

BCSDN

ANNUAL REPORT 2023

BCSDN ONLINE DISCUSSION

**DEFENDING
CIVIL
SPACE**

Democracy
Riding the
Bus of Change

BCSDN BLOG POST FARA
INITIATIVES IN THE REGION

**BACK TO THE ROOTS
DEMOCRACY**

Monitoring
Enabling Environment
Civil Society Development

Empowering civil society
in the EU, Western
Balkans & Türkiye

donor
strategies
in a time of
paradigm
shift

The Donors
are in the
Balkans

Explaining Western

Podcast Series by BCSDN
Episode 5: How (not) to lose the Balkans in 10 days?

**EMPOWER CIVIL
EU MOMENTUM**

**ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
DEVELOPMENT**

FEBRUARY 2024

BCSDN ANNUAL REPORT 2023

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II ABOUT BCSDN

The Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) is a regional network of local civil society development organisations (CSOs) from the Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey).

Its **VISION** is sustainable peace, harmony, and prosperity of societies in the Balkan region.

Its **MISSION** is to empower civil society and influence European and national policies towards a more enabling environment for civil society development in order to ensure sustainable and functioning democracies in the Balkans.

BCSDN's **GOALS and OBJECTIVES** are:

1. Increased role of civil society by strengthening its voice in policy- and decision-making process on national, regional and EU level;
2. Promoted civil dialogue between civil society actors, state institutions and the European Union in order to influence public policy;
3. Developed advocacy knowledge and skills of civil society actors as a base for achieving greater impact; and
4. Strengthened communication, coordination, and cooperation between civil society actors in the Balkan region.

BCSDN is a registered foundation under the Macedonian Law on Citizens Associations and Foundations (Official Gazette of RM No. dated 31/98 and 29/2007) as of 30th September 2009 with the Decision no. 3012009172866 of the Central Register of the Republic of North Macedonia (CRNM). BCSDN's identification number is 6524710 and the tax identification number is 4057009503419.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

BCSDN consists of 13 partner organisations, which are equal in their rights and duties as members of the network, and one consultative member organization. Principles of cooperation, partnership, tolerance, dialogue, and respect for others are the main working principles in the network.



The network organs consist of the Council, the Board, the Executive Office, and the Executive Director.

The Council is the highest organ of BCSDN and is composed of one authorised representative per each organisation with member status. The Council is chaired by the Chairperson of the Council, who are selected on an annual, rotating basis.

The Board is the governing and supervisory organ body of BCSDN. It consists of six to eight members: Chairperson of the Board, Deputy Chairperson of the Board and four to six members. The mandate of the Board members is 3 years. The current Board mandate has started on September 1st, 2023, and its members are the following:

1. Tina Divjak (Slovenia)
2. Taulant Hoxha (Kosovo)
3. Aida Daguda (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
4. Klotilda Kosta (Albania)
5. Rana Kotan (Turkey)
6. Maja Stojanovic (Serbia)
7. Snezana Kamilovska Trpevska (North Macedonia)

Ms. Maja Stojanovic from Civic Initiatives and Ms. Snezhana Kamilovska Trpovska from the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC) have been elected to the BCSDN Board, bringing extensive experience in civil society, advocacy, policy analysis, and good governance. They will contribute to BCSDN's mission of promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance in the Balkans.

The Executive Office in Skopje, North Macedonia, manages the daily functioning and coordination of the network.

The Executive Director is the major administrative and financial official and represents BCSDN with other institutions, networks, and donors. The Executive Director is appointed by the Board and participates in Council and Board sessions without the right to vote. As of September 1st, 2020, BCSDN's Executive Director is Biljana Spasovska. Following the internal network's procedures, in 2023, Ms. Spasovska was re-elected as a BCSDN Executive Director for additional 3 years mandate.

III STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND RESULTS

The latest mid-term strategy of BCSDN was adopted in 2021 after thorough discussions and comprehensive assessment of the realization of the objectives from the 2017-2020 strategy. The 2021-2024 Strategy outlines the following objectives:

1. To facilitate a common understanding of the enabling environment for civil society development and a recognition of its role in the sustainable development of the region and its accession into the EU;
2. To strengthen CSO capacities and their place in functioning democracies;
3. To increase the collaboration and the recognition of the network with and among the core stakeholders;
4. To improve the functioning, communication, and collaboration of the network.

TARGET GROUP & AREA

BCSDN target group are CSOs working on civil society development (CSDev) in the Balkan region. The direct beneficiaries are local civil society development and resource organisations. With its activities, the network targets stakeholders such as national institutions and international governmental organisations (IGOs). Among national institutions, the focus is on national public bodies and/or offices for cooperation with CSOs in member countries. Among IGOs, in focus are the EU institutions, Council of Europe, the Regional Cooperation Council, the Western Balkan Fund and related inter-governmental initiatives in the Balkan region. BCSDN promotes the principle of inclusiveness of marginalised and vulnerable groups in the society (incl. Roma community, inhabitants of rural areas). BCSDN works in countries of the Balkan region, Europe and internationally, according to its mission, vision, and goals.

1. FACILITATING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND A RECOGNITION OF ITS ROLE IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION AND ITS ACCESSION INTO THE EU

One of BCSDN main objectives is to increase the understanding among the wider audience that for civil society to be effectively tackling societal challenges, the existence of an environment that is enabling for its functioning and further development is essential. The strategic approach is to utilise the Monitoring Matrix (MM) as the framework for building consensus and for identifying key measures that need institutional consolidation. The MM findings have been the basis for BCSDN's advocacy and policy influence: conducted by BCSDN members on national level and conducted and coordinated by BCSDN on regional, EU and international level.

This strategic goal is set on three pillars: I. Monitoring the enabling environment; II. Promoting Civil Society as a Competent, Democratic Actor in the EU Accession Process and III. Promoting improved funding models that enable CSOs' work.

1.1. Monitoring and Promoting an Enabling Environment

MAIN OUTPUTS	MAIN OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Revised Monitoring Matrix methodology• Comprehensive reports on CSO Enabling Environment (6 national + 1 regional)• Regional multistakeholder workshop and policy paper on AML/CFT• Advocacy events in Brussels• 48 updates on civic space in WBT for the Civicus Monitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Monitoring Matrix is a powerful platform for advocacy on CSO enabling environment used by members.• Several policy changes on a national level attributed to the MM work.• Improved understanding of the EC on their role in promoting a more enabling environment, as reflected in key EC documents.• Improved understanding, cooperation, and commitment among key stakeholders on AML/CFT issues.• Increased understanding and engagement of civil society actors and donors in the region on SLAPPs.

Closing a 10-Year Cycle of the Monitoring Matrix

Staying true to our mission, in 2023 we concluded the process of revision of our flagship Monitoring Matrix on enabling environment for civil society development. The process of revision included 3 in-person workshops that took place in [Berlin](#), [Podgorica](#), and [Sarajevo](#), many online working meetings, and countless hours of dedicated work. The revised methodology, equally comprehensive, now reflects contemporary trends, particularly the digital civic space's expansion post-Covid-19, is tailored to respond to the ongoing challenges, and is more coherent due to the experience-based approach to the monitoring implementation that comes after a decade-long implementation. With this upgrade, the research process shall be even more reliable, relevant and efficient leading to a more effective advocacy process.



Closing the 10th annual monitoring cycle, [the Monitoring Matrix Regional Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society 2022](#) had its debut on March 1 in the Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) premises in Brussels. In addition to this, BCSDN organized a series of advocacy events between 1-3 March 2023, aimed towards Brussels-based stakeholders. The [BCSDN- EU DG Near Workshop: Going Back to the Roots of Democracy and Exploring Transformative CS Power in EU Accession Process](#) was one of those events. Presenting the comprehensive draft of monitoring findings and engaging in country-specific interventions enabled an invaluable exchange with representatives of DG NEAR and DG JUST. The EC participants showed particular concern about the rise of harmful practices towards freedom of association and expression such as SLAPPs and FARA draft laws. The interest shown by EC participants amplified in the upcoming months among the wider international community. The findings and recommendations presented by BCSDN at the workshop, have been reflected in the EC's Enlargement Strategy and Country Reports 2023

One example of the impact of BCSDN regional EU advocacy events on a national level has been the pressure exerted afterwards towards successful removal of harmful provisions primarily foreseen in the Law on Freedom of Access of Information (Fol) in Albania.

and in the IPA Civil Society Facility Call for Support to regional CSO Networks. In addition to this, at least one BCSDN member reported that concrete policy changes on a national level can be attributed to BCSDN's Brussels advocacy event.

The Monitoring Matrix report continued to serve as a valuable advocacy resource throughout 2023. Capitalizing on multiple opportunities, the research findings had been presented to relevant stakeholders such as the [TACSO 3 Regional Civil Society Forum](#) (31 May, Podgorica) or the [Council of Europe's First exchange of views with civil society](#) (15 September, Strasbourg), [The Global People's Assembly organized in light of the UN SDG Summit](#) and the [9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum organized by the EESC](#).

Topics in Focus (I): Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Terrorism-Financing

Among the many common challenges for civil society regionally, the 2023 monitoring findings highlighted anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML-CFT) regulations and practices as an increasing concern in all the WBT countries. To explore the topic in more detail, BCSDN conducted the [Regional AML/CFT Workshop: Multi-stakeholder Dialogue and Cooperation Key for Effective Policies and Regulations that Protect Civic Space](#) (26 April, Skopje) in cooperation with ECNL. The challenges, often arising from ill-implementation of international standards aimed to combat ML and FT, were presented in front of a multi-stakeholder audience, consisting of BCSDN member organizations, CSOs working on the topic, banking institutions and relevant public institutions representatives dealing with the AML/CFT regulations in all WB countries. The multi-stakeholder approach proved to be an effective means for strengthening the relationships among the relevant parties and creating a positive peer pressure on a regional level, which was evidenced by the commitments shared at the end of the workshop and feedback expressed.



The workshop enabled the deepening of the joint advocacy efforts of the CSO actors, [resulting in a joint reaction towards the Council of Europe](#) (CoE) regarding its latest report on the regional terrorism financing risk assessment of the not-for-profit sector in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. This effort, well received by the CoE stakeholders,

prompted an invitation for a meeting for further elaboration on the addressed concerns. The online [meeting](#) was attended by CSO representatives from BCSDN members and partners and key and high-level representatives of the Council of Europe, as well as representatives of MONEYVAL. The Council's representatives committed to a careful revision of the text to ensure that applying the report's recommendations for compliance purposes would not go against CSOs and their legitimate activities, as well as to a continuous dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.

BCSDN further amplified its advocacy efforts with the publishing of the policy paper [AML/CFT Regulations and Implications on CSOs in the Western Balkans and Türkiye](#) that discusses the application of international regulations and standards related to AML/CFT and analyzes their legal and practical implications on CSO operations in the WBT region. The paper is the first comprehensive research on the topic in the region and gives a strong evidence-base for targeted CSO advocacy efforts and comprehensive information for relevant policy and decision makers.

Topic in Focus (II): SLAPPs

Another critical area that the MM research in 2023 shone light on was the omnipresence of the SLAPP phenomenon throughout the region. Marking it as a potentially growing issue, BCSDN further actualized the problem of preventing public participation through strategic lawsuits against CSOs and activist. In that direction, the network put to use its resources in the mobilization of regional stakeholders by initiating a working group aimed to enable mutual learning and exchange, but also to enable further actions by making available financial resources for actions aimed to prevent the overspill.

Being highly aware that to be able to conduct effective activities to combat SLAPPs CSOs need a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, but also having in mind that resources available on the topic are severely limited, BCSDN started the process of developing in-depth research on SLAPPs in the Western Balkans. The comprehensive methodology for the regional research was co-created with member organizations and freedom of expression legal experts from the region who kindly and gladly contributed towards the mutual goal. BCSDN members initiated the research on the ground at the end of 2023, and the research products are expected to be published in spring 2024. All these efforts have resulted with increased understanding and engagement of civil society actors and donors in the region.

Regional Knowledge Exchange for Promoting CSO Enabling Environment: Open Call for Ad-hoc Research Support

The ad-hoc support as an instrument of the BCSDN Regional Civil Society Development Hub was initially established to respond to immediate threats to the civic space or windows of opportunity for promoting civil society development that enables CSOs to be influential actors in society. The revised ad-hoc support mechanism that was [launched](#) in April 2023 emphasized fostering knowledge sharing and evidence gathering among CSOs in the region. The revision aimed to tap into the power of regional exchange, facilitating learning transfer across countries to drive evidence-based advocacy for a more supportive civil society environment in the Western Balkans.

[Two research actions were supported](#) with an ad-hoc grant, the first assessing the implementation of EC guidelines for Economic Reform Program (ERP) preparation in WB countries, focusing on institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement and the lack of transparency of the process, and the other evaluating the philanthropic landscape in the WB6, uncovering a moderately favorable regulatory framework with persistent challenges in taxation policies and government-philanthropy relationships. Both papers provided concrete recommendations for fostering a more supportive environment for effective CSOs contribution to relevant processes in the WB.

Contribution to Global Monitoring and Advocacy

BCSDN's continued raising awareness about the regional civic space threats among the wider international community. Contributing towards the global civic space monitoring tool, the CIVICUS Monitor, which provides longitudinal data on the state of civic freedoms in over 140 countries worldwide. Conducting the monitoring for eight countries in the region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey), the team submitted 48 periodical updates and successfully advocated for Bosnia and Herzegovina to be put on CIVICUS Monitor's watch list and with that putting the local civil society's concerns on the global map. This marks two consecutive years of Western Balkans countries being put on the watch list, with Serbia being twice on the Watchlist in 2023. The CIVICUS Monitor's watchlist is a global tracker that identifies countries where worrisome setbacks in the exercise of civic freedoms have been observed and it is important because it generates significant traction among media and policy-makers. The findings are based on assessments conducted by the CIVICUS Monitor in collaboration with human rights defenders and activists committed to safeguarding fundamental rights worldwide.

1.2. Promoting Civil Society as a Competent, Democratic Actor in the EU Accession Process



EU advocacy: Back to the Roots of Democracy

Continuing the over a decade-long tradition of annual advocacy events in Brussels, in March 2023, BCSDN organized a series of advocacy events and meetings targeting representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament. The [event in the Parliament, co-hosted by MEP Ms. Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield from the Greens/EFA](#), provided a platform for the network to discuss the state of civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey and advocate for concrete policy measures to support civil society in the accession process. BCSDN's ED Biljana Spasovska presented the network's opinion on how the EU can further empower civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey to strengthen the transformative power and the credibility of the EU accession process. The event attracted the interest of relevant MPs and Brussels-based CSOs, and pinpointed concrete problematic issues to be addressed, as participants pledged for continuous exchanges and closer cooperation.



In 2023, BCSDN representatives were invited to participate in regional and European events and meetings that provided valuable opportunities for advocacy towards key stakeholders to promote the role of civil society within and for the accession process of the Western Balkans and Turkey, while addressing the shrinking civic space and challenges faced by civil society.

Some of the events where BCSDN had a prominent role and outreach to key stakeholders were the [9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum](#) (19 October, Thessaloniki), where BCSDN's Executive Director Biljana Spasovska participated at the opening session assessing the relations between the EU and the Western Balkan region in light of the 2023 Enlargement package and ongoing democratic developments, and the [EESC Civil Society Days 2023](#) (3 March, Brussels) where Ms. Spasovska participated at the event's closing session, debating the challenges facing civil society in the region, as well as the opportunities to advance social justice, democracy, and inclusion.

After years of BCSDN's advocacy for more systematic and formal inclusion of WB civil society in EU processes, the EESC announced piloting the initiative *Enlargement Candidate Members*, enabling formal representation of candidate countries civil society representatives. In addition, another BCSDN advocacy aim has been fulfilled with DG JUST announcing the inclusion of Candidate countries in the Rule of Law reports, which will rely on strong input from civil society.

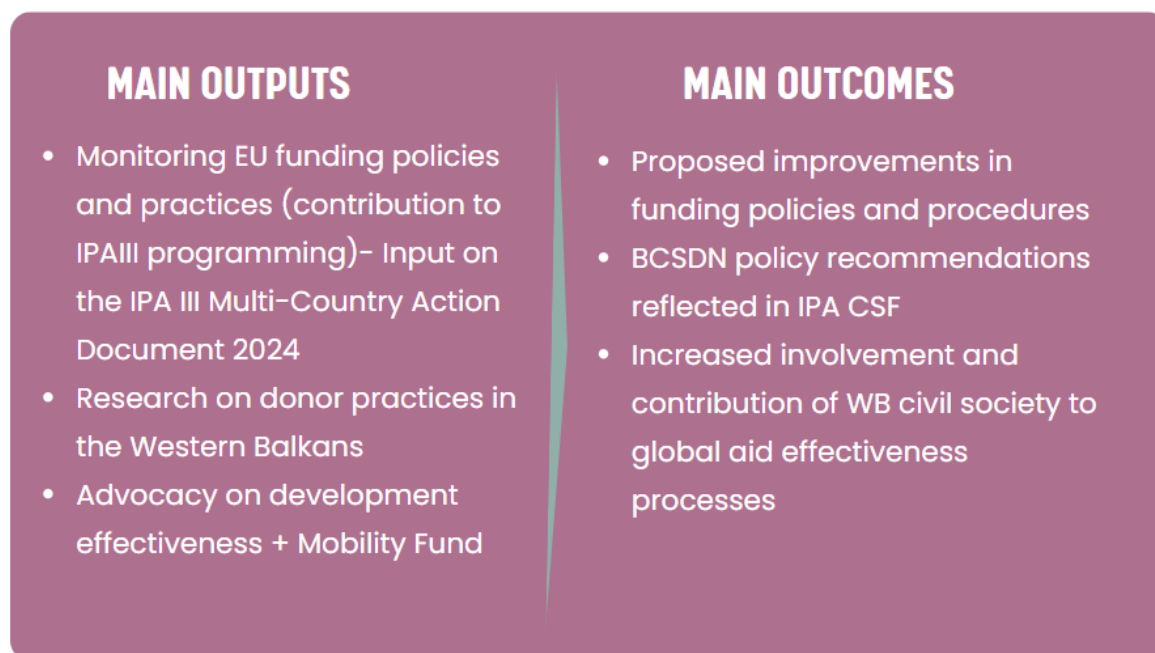


On the topic of involving civil society more effectively in monitoring the preparedness of the Western Balkan countries for EU membership, BCSDN's Head of Policy and Advocacy Anja Bosilkova-Antovska participated at the [11th Regional meeting of the WeBER Platform](#) (12 April, Sarajevo/hybrid). As part of the discussion on how civil society monitoring methodologies can be used as objective "third-party" indicators in the spirit of the new enlargement methodology, Ms. Bosilkova-Antovska presented the Monitoring Matrix as comprehensive methodology for monitoring the enabling environment for civil society – an important aspect of the accession process for countries seeking to join the EU. BCSDN has continued to use the Monitoring Matrix also to provide for shadow reporting on the enabling environment for CSDev and influence Enlargement policy and funding support towards the sustainable and strategic development of the sector, including the Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society.

For 14 years in a row, BCSDN has analysed how the European Commission's annual reports have assessed the civil society environment in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, comparing it with the Monitoring Matrix findings so as to highlight important developments that have been overlooked or underreported in the annual EC reports. The latest [Background analysis of the EC Enlargement package](#) recognizes the crucial role of civil society in the WBT accession, but highlights insufficient efforts for an enabling environment, with some countries regressing and civic space further shrinking – however this issue still did not get enough acknowledgement across the reports.

Throughout the year, BCSDN continued the communication with various EU actors, such as the EESC, EUDs, DG NEAR, EP and FRA, and actively followed relevant civil society related developments on the EU level that (may) also impact civil society in the accession countries. In that manner, BCSDN published a [reaction on the Resolution on the implementation of the EU's common foreign and security policy](#), welcoming the reaffirmed commitment to WB accession but noting a lack of focus on civil society, and reacted to the EP Draft Report on transparency and accountability of EU-funded NGOs, sharing concerns that the proposed provisions may be used as an excuse to put additional pressure on the already shrinking civic space in both the EU and our region. BCSDN also intently followed and reacted to the developments regarding the [EU Directive on Foreign Interference](#) proposed or the Rule of Law Report process, engaging more closely with CSOs and CSO networks in the EU, especially the Civil Society Europe and European Civic Forum, to effectively voice the concerns and contributions of CSOs in the WBT.

1.3. Promoting Improved Funding Models that Enable CSOs' Work



Monitoring and Promoting Good Practices in EU Funding

For years, BCSDN has been following the EU's approach in supporting civil society in the enlargement countries, advocating for recognizing and supporting the civil society as a competent and democratic partner in the EU accession process. We have based our recommendations on the findings from the monitoring conducted through our Monitoring Matrix, on our extensive experience as a network, and on the individual experience and knowledge of our member organizations that are the leading CSOs supporting civil society development in their respective countries.

BCSDN's [input on the IPA III Multi-Country Action Document 2024](#), forwarded during the open consultations by EU TACSO 3, underscores the critical need for genuine and meaningful engagement of CSOs in these processes. It highlights several concerns: the restrictive nature of the consultation process limiting CSOs' participation and access to vital information, the inadequate focus on fostering systematic and meaningful involvement of CSOs in decision-making processes, and the narrow approach towards financial viability, lacking emphasis on fair and transparent public support in line with the EC Guidelines. BCSDN emphasized the urgency for inclusive, structured, and effective collaboration, urging the EU to reinforce support for a more enabling civil society environment in alignment with the EU Guidelines and CSO advocacy efforts. Some of the recommendations raised we have seen appropriately reflected in the IPA

CSF Call for Support to Regional Networks, like recognition of enabling environment as a specific objective and dedicated allocation of funds for that matter, a clear link of the Call's objective to the EC Guidelines and concrete recommendations concerning re-granting rules.

Reflecting on how to make better use of existing and increasing EU funding for the Western Balkans, as part of the OSF Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans (15 October, Tirana), BCSDN's Policy and Advocacy Coordinator Anja Bosilkova-Antovska participated in the panel "Challenging 'the Lack of Administrative Capacities' Narrative. How Can the Western Balkans Absorb More EU Funding?". Discussing the recommendation to ensure meaningful inclusion and participation of stakeholders and CSOs in the planning, impact assessments, and monitoring of the use of EU funds, Ms. Bosilkova-Antovska focused on the shortcomings of current involvement of CSOs and the possible means to improve the process of consultations with civil society. The event provided an opportunity for networking with think-tanks and policy-oriented CSOs from the region, involved in the Berlin Process.

Research on Donors' Strategies and Practices in the Western Balkans

One of BCSDN key strategic objectives is facilitating a recognition of the civil society's role in the sustainable development of the region and its accession into the EU. Within this aim, BCSDN has been following how the EU and other donors' strategies and policies affect the development of civil society in the region. Building on previous research from 2011 and 2014, in July 2023, BCSDN initiated new research on the topic, aiming to capture the changes in donors' policies and practices in working with and supporting the civil society in the Western Balkans, as well as to look into donors' adherence to Development Effectiveness Principles. The research, conducted with Catalyst Balkans, was part of BCSDN's project with the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) aimed to contribute to a more enabling environment of CSOs, specifically to improve CSO capacity to engage development partnerships and, broaden support base for CSOs and their positions.

The document stemming from this research, titled "[Donor Strategies in a Time of Paradigm Shift: Mapping of The Donors Active in The Western Balkans](#)", presents a comprehensive overview of donor activities in the Western Balkans, aiming to understand the evolving landscape and provide actionable insights. The findings, presented at the Donors forum in Belgrade, reveal a shifting donor focus influenced by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical dynamics. While donors express commitment to continuing their support beyond 2023 and emphasize key Sustainable Development Goals, such as Gender Equality and Decent Work, challenges

persist. These include the need for improved coordination among donors, leveraging digital transformation for CSOs, and addressing issues like unstable funding and limited government recognition faced by CSOs. Recommendations highlight the importance of enhanced coordination, digitalization initiatives, and resolving CSOs' challenges to optimize donor impact and foster holistic regional development.

Facilitating Regional Exchange and Supporting CSO Advocacy Efforts on Development Aid Effectiveness

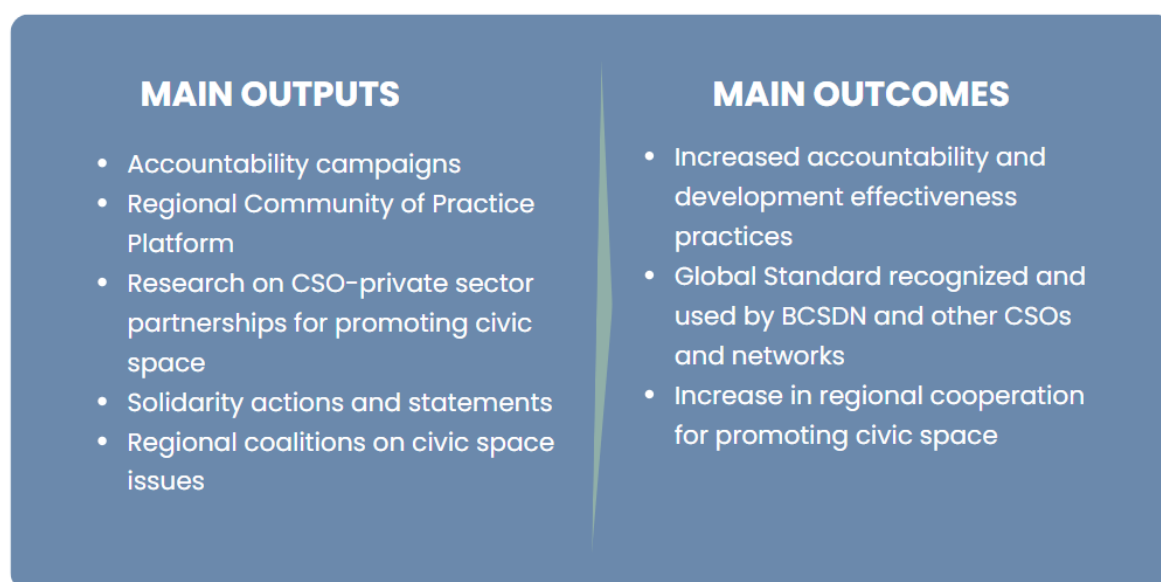
To enhance the effectiveness, transparency, and sustainability of development efforts and ensure meaningful participation of CSOs in the development process, BCSDN engaged in awareness-raising about the Effective Development Cooperation (EDC) principles among development partners. In the framework of the partnership with CPDE, BCSDN engaged in facilitating regional exchange and providing support for related CSO advocacy efforts.

In that line, a public call was open to support engagement of CSOs from the Balkans and the wider Europe into for reshaping the global aid architecture and for ensuring more enabling environment for civil society as a precondition for more effective development and more enabling environment. The [Mobility Fund](#) launched as part of the project, provided opportunities for five CSO representatives to expand collaborations and advocate for diverse issues by participating in relevant conferences, seminars, workshops, international fora, and high-level meetings focused on development effectiveness and fostering an enabling environment for CSO development.

The Mobility Fund users actively engaged in international advocacy campaigns, strategic alliances, and contributed to regional initiatives, amplifying their voices on global platforms. This served as an incentive, empowering users to advocate passionately for critical issues, strengthen alliances, and enhance their capacity for sustained impact in their respective domains.

2. TO STRENGTHEN CSO CAPACITIES AND THEIR ROLE IN FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACIES

BCSDN believes that in times of active pressure on civil society and civic space, civil society actors need to ensure they retain their core missions, integrity, legitimacy, and high level of trust. Civil society in all its forms has an important role in holding all stakeholders, including itself, to the highest levels of accountability. At the same, to be able to fight back, CSOs need to work more closely together and join forces for achieving common goals, and to protect and expand their civic space. Building on its own experience and learning the power of regional cooperation first-hand, BCSDN committed to supporting collaborative regional CSOs' actions for promoting civic space and supporting others to be more accountable actors in driving positive change.



Contribution to Improved CSO Accountability: Facilitating Regional Collaboration and Exchange on CSOs Accountability Practices

In 2023, BCSDN continued promoting CSO accountability standards and practices as means to enhance the trust, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the sector, and thus contribute to the protection and promotion of civic space. In that manner, BCSDN facilitated regional exchanges on enhancing CSO dynamic accountability in the Balkans through the **Regional Accountability Community of Practice (RACoP) group**. The [first thematic event](#), organized in January, provided a chance for community members to learn about upholding "dynamic accountability" in their work during crises, while continuing their efforts in monitoring and reporting about the civil society environment,

adapting to constituency needs, and using digital tools for efficient CSOs' operations. The workshop also presented the RACoP Action Plan and encouraged a dialogue among members to shape upcoming community activities. The [second thematic RACoP event](#), featured speakers from regional and international CSOs, promoting knowledge sharing on policy influence, networking, and capacity building in the Balkans. It sparked discussions on improving community-led development initiatives, enhancing the involvement of local CSOs in public processes, and fostering collaboration among CSOs in the region.

RACoP events inspired a sense of resilience and a joint commitment to a more accountable civil society in the Balkans. The RACoP also created a link between the regional group and the global Dynamic Accountability Community of Practice (DACoP), where Marija Vishinova Shemova from the BCSDN Executive office is part of the coordination team. Connecting the regional with the global community allows for learning from global trends, two-way knowledge sharing, cross-regional collaboration, and increased visibility and recognition, ultimately strengthening the effectiveness and impact of accountability initiatives worldwide.

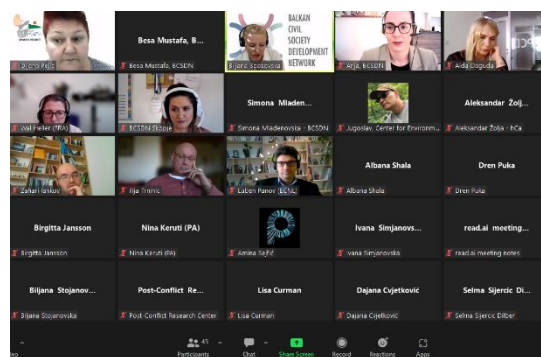
Leading Regional Collaborations and Joint Actions on Pressing EE Issues

Following our principle of regional solidarity and support, BCSDN coordinated with its members to provide a rapid response to civic space challenges in the region. While BCSDN's continuous monitoring and regular exchange with the members allowed us to closely follow and respond to several emerging trends and threats, two cases marked the past year – the major threats to civic space in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including two concerning laws and an overall state of harassment and pressure on civil society, and a SLAPP case against an investigative media outlet in North Macedonia.

Regarding the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in response to the re-criminalization of defamation in the Republika Srpska (RS) Criminal Code and the draft 'foreign agents' law, BCSDN took several actions to react and raise awareness on this adverse trend in BiH and its impact in the region. Firstly, BCSDN published a [blog post](#), followed by an [opinion piece](#) on the European Western Balkans online media platform, urging Republika Srpska's authorities to reverse these policies. BCSDN also expressed concerns about the situation through a [joint statement](#) and [advocated towards](#) relevant international stakeholders in the region, including the EU and the international community, to counter nationalistic tendencies, protect civic space and fundamental rights, and support Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU path.

BCSDN submitted a [complaint](#) to the United Nations Special Rapporteurs, raising concerns about the Republika Srpska draft foreign agents law. In late October, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms published a statement expressing their concerns over the draft law and requested its urgent withdrawal. BCSDN also wrote a [letter](#) to MONEYVAL Chairs seeking a response regarding the draft law in RS, noting that in justifying the need for the law, MPs in the RS Parliament were falsely referencing to MONEYVAL recommendations. The letter asked for an official response that would emphasize the need to balance security concerns and democratic values, in line with the efforts of MONEYVAL/FATF to prevent unnecessary restrictions on civil society. While MONEYVAL responded to the letter sent by BCSDN, there was no official reaction on the issue by the end of the year.

To raise regional awareness and prevent a possible spillover effect across neighbouring countries, BCSDN, in collaboration with its BiH member - CPCD, organized an [online discussion](#) titled 'Defending Civic Space in the Balkans.' This event highlighted the network's advocacy efforts against civic space challenges in Republika Srpska and discussed the risks faced by the CSOs in the entity following the imposition of the laws, along with their potential negative implications in society. Gathering CSOs from BiH and the region, but also a number of representatives from the international community, including donors and international agencies, the event reflected both to our principle of solidarity and our commitment to join forces with allies to coordinate joint actions and reach common goals. To further support this, BCSDN has issued a call for Expressions of Interest for financial assistance to CSOs, specifically targeting activities related to preventing harmful legislation or addressing risks in case the respective laws are adopted.



In the case of North Macedonia, after a defamation lawsuit targeted the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL), exemplifying a SLAPP aiming to silence critical voices, BCSDN expressed major [concern](#) over recent the verdict's impact on freedom of expression and association. In the published and widely disseminated statement on national, regional and international level, BCSDN urged that the judge's disconcerting statement, questioning IRL's media status and limiting journalistic activities, sets a dangerous precedent to fundamental freedoms in North Macedonia.

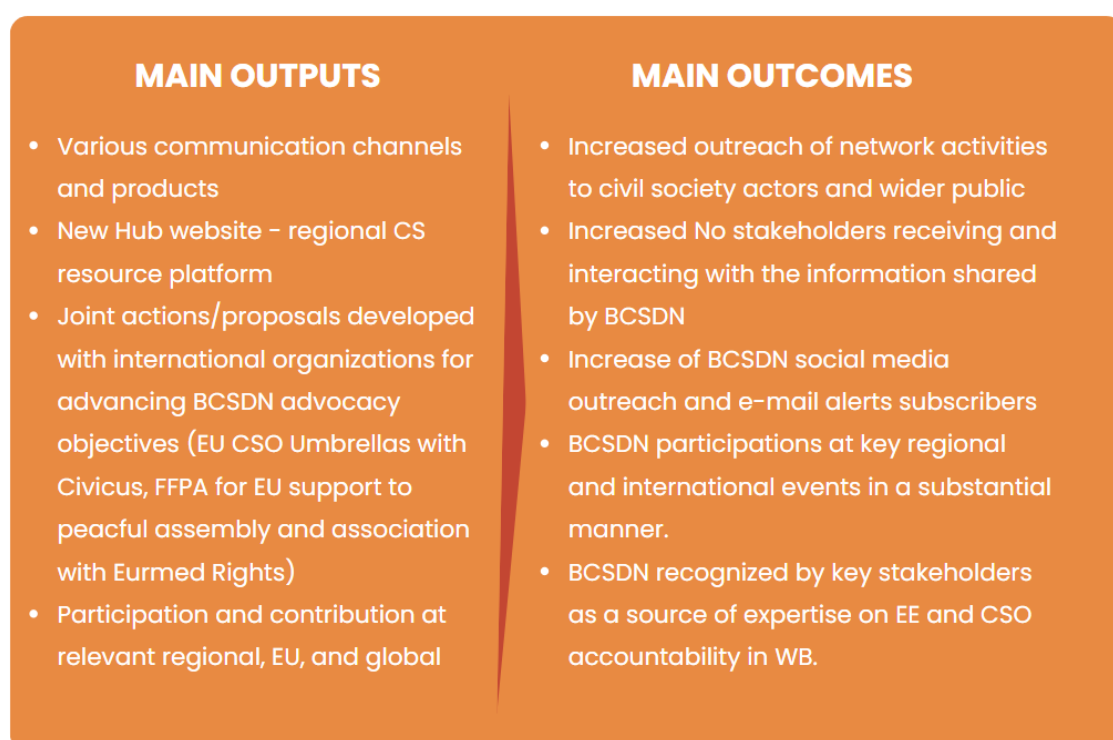
On two other occasions, BCSDN expressed solidarity in response to tragic events in the region – the [devastating earthquake](#) in Turkey and Syria, and the [catastrophic floods](#) in Slovenia.

Private Sector Watch

One of the novelties in BCSDN's approach to promoting civic space is exploring the cooperation with the private sector. In line with the input provided in 2022 for the global Private Sector Watch database, BCSDN successfully executed this initiative twice, surpassing the initially planned single contribution. After the initial case study concluded, led by our member Civic Initiative, our partners from the Reality of Aid expressed interest in the network participating in a second round of the Private Sector Watch. This extended involvement allowed us to contribute to the second synthesis report. By the middle of the year BCSDN delivered two case studies that were included in the [Synthesis report](#) launched by CPDE in November 2023. Both case studies were conducted and prepared by our member organization Civic Initiatives, one covering the topics related to issues with environmental impact of lithium mining and misuse of public safety surveillance software. Moreover, during the coordination of these efforts, Simona Mladenovska from the Executive Office of BCSDN played an integral role by actively engaging with the PSE Task Force. This increased participation demonstrates our commitment to fostering collaboration and extending our impact within the sector.

3. TO INCREASE THE COLLABORATION AND THE RECOGNITION OF THE NETWORK WITH AND AMONG THE CORE STAKEHOLDERS

BCSDN continued collaborating with international and global actors in the field, building on its achievements and growth into a prominent network recognized among international CSOs and key institutions for its efforts to promote the development of civil society and the civil society operating environment in the region. Therefore, throughout the year, BCSDN took part in several relevant activities and events.



Communication and Outreach 2.0

Throughout the year, BCSDN used different communication channels and tools, including its websites, several social media platforms, comms products like the renowned email-alerts and the newsletter, and the podcast series.

In 2023, BCSDN strived to broaden its outreach and impact by launching a Communications 2.0. plan. This involved repackaging the monitoring findings into accessible, user-friendly articles aimed at diverse audiences in the region and Europe. These articles introduced key topics, explaining the importance of trends in the civil society enabling environment, and some of them were the result of rapid responses to recent threats to civic space in the region. The goal was to increase website traffic and engagement. Some of these articles include:

- [Reaction to the Attack on Freedom of Expression and Association in Macedonia;](#)
- [Statement on Civic Space Threats in BiH;](#)
- [What went wrong with the Council for cooperation of the Government with Civil Society in North Macedonia?](#)
- [Why would anyone care about shrinking of civic space in BiH?](#)
- [CSOs Raise Concerns to Council of Europe on AML/CFT Report;](#)
- [From Smears to Strength: Defying Labels, Defending Democracy, and Riding the Red Bus of Change](#)

An example of repacking the annual MM findings is BCSDN's **analysis** that explored the history of CSO-government cooperation within Council for Cooperation of the Government with Civil Society in North Macedonia. This two-pager highlights setbacks, good practices, and recent events that led to the malfunction of the Council and the boycott by CSO members.

In 2023, there was steady growth in BCSDN website traffic. The website recorded a total of 16k visits throughout the year. The peak in daily visits occurred during the last week of November and early December 2023, which coincided with our communication campaign addressing civic space threats in Republika Srpska, the reaction to the attack on freedom of expression and association in North Macedonia, and the release of the 14th analysis of the EC's annual reports assessing civil society development in WBT.

Throughout the year, BCSDN has been working on establishing an independent website dedicated to the Regional Civil Society Development Hub and upgrading the existing Monitoring Matrix website. The creation of a dedicated website for the Regional Hub aims to streamline the collection of knowledge and sharing of information, making it easily accessible, valuable, and enduring resource to partners and the broader civil society beyond the Regional Hub's immediate stakeholders. Additionally, the existing Monitoring Matrix website is undergoing improvements to enhance its user-friendliness and visuality, as well as revisions following the revised MM methodology. These changes will allow visitors to explore various topics and findings across the region, compare a country's scores with others, and track changes over time.

BCSDN actively engages with diverse audiences across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Facebook serves as our primary channel, with more than 7,000 followers in total across the Balkans region and the EU countries. On LinkedIn, BCSDN focuses on maintaining communication with our Balkans constituencies, where the network boasts 1,149 followers, which is 458 followers more than last year. Our LinkedIn posts typically reach around 100 people. Meanwhile, our Twitter presence brings our content to 1,072 followers.

The E-mail Alerts, one of the signature BCSDN's services, is a bi-weekly service with 1576 subscribers, containing relevant information for CSOs and stakeholders, structured in an easy-read format. Releasing every 1st and 15th of the month, the Email Alerts provide timely information regarding the BCSDN EO, and members' activities and promotion of the products developed. BCSDN concluded 2023 with 524 published issues of this service and has received positive feedback from its readers on many occasions.

The Newsletter is an additional communication service that compiles information about BCSDN activities and members' highlights. It boasts 300 subscribers, including key partners, collaborators, and stakeholders relevant to the network. In 2023, BCSDN released a newly designed newsletter providing updates on the accomplishments of the first half of the year.

The Podcast series titled "Explaining Western Balkans", which premiered in last year, was realized with seven episodes in total. Since the beginning of the year BCSDN published two podcasts: One titled [Explaining Western Balkans – You\(th\) in Revolt!](#) and other focused on [Unveiling the Foreign Agent Registration Acts Across the Region](#).

External Cooperation and Networking

BCSDN continued collaborating with international and global actors in the field, building on its achievements and growth into a prominent network recognized among international CSOs and key institutions for its efforts to promote the development of civil society and the civil society operating environment in the region. Therefore, throughout the year, BCSDN took part in several relevant activities and events.

Our long-term partnership with the **CIVICUS** world alliance continued through 2023, joining efforts with international actors on global actions aimed to ensure basic human and civil rights. Reporting on 8 counties from the region for the CIVICUS Monitor tool, BCSDN provided 48 periodical updates on the state of freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, putting the challenges of our region on the global map. BCSDN also is part of the AGNA Network of National Alliances and the Vuka! Coalition, both initiatives of CIVICUS.

BCSDN continued fostering and maintaining robust participation and engagement with the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)**. This invaluable partnership enabled the network to be timely informed and involved in numerous consultation processes and opportunities for input provision, providing space for the organizations to remain valuable stakeholder in the international community.

As the **CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE)** secretariat for the Europe region, BCSDN concluded its four-year project at the end of 2023. The project enabled the facilitation of the advocacy workshops in Brussels, where the network's work was presented, focusing on creating a more enabling civil society environment and enhancing CSO engagement in development partnerships. As part of the CPDE@s Regional Observatorio, BCSDN took part in [research on donors' strategies and practices](#) in supporting civil society in the Balkans. The research captures the changes in donors' policies and practices in working with and supporting the civil society in the Western Balkans and looks into donor's adherence to Development Effectiveness Principles.

Through the cooperation with **ECNL**, during 2023 BCSDN further amplified its engagement on AML/ CTF regulations impact on civil society work, especially by hosting the regional multi-stakeholder [workshop on AML/CTF](#), increasing the FIUs, banks, and CSOs' representatives' knowledge and understanding of this pressing issue. BCSDN representatives also attended the Global Expert Hub on AML/CTF [workshop](#) organized by ECNL focused on the use of technology and security measures to address terrorism and other civic space threats. Participants shared best practices on topics including emerging technologies, fintech, content moderation, and digital surveillance.

BCSDN partnered with EuroMed Rights, ARCS, UnPontePer, NOVACT, and others on the EU Global call Thematic Framework Partnerships for Human Rights and Democracy, creating a consortium, covering the Euro-Mediterranean region, for Protecting Freedoms of Association and of Peaceful Assembly. Passing the first stage of the application process, the consortium **signed a framework partnership agreement with the European Commission**, committing to a closer cooperation and regular exchange. Following and MoU signed between BCSDN, EuroMed Rights and the other partners, the consortium is waiting for approval of financial support for implementation of 3-year project proposal pending positive final step evaluation.

As part of the **Global Standard for CSO Accountability** since 2018, BCSDN participated at a Global Standard [partners meeting](#) in April in Nairobi, Kenya, to discuss the strengthening the partnership's role in providing a more enabling civil society environment. The gathering welcomed three new members and approved a new jointly developed governance structure, founding documents, definition of partners' roles, and the election of the first Board composition of the partnership. In June, BCSDN participated in a Global Standard campaign during the OECD DAC Civil Society Days 2023, raising awareness about the OECD DAC Recommendation through a [short audio presentation](#). The audio highlighted the relevance of the recommendation and the network's potential contributions to its successful implementation.

4. TO IMPROVE THE FUNCTIONING, COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION OF THE NETWORK

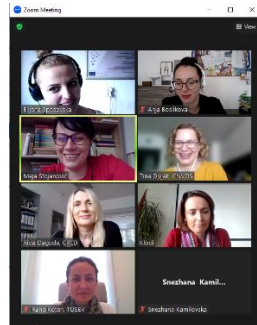


Strategic Planning and Revisioning Process

The pivotal strategic planning process that commenced in 2022 persisted into 2023, marking a continued effort in shaping the network's future direction. In April, with the support of Peace Nexus, BCSDN [convened](#) in Berovo, Macedonia, with representatives from member organizations and the Executive Office, fostering crucial discussions on past achievements, challenges, and future plans. The primary aim was to align efforts, address challenges, and define a collective vision for impactful action, emphasizing agreed-upon priorities. The process culminated in a consensus-driven vision and priorities, paving the way for a strategic roadmap that ensures impactful operations and unified progress for BCSDN's future endeavours.

After a number of online meetings and exchanges, the [strategic revisioning process](#) was successfully completed in July 2023. The essential gathering in Podgorica involved BCSDN members and the Executive Office in redefining the network's goals, mission, and vision, aiming to bolster its advocacy role in fostering a more supportive civil society environment. Through dynamic dialogue, BCSDN members aligned on priorities for the next four years, focusing on addressing the challenges and needs faced by civil society

in the Balkan countries. As a regional network, BCSDN remains persistent in its commitment to leading efforts toward a more enabling environment for civil society development in the region, emphasizing the crucial role of civil society in the democratic reform processes of the countries.



The recently developed network's Strategy comprises more detailed presentation of the rationale behind our strategic objectives, outlining the key expected outcomes and the strategic approaches. To operationalize the Strategy and deliver more tangible results against the set goals, BCSDN started developing a comprehensive, result-oriented Regional Advocacy Strategy for joint advocacy actions in the Western Balkan region that will aim to contribute towards a more enabling environment for civil society development and influence in policy and decision-making.

Comprehensive Regional Hub Evaluation and Successful Start of a New 4-Year Phase

Following the successful implementation of the pilot project funded by Sida "Protecting Civic Space- Regional civil Society Development Hub", Sida's external evaluation assessed the Hub's performance and results, highlighting the project's relevance and effectiveness in achieving immediate and intermediate outcomes, with prospects for sustainability in cases where legal changes have occurred, particularly in reinforcing evidence-based advocacy and increased regional cooperation for civic space, as well as increased CSO understanding of the enabling environment. Conversely, it noted limited impact on more transparent, and accountable CSOs, suggesting a strategic shift towards larger grants and enhanced BCSDN's own advocacy for attaining better results.

Responding to this feedback, the program's strategic framework and re-granting approach have been redesigned to maximize BCSDN's regional impact, prioritizing evidence-based advocacy, enhanced understanding of the enabling environment, and strengthened regional cooperation for civic space, aligning with evaluation findings, the input collected from BCSDN members in the strategic revisioning process and findings from the monitoring of the civil society state of play in the region.

BCSDN's extended partnership with Sida focuses on a [newly granted 4-year project](#), aiming to bolster CSO cooperation and resilience in the Western Balkans and advance civil society influence in policy and decision-making. The anticipated outcomes include positive changes in standards and legislation affecting CSOs' operating environment, enhanced common understanding and cooperation for promoting civic space.

Over the next phase, BCSDN will prioritize core activities of monitoring and evidence-based advocacy for promoting the enabling environment and civic space. Additionally, the focus extends to enhancing stakeholder awareness and support for a more enabling environment by developing a comprehensive Regional Advocacy Strategy and a Rapid Alert mechanism to address sudden threats to civic space promptly. Moreover, the project aims to establish joint strategic approaches and responses to civic space issues by fostering collaboration, information exchange, and joint actions among BCSDN members and regional CSOs through regional coalition.

Strengthened Internal Communication

To enhance communication and collaboration within the network, BCSDN introduced regular informal bilateral meetings between the executive office (EO) and BCSDN members. These meetings facilitated information sharing and improved communication flow, fostering collaboration and better promotion of members' work. In 2023, BCSDN EO conducted five such meetings with each member, and exchanged information regarding key developments affecting the civil society environment at various levels—national, regional, or EU. These discussions also included updates on members' and EO's ongoing and planned activities. The information gathered was summarized in the BCSDN Internal Digest, which was released every two months following each round of meetings, offering the most recent updates and resources from the network and its members. By the end of 2023, BCSDN had published five editions of the BCSDN Internal Digest, for which members shared positive feedback.

To further improve the internal collaboration and strengthen our work, BCSDN Executive Office conducted Members Feedback Survey. The aim of this survey was to gather the members' experiences and feedback on the functioning of the network during 2023, by evaluating the members' satisfaction with various aspects of the network's operation.

The survey offers valuable insights into the network's operations and member satisfaction. While notable successes were achieved, such as the development of a new strategy and advocacy efforts, challenges remain, particularly in maintaining focus and improving communication and member engagement. Moving forward, addressing

these challenges while building on successes will be key to ensuring BCSDN's continued effectiveness and impact in supporting civil society and providing more enabling civil society in the Balkans.

Strengthened Internal Rules and Procedures

While there was no revision of introduction of new rules and procedures, 2023 for BCSDN was a year marked with comprehensive and inclusive revisioning process of the network strategic approach, position, and way forward. In the course of the year BCSDN held four Board meetings, two in-person Council Meetings dedicated to the strategic planning and one email correspondence Council session for (re)election of BCSDN Board in the same composition as the previous Board. The strategic discussions resulted with the preparation of a new Strategic Framework for 2024-2027 and agreements.

III FINANCIAL REPORT

NARRATIVE

In 2024, we successfully concluded three projects: the 4-year project BCSDN implemented through the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness EU Funded Project “Advancing CSO Advocacy and Capacity on EDC and Partnerships”, the Sida-funded “Regional Civil Society Development Hub” and the ECNL project “Western Balkans and Turkey as part of the Global Expert Hub on AML/FATF”. Following a successful evaluation and closing of the Sida supported pilot programme Regional Civil Society Development Hub, and a comprehensive process of planning of the Hub’s next phase, we started a new 4-year programme of the Hub from July 2023-July 2027 with total amount of 24 million Swedish Kroun.

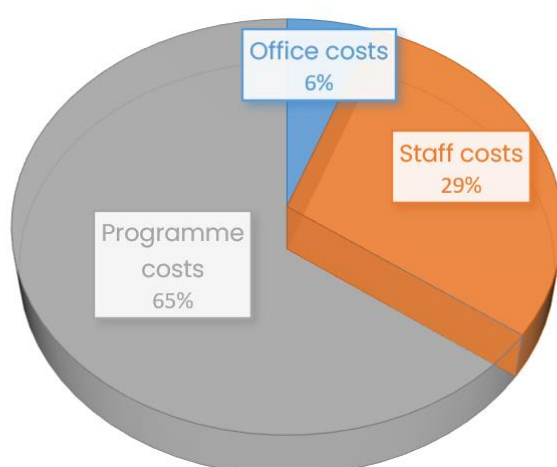
In addition, similarly to previous years, BCSDN’s work was supported with an operational grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

REVENUES

Income Source	Received
Membership Fee	3,730 €
RBF Core Funding	36,757 €
Civicus CSM	15,836 €
Peace Nexus	12,277 €
ECNL - AML Project	19,320 €
CPDE	997 €
SIDA Phase 1	339,546 €
Sida Phase 2	517,638 €
Other	441 €
Total	946,541 €

* 287,894 € CARRIED OVER FOR 2024 ACTIVITIES

COSTS



TOTAL COSTS 658,647 €

THE YEAR IN A GLANCE



13

EVENT REPRESENTATIONS



14

REACTIONS/ ANALYSIS/ BRIEFS

7

MONITORING MATRIX REPORTS

3

IN PERSON MM WORKSHOPS



5 ONLINE EVENTS ORGANIZED

3 IN-PERSON EVENTS

MANY ONLINE AND 2 IN PERSON
COUNCIL MEETINGS

4 BOARD MEETINGS

2

AD-HOC RESEARCH ACTIONS
SUPPORTED



3

WEBSITES



24 EMA EDITIONS

1560 SUBSCRIBERS



9K SOCIAL MEDIA
FOLLOWERS



1 EXTERNAL NEWSLETTER

5

INTERNAL DIGESTS



2 PODCASTS



COMMUNICATIONS
FACTS