Balkan Civil Society Development Network

2024-2027

STRATEGY

Skopje, March 2024

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BALKAN CIVIL SOCIETY
DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Executive Summary

Initiated in 2001 and formalized in 2009, BCSDN serves as a regional network of 12 civil society organizations from 8 Balkan countries with a focus on enhancing civil society development. As a network, we facilitate and practice exchange, and we take a wide regional strategic and systemic view at the issues and opportunities affecting the civic space.

In 2013, EU introduced a section on the civil society state of play in country reports of accession countries, which reflected our Monitoring Matrix methodology to a large degree and started mainstreaming the topic of the "enabling environment "for civil society as a horizontal issue.

Over the years we have advocated the financial support available for civil society which is responsive to civic space challenges and supports the development of a strong and empowered civil society. BCSDN has followed the EU's approach to supporting civil society in enlargement countries, advocating for the recognition and support of civil society as a competent and democratic partner in the EU accession process, as well as for the enhanced distribution of EU and other donors' funds to CSOs.

We have also been one of the pioneers in developing and promoting the Global Standard for CSO accountability, and BCSDN itself continues to be a best practice and role model for sector-wide accountability. With the establishment of the Regional Civil Society Development Hub in 2019, we also piloted a new approach to protecting and expanding the civic space in the Western Balkans by supporting regional civil society cooperation.

However, the civic space in the Balkans seems to face unprecedented challenges and threats coming from geopolitical turbulence marked by competition for illiberal influence, state capture and eroding democracy, rising populism, and authoritarianism. Political elites often misuse legislation and policies to suppress watchdog functions and stifle dissent. Growing polarization exacerbates these challenges, undermining civic engagement and trust in civil society. Moreover, the EU accession process has slowed down, diminishing hopes for democratic progress and support for civil society development.

In light of this external context, we have launched a process of reviewing and consolidating our strategic approach to strengthen the results and impact of our work on our societies. In an inclusive and comprehensive process that lasted for almost two years, we updated our context analysis and adjusted our vision, mission, and strategic

direction, in view of it, we discussed at length our strengths, potential entry points, and how to utilise them to be more effective and impactful.

Vision

BCSDN envisions the Balkan region is part of the European Union and made up of inclusive and functioning democracies which offer an enabling environment for civil society, peace, and prosperity.

Mission

Protect and expand the civic space through evidence-based and collaborative policy influence on international, European, and national level.

In the forthcoming period, we will strategically aim to achieve the following three goals:

Goal 1: Advocating for the protection and expansion of civic space.

BCSDN aims to expose and prevent harmful legislation, support positive changes in legislation, engage in substantive dialogue with the EU, and collaborate with international actors to protect and expand the civic space.

Goal 2: Securing more favourable donor practices for protection and expansion of the civic space.

BCSDN will conduct ongoing research, facilitate donor coordination, and provide expertise to promote transparent and inclusive donor strategies that adhere to Development Aid Effectiveness principles.

These goals rely on increased stakeholder understanding, evidence-based recommendations, and strengthened civil society collaboration. To achieve the first two ambitious goals, we have set an additional goal for the development of our network:

Goal 3: BCSDN strengthens its mutual learning, coordination, and collaboration for strengthened advocacy on civic space.

BCSDN remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing civil society development and protecting fundamental freedoms in the Balkans. We invite partners, donors, and initiatives who share our values to join us in realizing our vision for the region.

Introduction

The Balkan Civil Society Development Network is a Balkan regional network that functions informally as of 2001 and was formalised in 2009. We bring together organisations from 9 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Romania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia, and Turkey), that are focused on supporting and enabling civil society development at the national level. As a Network, we facilitate practice exchange and take a wide regional and systemic view at the issues and opportunities affecting the space for civil society work.

We are particularly proud of the work we have achieved in the field of monitoring enabling environment for civil society: back in 2013, EU introduced a section on the civil society state of play in country reports of accession countries, which reflected our Monitoring Matrix methodology to a large degree and started mainstreaming the topic of the "enabling environment" for civil society as a horizontal issue. Over the years we have contributed towards improved financial support, including, by pushing through concrete recommendations for support modalities, like IPA regulation of responsive EU funding in cases of democratic backsliding. We have also been one of the pioneers in developing and promoting the Global Standard for CSO accountability and continue to be a best practice and role model for sector-wide accountability in Europe.

However, with worsening context and new threats to civic space arising, we felt the need to take a step back and embark on a thorough strategy development process in 2022. We updated our context analysis and adjusted our vision, mission, and strategic direction in view of it, we discussed at length our strengths, potential entry points, and how to utilise them to be more effective and impactful.

In the upcoming strategic period (2024 - 2027), we will:

Pursue our vision and mission with renewed focus.

We witness every day the impact of shrinking civic space and will stay the course in trying to both protect it and expand it.

Build on what we do best and adapt our tools and approaches to ensure high quality data and analysis for more targeted and strategic advocacy at European and regional level.

Strengthen our learning and collaboration within the Network and externally, to be better placed to achieve our impact.

We trust that this direction builds on the unique voice and positioning we developed over the years, and addresses burning issues in our national and regional context. As we pursue our goals, we will be honoured to work with partners, donors and initiatives who share our values and our vision and want to contribute to making it a reality.

Context

Conducting in-depth context analysis is part and parcel of BCSDN's day-to-day work since the network monitors the state of play regarding fundamental freedoms in the region and since its members are at the forefront of civil society development at the national level. As part of the strategy development process, BCSDN members pooled their analysis together and identified the following key developments.

No progress on the political front: democracy continues to erode in the region

In the past years, the civic space has been affected by rising populism and nationalism across the wider Balkan region (in both EU and non-EU members), the strengthening of the far-right movement and the overall worsening of the state of democracy, evident through strong autocratic tendencies of incumbents in some countries and legislation and policies increasingly being misused against actors performing watchdog functions. Rising economic crisis, frequent elections, low civic engagement, and limited international community pressures have left the same ruling elites in place, who often have limited interest in pushing for meaningful change since they benefit from the status quo.

Civic space is shrinking under constant threat and social polarisation is on the rise

Across the region, backsliding can be observed when it comes to the civic space. Hard-won fundamental freedoms are factually encroached upon by a mix of regulatory developments and diverse socio-political pressures. Existing laws and standards meant to protect the civic space are frequently violated. Media freedom is significantly constrained in several countries of the region. In addition, new trends have emerged. Activists and journalists who criticise or challenge those in power often find themselves at the receiving end of costly and damaging SLAPP suits. They are also often subject to public smear campaigns as well as threats in the form of graffiti, online hate speech or worse. The scope and potential impact of these trends is larger than meets the eye as incidents tend to be underreported. The criminalisation of defamation, underway in BIH, is being used to silence opposition while 'foreign agent' laws are under consideration in some countries and would serve the same purpose.

Growing polarisation is a key aggravating factor when it comes to the shrinking civic space. Attacks against media freedom, freedom of assembly, and pressures against

activists are all facilitated by a political context in which (often conservative) elites in power use the media machine at their disposal to effectively vilify alternative voices and spread disinformation. In this environment which creates an "us versus them" mentality, attacks end up being tolerated and even normalised.

Civic engagement faces multiple barriers

Civic engagement, including citizen mobilisation to vocally defend fundamental freedoms, is undermined by multiple factors. Overall, the persistence of the socio-political status quo (including the frequent interplay between political connections and job opportunities) and the renewed fears of conflict triggered by the war in Ukraine often go hand in hand with insufficient readiness of citizens to engage in public issues with the notable exception on environmental issues. Those who stand ready to engage face barriers. Brain-drain and increased illiberal tendencies make civic engagement difficult, particularly for actors who focus on holding decision-makers to account, which are facing operational challenges and reduced advocacy strength as a result of continuous pressures. As decision-makers and mainstream media frequently portray civil society actors as 'traitors' or as carrying out a "foreign" agenda, trust in civil society is relatively low across the region although, paradoxically, trust in institutions is even lower. Civil society's capacity to effectively perform its role is at times further challenged by donors' programming patterns which don't always sufficiently enable local ownership, both regarding the topics that are put on the agenda and the way funding is provided.

The EU accession agenda and civil society development contribution: from hope to loss of steam and uncertainty

In the last decade, the EU integration of the Western Balkans has been moving slowly and the transformational power of the EU enlargement policy has been losing its strength. Montenegro and Serbia, the two countries that are most advanced in the process as they have been negotiating for years, seem nowhere closer to accession. The rest of the countries seem so far away.

The slow process, the repeated political blockages, the lack of effective repercussions against democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans, as well as the bad examples set by some EU countries in (not) respecting the core EU values of democracy and rule of law, have caused irreparable damages to the credibility of the EU enlargement policy. As a consequence, the commitment and trust have been in decline by all stakeholders involved in the EU accession process, including the political elites, the institutions on both sides of the process, and the civil society in the WBT countries.

The absence of strong political commitment to the enlargement agenda and the lack of progress in delivering country reforms has undeniably affected the EU's attitude, dialogue and support towards the civil society in the region. This has negatively affected the quality of the EU dialogue and partnership with the civil society, and in the way the civil society is supported both politically and financially.

The outlook for the upcoming years is concerning

The current regional context is both complex and volatile and several scenarios are possible. However, the most likely appears to be a continuation of ongoing trends in terms of shrinking civic space. In light of the Ukraine war, it is expected that EU accession process continues but it may well do so primarily according to stability and geopolitical considerations. In addition, bilateral tensions are very high between Kosovo and Serbia and any further significant escalation could have spillover effects in the broader Balkan region.

The case for BCSDN

While we are concerned about context developments, the difficult situation makes it clear that our work has never been more needed. As a network constituted of organisations that are at the forefront of civil society development in their countries, we are uniquely positioned to respond to developments that constrain the space for civic action and to be propositional in the development of policies and approaches that advance the civic space. Our regional nature also means that we can enable solidarity and the exchange of both lessons and practical support between CSOs across borders. We are also able to play a robust advocacy role. Thanks to our long-standing dialogue with the EU, EU-based member organisations and membership in international coalitions, we are well-placed to contribute to relevant policy discussions - whether they relate to regulatory frameworks, donor policies or government practices affecting the work and development of the civil society in our region.

Strategic Direction

Vision

The Balkan region is part of the European Union and made up of inclusive and functioning democracies which offer an enabling environment for civil society, peace, and prosperity.

Rationale

We envision a future in which citizens of the Balkan region live in peace and prosperity, benefiting from deep and genuine democracy and enjoying the full and systematic respect of their fundamental freedoms. We strive to see countries of the Balkan region take proactive steps to encourage civil society development and recognise CSOs and activists as democratic and legitimate partners. We hope to see all countries of the region become and remain committed members of the European Union.
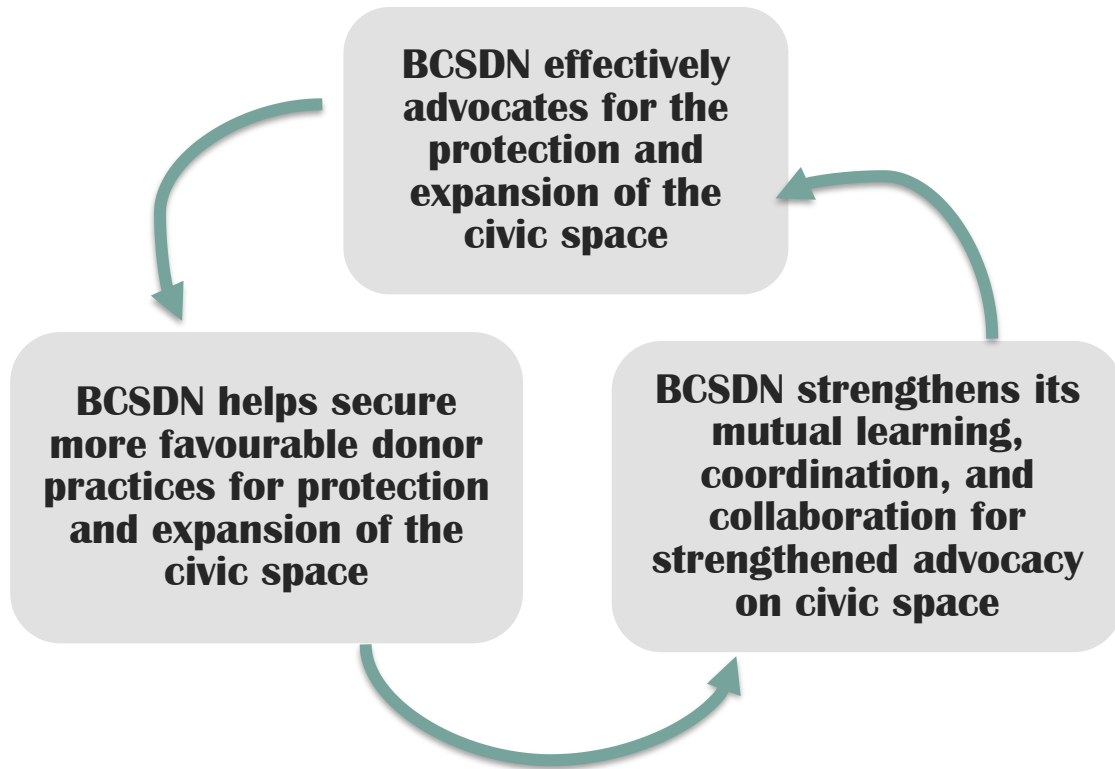
Rationale

A thriving civic space is an essential component of any functioning democracy and peaceful society. Yet, in the past decade, the civic space has shrunk due to a mix of regulatory developments and socio-political pressures. We see it as our role to vocally protect fundamental freedoms whenever they are encroached upon, to strengthen the role of civil society in policy making and to advocate for an expansion of the civic space. We are aware of the interplay between national, regional, and international level and, as a network of expert organisations, are uniquely placed to enable learning and collaboration.

Mission

Protect and expand the civic space through evidence-based and collaborative policy influence on international, European, and national level.

Strategic Overview

In the next four years, we will pursue three ambitious strategic goals:

BCSDN effectively advocates for the protection and expansion of the civic space

BCSDN helps secure more favourable donor practices for protection and expansion of the civic space

BCSDN strengthens its mutual learning, coordination, and collaboration for strengthened advocacy on civic space

These objectives are underpinned by our conviction that meaningful change in expanding the civic space can only happen if:

▶ Key European, regional and national stakeholders have an increased understanding of the enabling environment that is required for effective civil society action and of the barriers currently constraining civic space.

▶ Potential threats to civic space are early identified and recognized by wider stakeholders.

▶ Evidence-based recommendations and solutions to address problematic legislation and policies are available to policy-makers at various levels.

▶ Civil society remains a beacon of protecting basic freedoms despite being exposed to different pressures.

▶ Donors adapt their agendas and programming to incentivise more local ownership, collaboration, and joint action.

Strategic goals

1 BCSDN effectively advocates for the protection and expansion of the civic space

WHY WE PURSUE THIS GOAL

The civic space in the broader Balkan region continues to be under attack and the environment in which CSOs operate is worsening progressively. Although the exact situation differs in each country, there are three common trends:

- insufficient respect of existing standards meant to enable civil society development;
- attempts to introduce legislation that are undermining, disabling or even intentionally harming civil society's work and its development;
- the negative impacts related to how international standards are being applied in the region;
- insufficient advancement of new/updated measures surrounding civic space.

When it comes to existing standards, BCSDN's 2022 monitoring efforts show that political developments in the Western Balkan countries and Turkey seriously impacted the state of the civil society sector. We have registered violations against all fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression, with freedom of expression particularly under pressure due to the rise of smear campaigns, an increasing number of strategic litigation lawsuits, direct verbal attacks from highest political officials, or most recently, reintroduction of criminal charges for defamation in part of the region.

Regarding the negative effects of new standards, the situation is one where well-intended instruments, such as taxation, anti-money laundering (AML) and combating the financing of terrorism (CFT) are at times intentionally misused or inadvertently hamper civil society action due to how they are applied locally. For example, anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism regulations come with reporting requirements that are near-impossible and that end up constraining access of legitimate organisations to banking services.

Additionally, following the Russian Foreign Agents Registration Act, a number of countries in the region (and elsewhere in Eastern Europe) are now drafting and preparing to adopt similar acts, with the sole goal of preventing CSOs from performing their roles and vilifying them in the media. The region is also facing an increase of risk when it comes to the misuse of technology to further shrink civic space (e.g. through potential identification and surveillance of those who attend protests/demonstrations), or abuse of the unregulated civic space to harass, intimidate and stigmatise CSO activists and their work.

CSO's ability to raise funds is another issue that remains problematic for the work and the development of the sector. Both the fiscal and tax treatment of CSOs, and the framework for individual and corporate giving, remain insufficiently regulated and non-stimulating, and the most problematic is the lack of comprehensive public funding reform regulating institutional support, multiannual contracts, co-financing, clear procedures for distribution, monitoring and evaluation, etc. The significant use of public funds by organisations close to or owned by the government is also an issue that affects not only the transparency of public funds, but also the public image, independence, and legitimacy of the civil society.
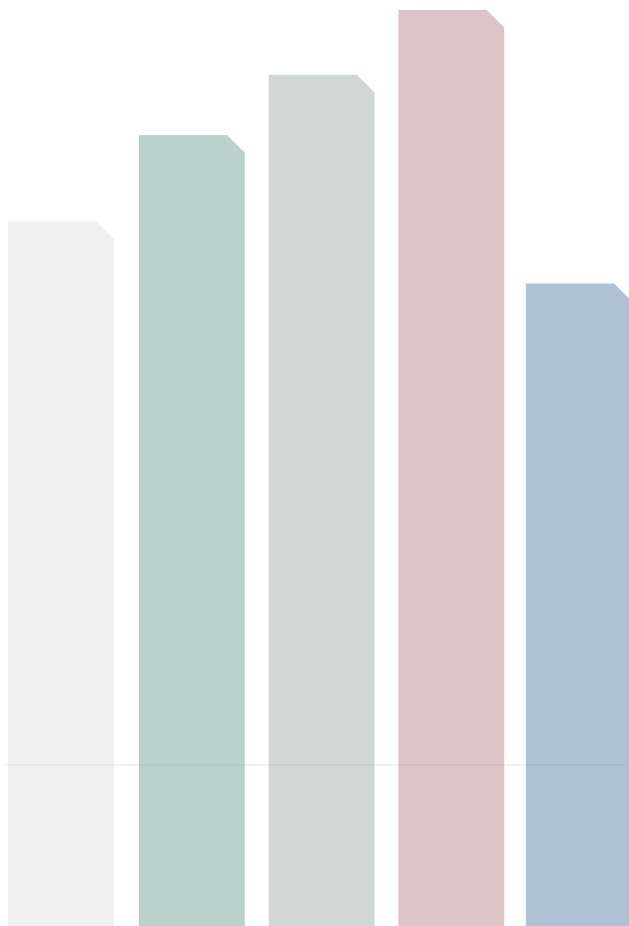
Lastly, despite the legislation regulating the involvement of the civil society in policy and decision making process and dialogue with governments, there is an increasing trend of CSOs being disregarded and excluded from public policy cycles all across the region.

Responding to these trends and creating a more enabling environment for civil society is essential to advance peaceful democratic development in the region. Doing so requires efforts from local activists and national institutions but it also hinges on a principled stance and intentional strategies from the EU. Indeed, the EU influences the regulatory environment for Balkan civil society directly through its own policies, instruments and financial support, and indirectly through its ongoing dialogue with accession countries. In recent years, the protection of the civic space and related human rights appears to have often been de-prioritised, in part due to geopolitical calculations centred around "stability".

This orientation has multiple practical implications. If mindful of civic space considerations, EU country reports, civil society strategy and negotiation accessions all have a key role to play in advancing democratisation in the Balkan region. Conversely, if such documents and processes turn a blind eye to the state of play regarding fundamental freedoms and civil society development, those national actors who see civil society as a threat and want to silence it will have more space to further shrink the civic space.

Proactive efforts to further expand civic space protection are often dwarfed by 'reactive' efforts that focus on protecting existing standards and avoiding the misuse of regulations. Therefore, BCSDN wants to act on all levels to secure a more enabling environment for civil society. We will play a watchdog role and push against violations of hard-won freedoms but will also strive to play a proactive and propositional role geared towards policy improvements and innovations, particularly concerning the EU policy towards Balkan civil society.

With our membership composed of EU-based and non-EU members, BCSDN is uniquely placed to monitor the state-of-play in different countries, to anticipate how trends in some countries may soon affect other parts of the region, and to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and more preparedness of civil society organisations at a regional level.

KEY RESULTS BY 2027

Through our work, we will strive to contribute to the following changes and results.

PROTECTING THE CIVIC SPACE

Attempts to introduce harmful legislation and/or to misuse legislation/standards to stifle civic engagement are exposed and prevented.

EXPANDING THE CIVIC SPACE

Positive changes in legislation and regulations affecting the civic space and standards are increasingly considered and rolled out by national and international stakeholders.

Concrete indicators will be developed to correspond to the strategic approach and actions elaborated below to provide for specific and targeted approach that could be monitored and measured.

STRATEGIC APPROACH AND ACTIONS

Effective monitoring, awareness-raising, and advocacy

As there can be no effective policies without an in-depth understanding of local and regional trends, we will double down on our monitoring efforts. Through our monitoring matrix (MM), we measure the health of the legal, regulatory, and financial environment in which civil society organizations in the Western Balkans and Turkey operate. As threats are evolving, we are revising our monitoring methodology and will ensure it can capture new trends. We will also expand our communication and outreach efforts so that our monitoring efforts effectively serve as an early warning mechanism and translate into key stakeholders having a nuanced understanding of the situation at a national and regional level, and a practical understanding of how certain well-intended standards are used and misused in practice.

Substantive dialogue with the EU

In the early 2000s, the EU played a pivotal role in the Balkans by contributing to the advancement of the democratisation agenda and providing a long-term optimistic horizon to aspiring members. In 2023, democratic backsliding has been happening in several countries of the regions. We believe the next few years will be crucial in reversing these developments and cannot be achieved without the EU once again engaging closely with civil society and contributing to shaping an environment in which civil society actors can not only survive but thrive. We will strive to play our part by making our analysis and recommendations available to EU institutions and by seizing any space for meaningful EU-civil society dialogue.

Cooperation with other international actors relevant for the protection and expansion of the civic space in the region

Other than the EU, whose politics and legislation have direct effects on the national-level policies that concern the civil society enabling environment in the Balkans, there are a number of other international organizations and initiatives whose commitments and processes can be leveraged for policy influence on national level concerning the civil society environment. With increasing attacks and threats on the civic space, and the decreasing influence of the EU when it comes to its protection, BCSDN in the forthcoming period will expand its work with other relevant international actors whose mandate directly concerns the civil society enabling environment. More concretely, these are the Council of Europe and Monevyal, the UN Institutions esp. UN Special Rapporteurs when it comes to the basic freedoms and the OECD, OGP and the GPEDC when it comes to Government – CS relations. Other international bodies or initiatives, or bilateral relations (such as the US) that may have a positive influence on the national policies affecting the civil society-enabling environment in the region would also be considered in the forthcoming actions.

2 BCSDN helps secure more favourable donor practices for protection and expansion of the civic space

WHY WE PURSUE THIS GOAL

Donors' agenda and policies are a very important component of the ecosystem in which civil society operates in the Balkans, especially given the limited public funding made available locally. While international donors have undoubtedly made possible very important progress in fields that would otherwise not be supported in the region, there is however room for improvement on several key topics. On paper, international standards such as the principles of Development Aid Effectiveness (DAE) enshrine key notions such as the importance of local ownership and the relevance of mutual accountability between donors and partners. However, we observe the persistence of practices that do not sufficiently follow these principles, which leads to the fragilization of the civil society sector at a time when it should be consolidated as the socio-political situation and state of democracy deteriorates in the region.

When it comes to programming, the main issues we observe relate to insufficient consultation and local ownership. Civil society is largely insufficiently consulted in the process of donor strategies development and participatory programming is fairly limited. This leads to a relative mismatch between funding patterns and local needs. We observe that donor agendas allocate less funding for network organisations and deprioritise certain topics (like arts and culture). We also notice that the geographic scope of available opportunities is not optimal (e.g. most of the funds for the Balkans exclude Turkey and there are few incentives for collaboration between EU and non-EU countries).

When it comes to programme delivery and learning, many prevalent donor practices undermine the prospects of long-term results and collaborative actions. With the worsening socio-political context, the need for more flexible and institutional funding is only increasing, but the available funding mechanisms are slow in adapting its funding to meet those needs. Indeed, financial support is often project-based and relatively short-term whereas core funding and long-term programmatic support are hard to come by. Funding is also often channelled through international intermediaries, which have a top-down approach and lack local knowledge, and do not have the incentive to

ensure sustainability and ownership of programme results. Due to the combined political and financial pressure, many end up in a "survival mode" that is more likely to result in being donor-driven than in achieving the desired results and that can also result in a vicious circle where their donor orientation and insufficient results lead to more distrust in the sector. Similarly, competition for a very limited pool of core and flexible funding disincentivizes collaboration between civil society organizations. Often, relationships between donors and their civil society partners are very hierarchical which undermines opportunities for co-creation and for mutual learning and adaptation.

Despite those issues, several donors are interested in the implementation of the Development Aid Effectiveness commitments. As a network with substantial re-granting and grant-making experience and an in-depth of the civil society sector, we are well placed to engage in meaningful dialogue with donors and in sharing both our practical experience of good practices and our analysis of the field-level impact of practices that do not follow the DAE principles.

KEY RESULTS BY 2027

We will strive to contribute to the following result:

> Donor strategies are transparent, inclusive, respond to local needs and follow DAE principles throughout the entire cycle of funding (from programming to impact assessment).

Concrete indicators will be developed to correspond to the strategic approach and actions elaborated below to provide for specific and targeted approach that could be monitored and measured.

STRATEGIC APPROACH AND ACTIONS

Ongoing research and evidence-based advocacy

We will engage in mapping of the funding landscape, analysis of donors' current policies and funding practices, and use it to show the influence of donor practices in the development of civil society (positive and negative) and to showcase positive practices. We will use the research to facilitate the process of setting the main principles of funding civil society in the Balkans, mainly based on Development Effectiveness Principles/SDGs and other already endorsed international documents.

Enabling donor coordination and agenda-setting

Our research on the Balkan funding landscape will be broadly disseminated and serve as a basis for greater donor coordination and for dialogue between donors and local organisations. We will facilitate learning and information exchange between members and donors to exchange on current donor practices and how they can better deliver on their commitments to Development Aid Effectiveness. We will utilise relationships with key donors (SIDA, RBF, other private and bilateral funders) and partners (Philea, GPCDE) to bring more donors to the table and exchange on current donor practices and what can be done to better deliver on commitments to Development Aid Effectiveness. Our efforts will contribute to setting a clear agenda and priorities regarding funding practices and local ownership in the Balkan region.

Expertise provision and walking the talk

In those fora, we will share the practical ways in which we walk the talk when acting in a granting or re-granting capacity. We will also make ourselves available to any funder who may benefit from technical assistance on how to adapt their practices. Finally, we will apply the principles we advocate for, for example through our own grant-making practices and by not engaging as a network in funding practices that are not in line with DAE principles.

3 BCSDN strengthens its mutual learning, coordination and collaboration for strengthened advocacy on civic space

We are committed to the constant strengthening of our network. To deliver on our ambitious impact goals, we will pursue the following internal priorities.

KEY RESULTS BY 2027

Strengthen mutual learning, coordination and collaboration within the Network

We will intensify our efforts to keep BCSDN a learning-driven organisation, including by putting in place and utilizing new tools to ease our communication, coordination, and collaboration, and double down on the efforts to utilize collective know-how to maximize impact at a regional scale.

Refine and strengthen our advocacy approach and tools

We will ensure that our tools capture relevant and up-to-date trends and analysis, which will enable the impact of our work to be easily demonstrated, well documented and all the more visible to broad and wide audiences, to further fuel and support our advocacy efforts.

In addition, we will nurture existing good practices. Our Board will continue to play its strategic oversight role. It will continue to work closely with our Executive Office and will bring up relevant strategic topics for discussion with our members-driven Assembly whenever relevant. We will periodically assess where we stand with the implementation of our strategy and identify early on any needed adaptations, including in case of context deteriorations. We will approach our own sustainability and Network growth in line with our mission, vision, and strategic direction, which will further enable the strong focus and internal functioning necessary for us to be successful in achieving our desired impact.

Consolidate membership and network's sustainability

In view of our internal priorities, we will employ several horizontal approaches across the board:

- **Regional dimension** – we ensure the content of our advocacy includes regional perspectives and goes beyond the more visible accession countries' contexts.

- **Recognition and strengthening of our members through our work** – we design and implement our activities and their follow-up in such a way as to build and/or strengthen our members, support each other in need, and amplify our respective work.

- **Linking up with relevant partners and initiatives** – we will continue to build synergies with other actors by connecting with them and providing support when we recognize the potential of joint impact and by building strategic partnerships that increase the efficiency and impact of our work.

- **Leading by example** – we will continue to work in such a way that demonstrates how CSOs apply and follow the highest accountability standards and that shows the trust and space that CSOs deserve.