



2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

NORTH MACEDONIA
OCTOBER 2022



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For North Macedonia

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NORTH MACEDONIA

Capital: Skopje
Population: 2,130,936
GDP per capita (PPP): \$15,800
Human Development Index: High (0.770)
Freedom in the World: Partly Free (67/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 3.6



Throughout 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a severe impact on socio-economic and political life in North Macedonia. To limit the spread of the virus, the government imposed and lifted various measures in response to different waves of the virus. Notably, health certificates showing that you were either vaccinated, had tested negative, or had recently recovered from COVID became mandatory for entering restaurants, malls, and other public spaces, and for organizing and participating in public indoor and outdoor events. By December 2021, approximately 40 percent of the population was fully vaccinated. The relatively low vaccination rate spurred the continuation of pandemic restrictions, while businesses suffered from high rates of absenteeism, further hampering economic recovery. In this context, civil society actors continued to provide targeted support to their constituencies, especially marginalized segments of the population, such as the elderly, disabled, impoverished people, and minorities.

Near the end of the year, political events and government reshuffles affected the country. An alliance between the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) had governed the country since parliamentary elections in July 2020. However, in local elections in late October 2021, SDSM lost control in nearly all major cities, including in the capital Skopje, winning only sixteen municipalities compared to the forty-two municipalities won by the opposition party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democracy Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). In the aftermath of this loss, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned from all political posts, triggering a reshuffle within the SDSM-DUI governing alliance. This brought policy-making processes in the country to a stalemate, hindering CSOs' work.

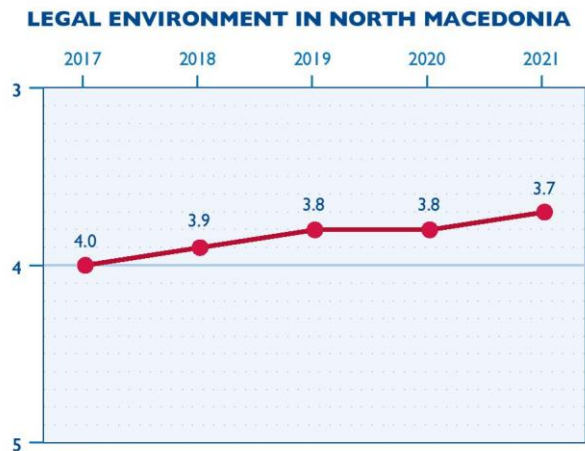
North Macedonia's long-standing attempts to join the European Union (EU) continued to be stymied in 2021, as Bulgaria continued to veto the opening of EU accession negotiations due to unresolved disputes over language and history. This veto negatively impacted the public's interest and trust in the EU enlargement process. As North Macedonia celebrated thirty years of independence, the country held its first population census since 2002, gathering information on the population size, ethnic and religious affiliations, and more.

In 2021, overall CSO sustainability in North Macedonia remained largely unchanged. A slight improvement in the legal environment balanced out a slight deterioration in financial viability. The legal environment governing the sector improved with the adoption of new strategies and other legislative changes, while financial viability was negatively impacted by a decrease in state funding. All other dimensions remained unchanged. CSOs continued to engage in wide-ranging advocacy and service provision efforts in 2021, despite the decline in financial viability and the ongoing pandemic restrictions.

According to data provided by the Central Registry of North Macedonia (CRNM), a total of 14,395 organizations were registered in the country as of the end of 2021, 8,725 of which were active. These figures indicate a huge

increase of registered organizations, rising from 10,812 in 2020. However, the data publicly listed by CRNM continues to lack precision and should be considered with caution, especially given the apparent volatility of the numbers.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 3.7



In 2021, the legal environment in which CSOs operate in North Macedonia improved slightly with the adoption of several strategies and other legislative changes.

The 2010 Law on Associations and Foundations (LAF) continues to provide a relatively clear and enabling framework for the operation of associations and foundations, defining requirements for organizational governance, reporting obligations, and other aspects of CSOs' work. The process to register a CSO continues to be generally fast and easy to complete.

In 2021, the Ministry of Justice announced plans to amend the LAF in accordance with the government's Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of Civil Society. The planned changes would affect the public benefit status of CSOs, the definition of political

activities, distribution and monitoring of state funding to CSOs, income-generating activities, public-private partnerships, and informal groups. However, working groups to define and propose specific changes to the LAF had not been initiated by the end of the year.

Several other reforms of the statutory framework have also been long expected, although an apparent lack of political will or the government's lower prioritization of civil society matters continues to cause delays. For example, although changes to the Law on Donations and Sponsorship of Public Activities were anticipated, none were introduced in 2021. A working group, including CSO representatives, was created to reform state financing for CSOs, but the process was notably delayed and the working group only began to meet in 2022.

Positive developments in 2021 included the adoption of new government strategies affecting the sector. The new Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of CSOs was adopted at the end of 2021 and covers 2022–2024. The National Strategy for Promotion and Development of Volunteering 2021–2025, adopted in September 2021, protects the rights of volunteers, promotes volunteering, and requires the state to support CSOs' and other public institutions' efforts to engage more volunteers, while providing the necessary infrastructure. Civil society actors were actively consulted throughout the drafting process for both of these strategies and most of their suggestions were adopted.

Civil society also claimed small victories in 2021 as its input was incorporated into several draft laws. First, the working group amending the Criminal Code accepted changes proposed by CSOs, according to which CSO legal representatives would no longer be treated as public officials, and thus would not be subject to criminal proceedings for "abuse of official position and authorization." Second, the draft Law on Civil Procedures establishes a special procedure for protecting collective rights, such as equality, environmental rights, and consumer rights, and gives specialized CSOs legal standing to initiate such procedures on behalf of their constituencies or target groups. Finally, CSOs' suggestions in the working group reviewing the Law on Volunteering received substantial consideration. Proposed changes ease the administrative obligations for setting up and running volunteering programs. While not yet formally adopted, these draft laws are all expected to have a positive impact on the CSO sector.

In another positive development in 2021, the government adopted a report on targeted risk assessment, the first of its kind to equally include CSOs in its methodology. The report found that 87 percent of the CSOs in North Macedonia present a very low risk of financing terrorism.

On the other hand, new provisions introduced in 2021 to the Law on Protection of Personal Data and the Law on Prevention of Money-Laundering and Financing of Terrorism complicated the work of CSOs. Misinformation

regarding the date on which the requirements arising from the Law on Protection of Personal Data go into effect caused uncertainty throughout the CSO sector. In addition, meeting these requirements, which are intended to align with European data protection standards, could impose costs disproportionate to the size and capacities of some CSOs. However, the concrete provisions of the law and implications for CSOs remain to be seen.

Simultaneously, provisions of the Law on Prevention of Money-Laundering and Financing of Terrorism imposed additional administrative burdens on CSOs, including the requirement to provide detailed information on their ownership structure. Failing to register a “real owner” in a timely manner can result in high fines. Cooperation with the Financial Intelligence Unit improved CSOs’ understandings of their obligations under the law, helping many CSOs avoid possible penalties. CSOs also developed closer working relations with banks in addressing these new requirements in 2021, which was important as banking rules for CSOs have been broadly considered unfavorable.

There were no reports of state harassment of CSOs in 2021. As in previous years, CSOs face no legal restrictions on their ability to access various funding sources, including economic activities, fundraising campaigns, foreign donors, or government procurement tenders.

The Law on Donations and Sponsorship in Public Activities continued to provide CSOs with exemptions from value-added tax (VAT) on foreign grants and domestic donations. Income derived from sources other than economic activities is exempt from profit tax. CSOs’ economic activities are subject to a preferential tax rate of 1 percent of the total generated revenues from economic activity in the calendar year on amounts that exceed MKD 1 million (EUR 16,260). Volunteer costs are also exempt from the personal income tax.

The Civil Society Resource Center and the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) continued providing legal support to CSOs around the country in 2021. Of particular importance was MYLA’s free legal advice clarifying the legal provisions regarding real owner registration.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 3.6

Organizational capacity of the CSO sector in North Macedonia remained largely unchanged in 2021.

Though the international donor community acknowledges the CSO sector’s need for capacity building, limited support is available for institutional and strategic development, such as financing the drafting of strategic documents, facilitating long-term strategic planning, or targeted staff training. In 2021, the Swiss-funded Civica Mobilitas program provided a few core grants. The Balkan Civil Society Development Network’s Regional Civil Society Development Hub and the mentorship programs through the EU’s Technical Assistance to CSOs in the Western Balkans and Turkey (TACSO) bolstered the capacities of CSOs with a focus on strategic development and capacity for strategic advocacy.

CSOs continued to provide targeted support to those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. This positively affected their relationships with constituents and the wider community, though not as strongly as it had in the first year of the pandemic, as the need for targeted assistance in response to the pandemic decreased and the situation became accepted as the new norm.

While most CSOs have strategic plans, as in 2020, financial limitations continued to shift CSOs’ focus away from building their long-term capacities and implementing their strategies. Instead, CSOs focus on pursuing donor-driven projects, which sometimes are not even related to their missions, in order to ensure their survival.

According to CRNM data, the number of CSOs continues to grow while the number of people employed in the sector remains almost exactly the same: 2,391 in 2020 and 2,398 in 2021. CSO staffing continued to be a problem

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN N. MACEDONIA

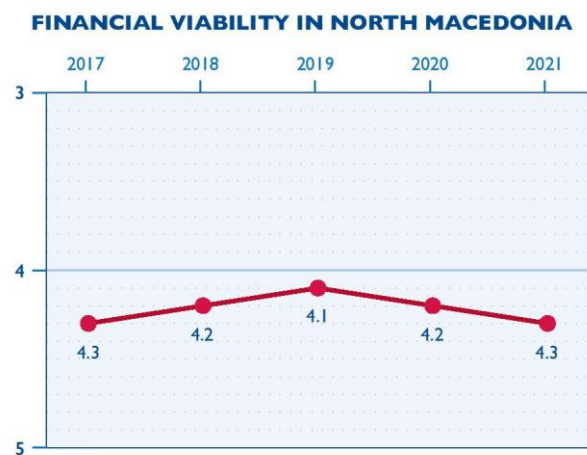


within the sector, especially at the local level, where it is difficult to find qualified staff. CSOs' lack of long-term financing and inability to provide competitive salaries makes it even more difficult for them to retain employees. The volatility of staffing has also hampered the institutionalization of work processes. For example, as managers have to perform many tasks simultaneously, organizations struggle to focus on their core activities. Few CSOs are able to operate with clearly divided internal management structures.

At the same time, employment in the civil society sector has become more attractive for university graduates. According to university professors, graduates' perceptions of CSOs have improved in recent years, as students, particularly those studying political science and law, have become more engaged in the sector.

After significant improvements in 2020, CSOs' use of digital information and communication tools became relatively standard in 2021. In addition to enabling work while complying with health restrictions on movement and public gatherings, the growth of technical capacities and new working methods offered new opportunities for advocacy. However, this increase in project outputs does not necessarily increase the visibility and effectiveness of civil society advocacy activities.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 4.3



The financial viability of the CSO sector deteriorated slightly in 2021 due to a further reduction of state funding for CSOs from both central and local budgets.

State funding for CSOs was reduced at both local and central levels in 2021 as the government continued to reallocate funds for COVID-19 relief and public institutions issued fewer calls for project proposals. Decisions about reducing and reallocating funding away from civil society were made without prior consultation with CSOs. In December 2021, for example, the government decided to limit the funding available under the budget line dedicated to CSOs. With this decision, the adopted budget for 2022 included just MKD 15 million (approximately \$257,000) in funding, all of which was provided directly to the North Macedonian Red

Cross. The CSO sector viewed this decision as a blow and further confirmation of the state's lack of interest in supporting its work.

At the local level, organizations also suffered from reduced public budgets, which especially impacted smaller CSOs. At the same time, however, funds for sport clubs and sport activities were not reduced, which was controversial, since both CSOs and sport clubs operate on the same legal basis and therefore receive funding from the same budget lines.

Many municipalities do not offer funding to CSOs. Those that do often lack prescribed procedures for distributing funds and award grants to CSOs in a non-transparent manner that may be politically motivated. For example, the municipality of Prilep issues annual calls for proposals, but has no criteria for the projects' evaluation and selection. In 2021, the municipality granted an equal amount of financial support to all organizations applying for funding, including non-existent organizations and projects without outlined activities.

Through the EU-funded Regional Program on Local Democracy in the Western Balkans (ReLoaD), implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), funding was offered to municipalities to develop a methodology for distributing state funds on the local level, according to which several municipalities opened calls for proposals in 2021. CSOs, however, see this as problematic, as it overrides the methodologies already developed with CSOs' support (although not practically implemented) in many of those municipalities.

Though the government's Code of Good Practices establishes clear procedural requirements, government consultation on sectoral funding priorities was limited in 2021, as was CSOs' involvement in the planning of projects and monitoring and evaluation processes.

The comprehensive reform of the framework for state funding to CSOs progressed slowly, as noted above, and working groups did not begin meeting until 2022. This reform constitutes an integral part of the government's Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of CSOs. According to the new strategy, as well as the strategy for the CSO-Government Council, central state funding should gradually increase until it accounts for 30 percent of CSOs' total revenue (or around MKD 2 million) by 2024. In the 2022 budget, which was adopted in 2021, state funding accounted for just 5 percent of CSOs' total revenue. The reform also aims to address the problems with the procedures for allocating funding.

In 2021, most CSOs continued to rely heavily on foreign support; in some cases, this drove CSOs to implement donor-driven agendas rather than focusing on their core missions. Larger organizations continued to have more access to longer-term funding support, while smaller organizations often relied on short-term funding. EU funding continued to be widely available, but its requirement for co-financing presents an obstacle for some organizations, especially since the state does not yet provide such co-financing support. Several organizations also reported that EU funding increasingly placed limits on the percentage of financial support available for salaries and human resources, in turn spurring organizations to hire external consultants rather than using and strengthening their own expertise and capacities. With funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Civica Mobilitas program continued to provide small grants at the local level. Other important sources of support for CSOs in the country include USAID through its Civic Engagement Project and the Local Works Program; the US Embassy Grants Program; and the Swedish, Dutch, the United Kingdom, and Norwegian governments.

Financial support from the business sector remained limited, at least partially stemming from the lack of a legal framework to enable and promote cooperation between the sectors. However, businesses were increasingly open to cooperation—for example, in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals—and providing non-financial support.

The first crowdfunding platform for CSOs was launched in North Macedonia in 2021, creating an alternative funding source for civil society. The eCrowd platform helps CSOs, especially newly emerging civil society actors, secure funding to implement activities. Several initiatives successfully garnered support through this platform during the year, most of which had a humanitarian character. For example, the Donate a Computer initiative secured enough funds to buy a vehicle to collect used computers from around the country, which it will then repair and donate to vulnerable groups of citizens.

In 2021, the USAID-funded Community Development Program, implemented by the Rural Development Network of North Macedonia, awarded institutional grants to four local action groups to support their efforts to mobilize local resources, including from the state, business sector, and citizens. The five-year program offers a sustainable model to catalyze locally-led development that can be replicated and scaled-up in compatible thematic sectors or geographic areas. The project aims to reinforce models of engaging local actors in the design and delivery of participatory solutions and resource allocation for the development of rural areas.

No significant changes were recorded in CSOs' financial management practices in 2021. The lack of staff with expertise in CSO financial management is a significant challenge for CSOs, especially at the local level. Very few accountants understand the specific nature and work of CSOs and are able to give guidance on donors' requirements and project-related finances and accounting. As a result, many organizations lack adequate systems and skills to comply with donors' requirements or meet financial management standards.

ADVOCACY: 3.2

CSO advocacy remained unchanged in 2021. Despite persisting difficulties caused by the pandemic and the largely pro-forma consultation of CSOs by public institutions, civil society actors took a proactive role in advocating for societal change in various domains.

Access to information is constitutionally guaranteed and operationalized by the Law on Free Access to Public Information. According to this law, all draft legislation should be published on the central ENER online platform; in 2021, however, only 41 percent of draft legislation was published on the portal (up from 34.3 percent in 2020). The ENER platform also offers civic activists the opportunity to submit legislative initiatives online, though this option was not used in 2021.

Civil society actors were only marginally involved in important consultation processes during the year. For instance, CSOs were not consulted regarding changes to election campaign financing regulations until very late in the process. In another example, the government announced that a report on state administration reform was prepared within an EU project, within which only closed debates were held without the participation of many stakeholders, including CSOs. After the report was presented, many CSOs pointed to a number of shortcomings and problems in the plan. Despite CSOs' demands that a consultative process on the report be opened, this did not happen by the end of the year.

In addition, consultations on the drafting of the Law on the Origin of Property were insufficiently participatory.

Although the drafting of this law was not included in any of the government's work programs for 2021, a working group was formed as part of a project implemented by the Council of Europe. The composition and activities of the working group were not publicly disclosed, and there is no public information on the process, despite the reactions of CSOs working on good governance and anti-corruption and demands for inclusion. Government cooperation with CSOs was particularly limited on human rights issues, and authorities' pledges to cooperate were often more declarative than genuine.

As part of the EU project Dialogue with CSOs – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integration, CSOs were able to participate in sectoral working groups to various extents depending on the ministry leading the groups. However, their impact on outcomes was marginal.

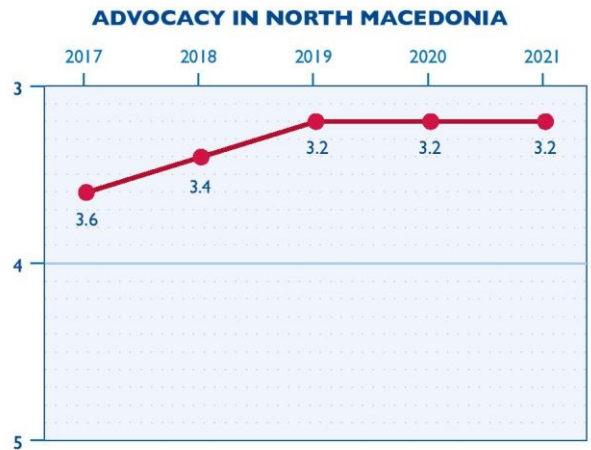
CSOs were substantially involved in the process of drafting the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Strategy for North Macedonia in 2021. The adopted strategy includes eleven commitments for the 2021–2023 action plan, including in the areas of anti-corruption, access to justice, public service delivery, and public transparency. This action plan will provide CSOs with a clear channel to work collectively with government institutions to influence policy outcomes on identified reform priorities.

At the local level, cooperation between government authorities and CSOs has not yet been institutionalized, so CSO involvement in policy making remains more limited. However, the Law on Youth Participation, adopted in 2020, had a positive impact at the local level in 2021. For example, it allowed activists to take part in local elections in several municipalities via civic lists of independent candidates. Two civic list representatives won enough votes to secure seats in the Skopje Council, ensuring broader representation at the local level and direct involvement in policy making.

The organization of the second civic budget forum for the City of Skopje, implemented by the association EDEN, provided citizens and civil society with an additional channel for advocacy and participation. Out of the thirty-three budget proposals coming out of the forum, five were adopted during 2021, after years of advocating for those issues. The City of Skopje also established a Green Council, based on the proposals of CSOs working in the environmental sector.

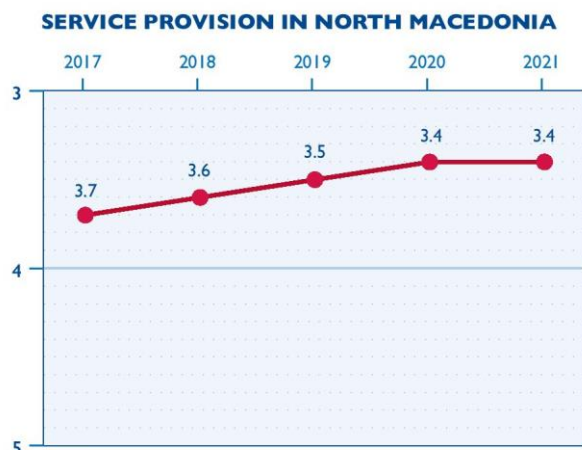
CSOs implemented several successful advocacy campaigns in 2021. For instance, CSOs successfully advocated to prevent changes to the Electoral Code that could damage independent civic lists; these efforts were successful to a great extent due to their proactive approach and media presence. CSOs in the environmental sector engaged in several joint initiatives; for example, the coalition Razbistri se advocated in favor of draft amendments proposed to the Law on Waters in 2021; these amendments were still pending at the end of the year. CSOs also succeeded in ensuring their exemption from provisions in the Law on Lobbying, concluding a campaign that started in 2020. Advocacy at the local level was also successful in several cases. For example, in Veles, the sector organized a public awareness campaign around gender-based violence, demanding a fair trial for a woman who was the victim of domestic violence and was being tried for murder committed in self-defense.

In the second half of 2021, CSOs actively participated in the drafting of the Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of CSOs for 2022–2024. The participatory process of developing the Strategy was initiated with an



open call for CSOs to submit proposals that were reviewed and approved by the Council of CSO-Government Cooperation. This was followed by public consultation events organized by the Civil Society Resource Center.

SERVICE PROVISION: 3.4



CSOs' service provision did not change notably in 2021. Despite declining financial support, civil society actors successfully provided services in various domains.

CSOs provide a broad range of services. In 2021, with state support, CSOs provided assistance to the elderly and those with disabilities and educational support in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. CSOs also received government support for projects on domestic violence and gender discrimination, protecting biodiversity, and humanitarian needs. The provision of humanitarian and social services through informal organizations also gained momentum. For example, the Retweet a Meal initiative, which also received support from the president of the country, provided food for homeless and socially disadvantaged people. Banka Za

Hrana, the Food Bank of North Macedonia, organized the massive #WeStandTogether initiative in August: in just eleven days, the Food Bank, together with twenty charities and over 200 volunteers, delivered 1,620 food packages, 6,480 protective masks, and 1,620 sanitizers to families across twenty municipalities in the country.

In addition to their core services, CSOs continued providing services to address community needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. As the measures to contain the pandemic continued throughout most of 2021, CSOs provided services both online and in person. Service providers followed the pandemic protocols in place, although they imposed some operational difficulties in ensuring broader access to their services.

According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, thirty-one new social service providers were licensed in 2021, up from just ten in 2020. Only licensed CSOs are eligible for state support in providing social services, although this is not guaranteed. For example, one of the newly licensed service providers, the crisis center Nadez, reported that it did not get any new funds after being licensed; as it had in the past, it received funding only through the national lottery, but this was insufficient to cover its total costs.

Social entrepreneurship initiatives also increased in 2021. The Fund for Innovation and Technological Development issued its first national call for social enterprises. Under this call, CSOs were eligible to submit business plans for providing services and pilot mechanisms for financing social enterprises. In September, the National Strategy for Development of Social Entrepreneurship in the Republic of North Macedonia 2021–2027 was adopted, after which the National Center for Support of Social Enterprises was established in Skopje. With these instruments, the infrastructure for social entrepreneurship improved significantly.

CSOs offer their services to individuals, other organizations, government institutions, and academia free of charge and without discrimination with regards to race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

CSOs typically are unable to generate revenue through service provision. As services are often linked to project activities and financed by foreign donors, CSOs provide them to their beneficiaries for free, even to those that are not at social risk.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 3.0

The infrastructure supporting the sector did not change significantly in 2021. As in 2020, while a number of entities provide support services to CSOs, these are largely funded by foreign donors, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of that support.

The EU-funded Civil Society Resource Center, which is implemented by the Macedonia Center for International Cooperation (MCIC), continued to provide information, consultations, training, free legal advice, and event management services to other CSOs, especially benefitting smaller CSOs. When EU project funding for the resource center ended in September 2021, MCIC used its own resources to ensure that the center could continue to pursue its mission and remain operational. The EU-funded TACSO 3 program continued to provide trainings on capacity development, the enabling environment, monitoring, visibility, and advocacy.

Several organizations continued to provide grants to local organizations. Civica Mobilitas awards institutional and small grants to local organizations, while UNDP launched the second phase of its ReLOaD project in September 2021. Some decrease has been noted in the level of re-granting under EU-funded projects.

Organizations focused on civil society development, such as the Foundation Open Society -Macedonia and the Civil Society Resource Center, continued to provide trainings to CSOs in 2021. As in 2020, trainings were primarily held online and were therefore widely available across the sector.

As in 2020, a wide range of CSOs cooperated during 2021 to achieve common goals. For example, the CSO Platform for the Fight against Corruption actively opposed the Law on Strategic Investments, which was adopted without any consultations, as well as the Law on Origin of Property and amendments to the Law on Preventing Corruption and Conflict of Interest. Other examples of coalitions engaged in joint actions include the Blueprint Group for Judicial Reform, the Network for Protection against Discrimination, and Voice against Violence (a coalition focused on protecting victims of domestic and gender-based violence). While these efforts have been successful to varying degrees, they demonstrate the close cooperation among organizations working in these areas.

CSOs also continued to participate in joint initiatives with actors from other sectors. For example, the initiative Nasa Tezga—the first rural women’s e-market—was developed and promoted by an intersectoral partnership involving CSOs, the business sector, media, municipalities, and other local and national public institutions. Through the USAID-supported Partnerships for Giving project, Konekt provides valuable assistance to CSOs to team up with the business sector, utilize the expertise of companies, and ultimately establish long-term partnerships.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN N. MACEDONIA



PUBLIC IMAGE: 4.3

PUBLIC IMAGE IN NORTH MACEDONIA



The sector’s public image remained largely unchanged in 2021.

As in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society actors were in high demand as interlocutors and expert commentators on different media formats, though the frequency of their public appearances decreased slightly in 2021. The media also provided positive coverage of civil society’s involvement in several local and national level working groups, in addition to their cooperation with local enterprises and other actors.

A recent survey by the Southeast Europe Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI) coalition assessed the public’s perception on corruption and trust in institutions. According to the survey, 47 percent of respondents consider CSO representatives to be corrupt, putting CSOs among the four least corrupted

occupations, with only journalists, bankers, and teachers considered less corrupt. On the other hand, over 75 percent of the public considers judges, ministers, and members of parliament to be corrupt.

Media continued to be an important tool for CSOs to not only pursue their advocacy activities, but also to promote the visibility of their missions and work. In 2021, CSOs led several comprehensive, multi-channel outreach campaigns. For example, through the USAID-funded Civic Engagement Project, the NGO Info Center organized a comprehensive information campaign on the importance of the 2021 census. The Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje continuously campaigned in favor of anti-corruption and parliamentary oversight through a bilingual social media campaign with informative content, as well as radio messaging and web-platform marketing. However, the overall visibility of CSOs' engagement continues to leave room for improvement, especially in promoting greater public understanding of CSOs' role in political and social processes.

The government's perception of CSOs remained satisfactory, and many public institutions continued to recognize CSOs' role and participation in public affairs. However, anti-CSO campaigns from select political parties remained a challenge in 2021. One political party, Levica, continued its calls for the "de-Sorosization" of the country and the civil society sector and led a defamation campaign in 2021, particularly targeting the Health Education and Research Association (HERA) and its work. Negative discussions around civil society activists also circulated on social media and in closed chat groups.

In 2021, fifty-one CSOs joined together to sign the first CSO Code of Conduct for North Macedonia; by the end of the year, over sixty organizations had signed it. This CSO-led initiative identified recommendations for action and aims to safeguard the quality of the sector's activities and output. The document was adopted on a voluntary basis, demonstrating CSOs' willingness to uphold high transparency and accountability standards, and aims to simultaneously increase the public's trust in the sector moving forward.

Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

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