Balkan Civil Society
Development Network

Monitoring Matrix
Regional Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development – Western Balkans & Türkiye 2024

Key Take Aways

May 2025

Summary of the Regional Report

This report, published by the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), presents an assessment of the environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans and Türkiye (WBT) during 2024. The research is grounded in the Monitoring Matrix methodology, a regionally recognized framework developed by BCSDN to systematically assess the legal, financial, and political environment for civil society in the WBT, and applied annually since 2014. The report highlights the significant disparities between legal guarantees and their practical implementation, noting a complex and often challenging operational landscape for civil society.

The report is structured around three key areas:

- **Basic Legal Guarantees of Freedoms**
- **Framework for CSOs' Financial Viability and Sustainability**
- **Government-CSO Relationship**

Key Findings:

In 2024, civil society in the WBT region operated in a diverse and uneven environment. While legal frameworks generally remained enabling, their effectiveness was undermined by persistent issues in institutional practice, political will, and financial infrastructure, impacting CSO sustainability and independence. Democratic backsliding, hostile narratives, and repressive legal initiatives intensified in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, and Türkiye. The report anticipates further deterioration in 2025, particularly in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. Basic Legal Guarantees of Freedoms

- **Freedom of Association:** Although legal guarantees largely align with international standards, practical implementation is challenging. Registration processes are often burdensome and uneven, with Albania lacking a functional electronic system and laws stalled in Montenegro and North Macedonia. Anti-Money Laundering/Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) obligations continue to burden CSOs in most countries, with progress noted only in Kosovo and Montenegro. Narratives delegitimizing foreign-funded CSOs persist as control tools, especially in Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia.

- **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly:** While generally protected, Türkiye enforces broad restrictions, and violations persist in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Protests, particularly environmental and anti-corruption demonstrations in Serbia, have been met with violence and mass arrests.

- **Freedom of Expression:** This freedom is threatened by defamation laws (which are still criminalized in Republika Srpska (BiH), Serbia, Albania, and Türkiye), Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and declining media independence. Serbia and Türkiye are identified as the most restrictive environments. Activists, especially from LGBTI+, gender, and environmental groups, face surveillance, harassment, and smear campaigns. Disinformation laws and bans also undermine online rights.

2. Framework for CSO Financial Viability and Sustainability

- **Financial Sustainability:** This remains a critical concern, with CSOs facing difficulties accessing funding due to banking restrictions, politicized oversight, and negative rhetoric.

- **Tax Frameworks:** These are underdeveloped and fragmented, with Value Added Tax (VAT) exemption procedures posing a significant challenge in Albania. Tax benefits are poorly implemented or limited to specific sectors.

- **Public Funding:** Public funds are scarce, fragmented, and susceptible to political influence. Philanthropic engagement is low due to legal ambiguities and a lack of incentives.

- **Human Capital:** Volunteerism remains largely unregulated, with exceptions in Türkiye and North Macedonia, and CSO employment is unstable due to limited access to benefits and state incentives.

3. Government-CSO Relationship

- **Cooperation:** Collaboration between governments and civil society is inconsistent and generally ineffective across the region. The implementation of national strategies for civil society development remains weak, underfunded and ineffectively monitored. Government-CSO cooperation councils are largely inactive or underutilized. Civil society in Serbia has increasingly withdrawn from these mechanisms, perceiving their participation as merely tokenistic.

- **Participation in Policymaking:** Despite formal inclusion, civic participation in policymaking is weak, with consultations often being symbolic or rushed, marked by limited openness and inadequate feedback mechanisms.

- **Transparency:** Transparency and access to information are limited, with notable regressions observed in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The report concludes that civic space is continually shrinking due to regulatory inertia, political hostility, and structural barriers. It emphasizes the urgent need for action to improve legal certainty, institutional transparency, and sustainable financing, while also safeguarding fundamental freedoms, which are essential for democratic development. The report provides specific recommendations for each country to address these challenges.

In 2024, civil society in the Western Balkans and Türkiye (WBT) faced deepening challenges across all three Monitoring Matrix areas. While legal guarantees for freedoms of association, assembly, and expression remain largely in place, they are increasingly undermined by restrictive practices, administrative and financial burdens, and shrinking political space. State interference, whether direct or indirect, continues to affect the operational and financial viability of civil society, while meaningful participation in policymaking remains largely symbolic in most countries.

To reverse these trends and support the development of a resilient, independent, and vibrant civil society, the following priority actions are recommended:

1. STRENGTHEN BASIC LEGAL GUARANTEES OF FREEDOMS

- **Decriminalize defamation** in Republika Srpska without delay to align with international human rights standards and protect freedom of expression.
- **Adopt anti-SLAPP legislation** across the region, in line with Council of Europe and EU standards, to curb legal harassment of journalists and activists—particularly urgent in Türkiye and Republika Srpska.

- **Introduce legal protections against smear campaigns** targeting CSOs and activists, especially in Serbia and Kosovo where these practices are increasingly used to silence dissent.
- **Ensure effective, accessible, and reliable registration systems** for CSOs across the region, addressing delays and inefficiencies that continue to hinder civil society formation and legal recognition.
- **Reform AML/CFT frameworks** to remove the blanket classification of CSOs as high-risk entities, and apply proportionate, risk-based standards that do not obstruct legitimate civic activity.
- **Conduct transparent and democratic reforms of media oversight bodies**, such as Serbia's REM, to ensure fair and independent regulation of the media landscape.

2. IMPROVE CSO FINANCIAL VIABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

- **Finalize and simplify tax reforms** to enable CSOs to benefit fully from available exemptions and incentives, particularly for donations, grants, and income-generating activities.
- **Ensure equal treatment of CSOs and private sector employers** in access to state-supported employment programs and benefits.
- **Harmonize VAT policies and reduce administrative burdens** to unlock the potential of philanthropy and social entrepreneurship.
- **Transition from project-based funding to multi-annual operational grants** that foster strategic planning, institutional stability, and long-term impact.
- **Introduce transparent, needs-based public funding mechanisms**, with clear criteria for allocation, monitoring, and evaluation, and safeguards against political influence.
- **Enhance non-financial support for CSOs**, such as access to public infrastructure, digital tools, and training programs that are practical and widely accessible.
- **Modernize civic education systems** to promote awareness of civic participation, human rights, and the role of civil society from an early age, supporting a culture of active citizenship.

3. ENHANCE STATE–CSO COOPERATION AND PARTICIPATION

- **Ensure that national civil society strategies are adequately funded** and backed by concrete implementation plans, avoiding tokenistic or symbolic initiatives.
- **Establish legally binding frameworks for state–CSO cooperation**, ensuring continuity and accountability beyond political cycles.

- **Protect the integrity of the civic sector by preventing GONGO infiltration** and rejecting efforts to institutionalize state-affiliated organizations that distort civil society representation.
- **Guarantee timely, inclusive, and transparent policymaking processes**, with genuine CSO engagement, accessible information, and meaningful feedback loops.
- **Address procedural barriers** such as short consultation windows, inaccessible platforms, and a lack of response mechanisms that prevent effective participation.
- **Leverage digital tools** to increase inclusiveness, particularly for CSOs based outside capitals or representing marginalized groups.

The path forward demands both political will and institutional reform. Reversing the decline of civic space requires not only safeguarding legal rights but also enabling their practical realization—through sustainable funding, participatory policymaking, and proactive protection of civil society actors. Policymakers, donors, and international partners must collaborate to support these reforms and safeguard civic space as a cornerstone of democracy and EU integration in the WBT region.

The full report, including detailed country-level data and methodology, is available on the Monitoring Matrix interactive web platform and can be downloaded as a .pdf file at this link.