. <https://prishtinainsight.com/journalists-association-welcomes-kosovos-constitutional-court-ruling-on-media-commission-law-mag/>

⁶⁴. <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2025/11/20/serbia-election-of-rem-council-undermines-democratic-principles/>

control over the new composition of the regulatory body. The Republika Srpska entity advanced media law drafts shrouded in secrecy, including provisions that would deny the legal recognition of civil society-operated news portals as media outlets.⁶⁵

Civic actors encountered relentless sanctions and threats across the Western Balkans. Journalists bore the heaviest burden through strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), brutal physical assaults, and well-coordinated online harassment campaigns. **Serbia's** investigative outlet KRIK⁶⁶ weathered over 16 SLAPPs from entrenched power figures. These lawsuits sought crippling financial damages, criminal penalties, and outright bans on journalistic practice for unmasking systemic corruption. Leaked recordings exposed state telecom officials plotting to limit independent media operations. Appellate courts compounded the assault by upholding penalties against KRIK for straightforward, factual reporting on its own legal entanglements.⁶⁷ The National Working Group Against SLAPPs in Serbia reported and published data on 72 SLAPPs since 2018, noting that this was only a part of identified SLAPPs so far.⁶⁸

Journalists across the region also faced physical attacks, intimidation, online harassment, and institutional obstruction, with incidents often linked to politically connected actors and compounded by persistent impunity. In **Montenegro**, concerns over elite-linked violence against journalists persisted, exemplified by the November 2024 assault on journalist Ana Raičković and her son. The attack, involving individuals reportedly connected to political and business networks, included serious intimidation and physical violence.⁶⁹ In **North Macedonia**, police detained and allegedly physically assaulted reporter Furkan Saliu during routine football match coverage, while women journalists nationwide absorbed vicious gendered hate speech flooding social media platforms.⁷⁰ In **Albania**, the prime minister publicly targeted journalists for critical reporting, drawing condemnation from media freedom

organisations, including journalist associations and regional watchdogs.⁷¹ The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia reported 383 incidents towards journalists in 2025, out of which 80 were cases of pressure, 164 threats, 116 physical attacks, 15 threats to media, and eight attacks on media.⁷²

Censorship, self-censorship, and digital threats increasingly intersected with economic and political pressures, narrowing the space for free expression across the Western Balkans. Economic fragility⁷³ and high dependence on a small pool of state and private advertisers strengthened political actors' leverage over independent media, especially those reporting on corruption and high-level abuses. In **Serbia**, pro-government tabloids and broadcasters led to smear campaigns against critical outlets and journalists,⁷⁴ while obstructions to reporting during protests contributed to pervasive self-censorship in newsrooms.

Across the region, civil society also reported opaque content moderation practices and account restrictions affecting critical or rights-based content, while pro-government narratives remained largely undisturbed. Independent outlets in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** endured unceasing cyberattacks coupled with explicit staff threats. In **Albania**, CSOs initiated legal challenges against what they described as disproportionate bans on TikTok content, warning of negative effects on freedom of expression. Women journalists in **Albania** and **North Macedonia** faced gendered hate speech and harassment on social media.⁷⁵ Furthermore, during the 2025 local elections in **North Macedonia**, public and online discourse was marked by a noticeable increase in hate speech and digital threats, reflecting heightened polarisation along ethnic and political lines.⁷⁶ Across the region, responses to incidents were marked by limited follow-up, with investigations into attacks and online restrictions rarely resulting in indictments or accountability. This demonstrates a persistent and mutually reinforcing set of

65. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sarajevo/-/defamation-slapps-and-democracy-protecting-the-space-for-public-debate-in-bih>

66. <https://www.krik.rs/krik-pravosnazno-osudjen-zbog-teksta-o-tome-ko-je-tuzio-redakciju/>

67. <https://www.insajder.net/prenosimo/koalicija-za-slobodu-medija-presuda-krik-u-nepravedna-hitno-usvojiti-anti-slapp-preporuke>

68. <https://slapp.rs/en/slapp-db/>

69. <https://safejournalists.net/commission-monitoring-report-police-directorate-didnt-provided-documentation-on-attack-against-ana-raickovic/>

70. <https://balkancsd.net/new-bcsdn-research-the-missing-lens-on-gender-equality-in-the-western-balkans/>

71. <https://scidevcenter.org/2025/06/03/media-landscape-may-2025-brief/>

72. https://nuns.rs/baza-nuns/?keyword=&gender=&type_of_incident=&life_threat_type=&physical_attack_type=&organisation_attack_type=&organisation_threat_type=&pressure_type=&type_of_media=&incident_year=&page=1

73. <https://balkancsd.net/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-a-leading-threat-to-press-freedom/>

74. <https://cpj.org/2025/09/serbia-police-target-journalists-as-anti-government-protests-escalate/>

75. <https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/73-6-BCSDN-Research-in-Focus-The-Missing-Lens-1.pdf>

76. https://rcgo.mk/vesti/zgolemen-govor-na-omraza-i-digitalni-manipulacii-za-vreme-na-lokalnite-izbori-2025/?fbclid=IwZxh0bgNhZW0CMATAAYnjpZBExTUZWaElsakk1b202MjQ1NnNydGMGYXBwX2lkEDlyMjAzOTE3ODgyMDA4OTIAAR7jSZS-sF2f7T3-4KdujSDNuMPxX72vujho86o5R_Gbgo99bynlvgVbLMQhwRw_aem_2ySahuaE8W4IZwuCAR7Z2g

threats to media freedom and freedom of expression in the Western Balkans.⁷⁷

Participation in Decision-making

Frameworks for civil society development and cooperation formally exist across the region, but their implementation remains limited, with strategies often developed through weak consultation processes and a lack of effective monitoring and integration into policy-making.⁷⁸ **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **North Macedonia** adopted new civil society development strategies following consultative processes.⁷⁹ In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, this marked the establishment of the first state-level framework aimed at improving the civil society enabling environment and cooperation with public authorities,⁸⁰ while in **North Macedonia**, the new strategy built on existing policies and set priorities for cooperation and support.⁸¹ **Kosovo's** civil society strategy remained unapproved, prolonging a policy gap, while extended disruptions of the online public consultation platform constrained civic participation and risked consultations becoming merely procedural. Similar concerns were raised in **Albania**, where delays in assessing the previous roadmap and drafting a new government roadmap for an enabling civil society environment prompted CSOs to call for more open, inclusive, and transparent consultations, stronger political commitment, sustainable funding, and clearer institutional responsibility.⁸²

Institutionalised councils for cooperation remained the primary channels for dialogue between governments and civil society across the region. **North Macedonia** reconstituted its co-operation council through an open process and resumed its work, strengthening structured government–CSO dialogue.⁸³ **Montenegro** re-established its cooperation council and held its first consultative session in December.⁸⁴ In practice, both councils resumed work, but this remained at an early stage. In Montenegro, the first session was largely

constitutive, focused on electing CSO leadership within the council and did not result in substantive decisions, though it was viewed as a positive signal. In North Macedonia, the council met regularly throughout 2025 and saw improved dialogue, the establishment of joint working groups, and commitments from government counterparts, although engagement has so far been largely consultative and promise-driven rather than outcome-oriented. In Serbia, civil society representatives suspended participation in the civil society council and other formal cooperation mechanisms with the legislative and executive authorities. They stated that ongoing deviations from democratic standards and the rule of law undermined the value of their engagement.⁸⁵

Consultation and participation in decision-making processes across the Western Balkans remained inconsistent, with wide differences in how meaningfully civil society was engaged. In **Albania**, a draft Law on Lobbying was presented as a step toward greater transparency in policymaking. However, CSOs raised concerns that its broad definition of lobbying, in the absence of clear exemptions for public-interest advocacy, could impose disproportionate obligations and constrain their participation in policy processes.⁸⁶ **Kosovo** demonstrated meaningful CSO involvement through consultations on the establishment of a 24/7 emergency hotline for survivors of gender-based violence,⁸⁷ formally operated by a licensed NGO. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** saw civil society engagement in socio-economic reforms, including advocacy on minimum wage subsidies,⁸⁸ alongside limited but constructive participation through informal labour law consultations and institutional dialogue.⁸⁹ **North Macedonia** conducted consultations around the drafting of the new

77. https://safejournalists.net/incidents/?lang=en&keyword&country&gender&type_of_incident&life_threat_type&other_threat_type&physical_attack_type&organisation_threat_type&organisation_attack_type&incident_means&incident_year&who_was_attacked&were_authorities_informed&by_whom&perpetrator&judiciary_status&type_of_violation&ja_reaction&ja_was_informed

78. <https://balkanecsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/63-3-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2024.pdf>

79. <https://rcgo.mk/vesti/sprovedeni-konsultacii-za-predlog-strategijata-na-vladata-za-sorabotka-so-i-razvoj-na-graganskoto-opshtestvo-i-akciskiot-plan-2025-2028/>

80. <https://civilnodrustvo.ba/usvojena-strategija-vmih-za-stvaranje-podsticajnog-okruzenja-za-razvoj-civilnog-drustva>

81. <https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk/?q=mk%2Fnode/1050>

82. <https://resourcecentre.al/open-letter-on-the-assessment-of-the-roadmap-for-government-policy-towards-an-enabling-environment-for-civil-society-development-2019-2023-and-the-drafting-of-the-roadmap-for-the-per/>

83. <https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk/?q=mk%2Fnode%2F1040&utm>

84. <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/zapocelo-sa-radom-savjet-za-saradnju-organa-drzavne-uprave-i-nevladinih-organizacija>

85. <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbian-civil-society-breaks-ties-with-authorities>

86. https://www.partnersalbania.org/News/comments-and-recommendations-on-the-draft-law-on-lobbying/?fbclid=IwZxh0bgNhZW0CMTEAc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQKJyYODU2ODM3OQABHgE2F9z4bHkQSoTr3kw9eQw4BWRBTBISqCFFGEKQlk2Yx6Kc-yOzEUcTJDGb_aem_XhYm9SbRaHg_gf7UBa93cA

87. <https://www.ocnal.com/2025/02/kosovo-government-approves-emergency.html>

88. https://civilnodrustvo.ba/minimalac-od-1000-km-da-uz-subvencije-za-civilni-sektor/?fbclid=IwZxh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2hUcuMbERUg4FgxZojAWnxnF1_768cLm5BE6D3bWIN9ruo4I9IkWRYDYl_aem_WfjPcrB3llpZooX2c0AXw

89. <https://www.federalna.ba/pocetak-neformalnih-javnih-konsultacija-o-novom-zakonu-o-radu-draft-zakona-dostupan-od-ponedjeljka-k8oto>

civil society strategy.⁹⁰ In **Montenegro**, consultations on the new Law on NGOs were procedurally weak and poorly timed, and expanded oversight provisions raised concerns about increased administrative pressure on CSOs.⁹¹ In **Serbia**, the process of selecting members of the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM Council) was marked by repeated legal and procedural violations, opaque criteria, and political interference, significantly limiting public access to information and meaningful participation in media governance.⁹²

Across the region, CSOs are formally included in EU accession processes through various consultation mechanisms and advisory bodies. Within this broader framework, **Montenegro** and **Albania**, as candidate countries with accession negotiations underway, have different arrangements for CSO participation. This includes the EU–Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee and the establishment of the EU–Albania Joint Consultative Committee, allowing CSOs to monitor the path of Albania towards the EU, and to adopt recommendations to the government of Albania and the EU institutions.⁹³ In Montenegro, the JCC has functioned as an effective and constructive platform, with strong EU engagement and meaningful inclusion of civil society priorities, though implementation of recommendations has varied in practice, reflecting differences in institutional follow-up and coordination. In Albania, the JCC is still at an early stage, but it has provided a structured forum for dialogue and monitoring of accession-related reforms, with its impact on implementation yet to be seen. In its EU accession process, **Montenegro** provisionally closed five negotiating chapters,⁹⁴ with CSOs participating in the consultations,⁹⁵ while **Albania** reached a key milestone by opening all remaining EU negotiating

chapters in 2025.⁹⁶ However, concerns were raised that negotiation clusters opened rapidly and reform timelines tightened faster than domestic democratic consolidation.⁹⁷

Legal and procedural barriers to accessing public information persisted across the region, with bureaucratic obstacles and limited transparency constraining informed civic participation. Access to public information in **North Macedonia** deteriorated despite formal improvement measures, including the Justice Ministry's adoption of an internal procedure. The state-funded Agency for Access to Public Information, responsible for ensuring public institutions follow transparency rules, reported receiving 500 complaints by late September 2025 about institutions failing to respond to requests. This is higher than the 354 complaints recorded in all of 2024. In practice, institutions increasingly failed to respond to requests, while proposed legal amendments, such as new restrictions on the re-use of open data, risked further limiting access, raising concerns about transparency and public trust.⁹⁸ In **Montenegro**, a proposed amendment to the Law on Free Access to Information — requiring each party to bear its own legal costs in cases of administrative silence — prompted strong opposition from civil society and calls for MPs to reject the change.⁹⁹

In **Serbia**, GONGOs weakened independent civic engagement by posing as independent actors during consultations on the Law on Court Fees and promoting narratives against critical CSOs.¹⁰⁰ Their attempts to claim representation during protests without authorisation,¹⁰¹ led student groups to distance themselves from GONGOs while continuing to support independent civil society.¹⁰²

Safe space

The abrupt termination of USAID funding under the Trump administration led to regional “foreign agent” disinformation campaigns that fundamentally altered

the landscape for civic actors across the Western Balkans. This provided domestic authorities, political parties, and the media with unprecedented ammunition

90. <https://rcgo.mk/vesti/sprovedeni-konsultacii-za-predlog-strategijata-na-vladata-za-sorabotka-so-i-razvoj-na-graganskoto-opshtestvo-i-akciskiot-plan-2025-2028/>

91. <https://institut-alternativa.org/ia-komentari-na-nacrt-zakona-o-nvo>

92. <https://www.gradjanske.org/grubo-krsenje-zakona-o-elektronskim-medijima-u-procesu-izbora-saveta-rem-a/>

93. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/sections-other-bodies/other/eu-albania-joint-consultative-committee>

94. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-montenegro-provisionally-close-another-five-chapters-accession-negotiations-2025-12-16_en

95. <https://www.gov.me/clanak/gorcevic-u-brislu-uspjesno-prosirenje-zahitjeva-otvorenost-saradnju-i-ucescje-cijelog-drustva>

96. <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/11/17/albania-open-eu-accession-negotiations/>

97. <https://balkaninsight.com/2026/01/02/albania-in-the-eu-fast-lane-accelerating-without-democratising/>

98. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/10/08/open-data-bill-in-north-macedonia-triggers-new-transparency-concerns>

99. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iPQOt5xt9aFHNbnt44CXJsemkklS33MFyJLgS_fk/edit?tab=t.0

100. <https://pescanik.net/zatvor-i-takse/>

101. Serbia's 2024–2025 anti-corruption protests, led by students after the Novi Sad railway canopy collapse that killed 15 people in November 2024, involved more than 80 faculty occupations and over 400 nationwide blockades against state capture. Students rejected GONGOs who falsely claimed to be representative during these actions.

102. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/12/30/how-student-protesters-spurned-serbias-demonised-civil-society/>

to portray independent CSOs and critical media as illegitimate extensions of Western interference. It culminated most notably in Serbia's police raids on five prominent organisations in February. Serbian authorities carried out warrantless inspections and administrative harassment, explicitly citing the Trump administration's statements condemning USAID. This establishes a dangerous precedent that reverberated regionally as governments from Skopje to Sarajevo amplified similar narratives to delegitimise domestic watchdogs.

In 2025, civic space was marked by pervasive physical violence, sophisticated digital campaigns, judicial persecution, and institutional intimidation operating with near-total impunity. Judicial processes became weapons of attrition across several jurisdictions. For example, in the *Sahrana demokratije* case in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, artists in Banja Luka were prosecuted for symbolic protest, despite police witnesses confirming no disturbance, and secured only partial relief on appeal after prolonged legal battles. In **Montenegro**, a complaint to the Ombudsman revealed that the Clinical Centre of Montenegro leaked the personal data of Ana Raičković, a journalist from the *Pobjeda* newspaper. Additionally, Jelena Jovanović, a journalist with *Vijesti*, who has been under constant protection since 2021 because of her reporting on organised crime, faced death threats. These assaults on media workers were condemned by professional associations.

Albania experienced increasingly sophisticated AI-driven digital attacks¹⁰³ targeting gender equality advocates, while **North Macedonia** saw journalists subjected to unauthorised surveillance¹⁰⁴ prompting professional unions to demand urgent investigation. In March, the government of North Macedonia launched a tender for a 24/7 media monitoring service covering traditional and online media and social networks, including sentiment analysis and AI analytics. Although presented as a policy-support tool, journalists and civil society warned that its features resemble surveillance mechanisms, potentially increasing pressure on critical outlets and encouraging self-censorship in an already fragile media environment.

Journalists recorded over 30 incidents against media workers region-wide, predominantly verbal and online threats, yielding zero prosecutions across all jurisdictions. **Serbia** represented the region's most acute safe space collapse, manifesting through systematic state violence,¹⁰⁵ technological surveillance,¹⁰⁶ and gendered terror against dissenters.¹⁰⁷ Over 1,000 protest-related arrests since November 2024 incorporated sonic weapon deployment during Belgrade demonstrations in March, triggering the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to issue interim measures prohibiting their use.¹⁰⁸ Police brutality escalated when detainees were forced to kneel against a wall, prompting human rights concerns and warnings that this may constitute degrading treatment under international standards.¹⁰⁹ Despite SNS supporters hurling scalding liquids at protesters, the violence was not investigated. State surveillance weaponised commercial spyware and Cellebrite forensic extraction tools against activists. Gendered violence peaked when Nikolina Sindjelic was doxed (her private photos weaponised online), compounded with direct rape threats by police colonel Marko Kričak, and through retaliatory lawsuits.

Identity politics were systematically weaponised against the most vulnerable civic actors to vilify them. Anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns in **North Macedonia** generated death threats against youth programs, false paedophilia accusations against artists exhibiting childhood photos, and rape threats against feminist activists. Disinformation campaigns in **Albania** eroded legislative support for gender equality reforms, feminists in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** faced coordinated backlash and harassment, and in **Montenegro**, transgender activists' residences were marked with homophobic graffiti while women journalists endured vicious physical assaults. On a positive note, the **Kosovo** government approved an administrative instruction that establishes a 24/7 emergency hotline for victims of domestic violence, violence against women, and gender-based violence, aimed at providing immediate, confidential support and rapid referral to relevant protection and support services.¹¹⁰

Across the Western Balkans, femicide remains a significant challenge, with institutions grappling with

¹⁰³. <https://birm.eu.com/news-and-events/vulnerable-groups-bear-brunt-of-digital-rights-violations-in-balkans-conference-hears/>

¹⁰⁴. <https://znm.org.mk/en/ajm-and-ssnm-suspicions-of-wiretapping-of-journalists-need-to-be-fully-clarified/>

¹⁰⁵. <https://vreme.com/en/vesti/evropske-ngo-alarmanje-razmere-drzavnog-nasilja-u-srbiji/>

¹⁰⁶. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-10-2025-000686_EN.html

¹⁰⁷. <https://en.vijesti.me/world-a/balkan/770899/Sindjelic-Kricak-slapped-me-and-hit-my-head-against-the-wall--he-said-he-was-going-to-rape-me-in-front-of-everyone->

<https://www.dw.com/bs/slu%C4%8Daj-nikoline-sin%C4%91eli%C4%87-privatne-fotografije-kao-oru%C5%BEje/a-73730240>

¹⁰⁸. <https://crra.rs/en/the-european-court-of-human-rights-statement-regarding-the-alleged-use-of-sonic-weapons-during-the-protest/>

¹⁰⁹. <https://n1info.rs/english/news/human-rights-lawyer-serbia-could-face-accountability-over-video-of-arrested-people-kneeling/>

¹¹⁰. <https://www.ocna.com/2025/02/kosovo-government-approves-emergency.html>

legal and enforcement gaps. In **North Macedonia**, at least six women were killed January to November 2025,¹¹¹ sparking protests and criticism that institutions fail to adequately assess risk and protect women despite growing awareness and preparatory monitoring mechanisms. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, recent femicides, including the high-profile killing of Aldina Jahić in Mostar, a young woman active in civil society,¹¹² have highlighted ongoing legal and enforcement gaps, even as the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's parliament moves to recognise femicide as a distinct aggravated offence. Both countries face challenges in strengthening laws and ensuring effective preventive and protective measures. In **Montenegro**, expert discussions in early 2025 stressed the need to define femicide as a distinct criminal offense to strengthen legal protection and prevention.¹¹³

Digital surveillance compounded physical threats region-wide, with the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) documenting 1,440 violations. In **Albania**, phishing scams, impersonation attempts, and false health alerts circulated widely online. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** saw inflammatory online rhetoric by political leaders and coordinated election-related disinformation. In **Kosovo**, AI-generated content and misleading posts targeting political figures and international agreements spread rapidly.

Montenegro experienced spikes in hate speech and online harassment, including attacks on journalists covering corruption. In **North Macedonia**, cultural events triggered ethnic slurs, while manipulated videos and memes promoted conspiracy narratives. In **Serbia**, online hostility, including death threats linked to protests and campaigns targeting minority groups, remained prevalent.¹¹⁴ No governments issued condemnations, initiated credible investigations, secured prosecutions, or established protective mechanisms —neither emergency helplines for threatened CSO workers and families, nor dedicated resilience capacity funding.

These relentless pressures inflicted profound, measurable damage on civic infrastructure throughout the Western Balkans. Self-censorship muted investigative journalism and human rights advocacy, psychological trauma drove widespread activist burnout and relocations, protracted legal defences consumed organisational budgets, and institutional reprisals chilled solidarity networks. Pride events were cancelled under security threats, feminist organisations shifted from policy advocacy to survival mode, and journalists weighed publication against personal safety. The complete absence of positive initiatives entrenched a vicious cycle where unchecked aggression dismantled civic resilience region-wide.

¹¹¹. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/femicid-nasilstvo-zheni/33635209.html>

¹¹². <https://n1info.ba/english/news/mostar-woman-murdered-after-receiving-prior-threats-from-suspect-authorities-confirm/>

¹¹³. https://www.undp.org/montenegro/news/expert-discussion-femicide?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹¹⁴. <https://birn.eu.com/news-and-events/turning-data-into-stories-digitalrights-and-freedoms-at-the-crossroads/>

Recommendations

TARGETED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ **Urgently integrate civic space as a binding accession benchmark, incorporating indicators such as SLAPPs and AML/CFT misuse into the fundamental rights cluster and linking progress to clear minimum standards.**
- ➔ **Immediately institutionalise systematic and meaningful consultation processes, ensuring mandatory, structured CSO participation in EU integration and reform agendas through functional mechanisms across countries.**
- ➔ Ensure the effective legal protection of freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, with consistent implementation and safeguards against selective enforcement.
- ➔ Urgently repeal restrictive legislation, put an end to “foreign agent” narratives, and align national legal frameworks with international human rights standards to prevent the stigmatisation and control of civil society.
- ➔ Introduce legal protections against smear campaigns targeting CSOs and activists, particularly in countries where such practices are increasingly used to silence dissent.
- ➔ Prevent GONGO infiltration and safeguard the integrity of civil society representation in consultation, funding, and policymaking processes.
- ➔ Adopt and effectively implement anti-SLAPP legislation across the region, aligned with EU and Council of Europe standards, to stop the misuse of litigation against journalists and activists.
- ➔ Apply a proportionate, risk-based AML/CFT approach, ensuring CSOs’ access to banking and financial services without undue restrictions or blanket risk classifications.
- ➔ Strengthen civil society resilience through coordinated donor and CSO action: donors should expand core, flexible, and long-term funding and coordinate exits transparently with local partners, while CSOs should diversify funding sources, strengthen constituencies, and assert their role as independent democratic actors beyond service delivery.

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025



About European Civic Forum

The European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of more than 100 associations and NGOs across 30 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 levels, and analyses trends. 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 and alerts European and international institutions when rights are at risk.

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