

Civil Society in the Western Balkans & Türkiye in the EU's Evolving Policy Framework



Balkan Civil Society
Development Network

How Can the EU Ensure Meaningful Civil Society Inclusion in a Credible Enlargement Process?

The Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) closely follows the EU's approach to civil society in enlargement countries, and advocates for its structured recognition as a core partner in the accession process. Through the Monitoring Matrix on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, rapid alert and trends analysis, and sustained dialogue with EU institutions, BCSDN provides independent evidence on civic space, participation and fundamental rights developments across the Western Balkans and Türkiye.

Building on this evidence and the expertise of our member organizations, this policy brief sets out practical recommendations to ensure that the EU's evolving democracy instruments and financial architecture strengthen the role of civil society in delivering a credible and effective enlargement process.

The EU is evolving its approach to civic space and civil society engagement, recognizing that democratic challenges in both Member States and enlargement countries are interconnected. Civic space deterioration in enlargement countries is not an external issue, but a systemic European democratic risk that directly affects the credibility and resilience of the Union as a whole. Through the EU Civil Society Strategy, the European Democracy Shield, and the development of the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) the EU is strengthening its instruments for civil society participation, protection, and funding safeguards – while increasingly associating Enlargement countries with these frameworks. However, how these frameworks will function in practice remains unclear.

Civil society is considered a key partner in reform processes and democratic resilience. At the same time, the transition from IPA to Global Europe, the operationalization of the rule-of-law conditionality, and the design of participation mechanisms leave key questions about safeguards, enforceability, and funding architecture unresolved. Decisions taken in 2026 on governance design and the MFF architecture will determine whether enlargement civil society is structurally included or marginalised for years to come.

For the Western Balkans and Türkiye, this evolving policy landscape creates both opportunity and uncertainty. While enlargement countries are being integrated into EU-level democracy instruments, guarantees for structured participation, protection mechanisms, and sustainable funding remain uneven and politically contingent.

As EU policy discourse increasingly prioritises competitiveness, security, and simplification, there is a risk that civic space commitments remain declaratory unless backed by clear safeguards.

This brief identifies where operational guarantees are needed and proposes targeted measures to ensure that civil society participation, protection, and funding are embedded as enforceable components of a credible enlargement process – rather than remaining political commitments in principle.

The **EU Civil Society Strategy**, focused on engaging, protecting, and enabling civil society, extends to candidate and potential candidate countries through structured consultations, recurring participation in political dialogues, and mechanisms such as the Civil Society Platform and the Civic Space Knowledge Hub, recognizing civic space developments as directly relevant to accession.

The **European Democracy Shield**, aimed at strengthening democratic resilience and protecting against disinformation and interference, allows their association to key mechanisms, including early-warning systems, disinformation responses, and protections for media and activists, reinforcing their role in wider European democratic resilience.

Within the **2028–2034 MFF architecture**, designed to structure funding, partnerships, and long-term support, enlargement countries are included through Global Europe, which will channel all pre-accession funding, and may gain access to programmes like AgoraEU through association agreements.

Together, these developments bring higher expectations for CSO involvement in reforms, stronger safeguards against democratic backsliding, and more strategic investment in rights, rule of law, media, and public participation.

Civic Space Embedded in the Accession Process

Civic space and civil society are increasingly addressed within rule-of-law monitoring, the fundamentals cluster of the accession process, and democratic conditionality. Civic space developments are becoming more visible within EU assessment frameworks and political dialogue. Yet, its treatment varies across countries and reporting cycles, and participation of civil society in reform processes is often ad hoc rather than structured.

At the same time, the gap between EU political expectations and operational safeguards is widening, as enlargement CSOs are asked to take on stronger engagement and monitoring roles without guaranteed structured participation pathways or financial safeguards.

This creates an opportunity to move from political recognition to operational integration. To protect civic space and strengthen the role of civil society within the accession process, the European Commission should:

Integrate civic space into accession benchmarks and conditionality

Formally integrate civic space indicators within screening, interim, and closing benchmarks under the fundamentals cluster. This should include systematic monitoring of freedoms of association, expression, assembly, and access to funding.

Where deterioration is identified, it should be reflected in accession assessments and linked to political dialogue and, where relevant, negotiation dynamics.

Institutionalize structured participation of civil society

Establish predictable and recurring consultations with civil society ahead of Stabilisation and Association bodies, enlargement cluster meetings, and key political dialogues. Encourage governments in enlargement countries to formalize civil society roles for CSOs within in accession coordination and reform monitoring structures.

The Growth Plan should include a clearly defined allocation for civil society participation across design, monitoring, and implementation phases to enable civil society to meaningfully contribute to transparency, accountability, and reform delivery.

Systematically integrate civil society evidence into EU monitoring and action

Ensure that civil society monitoring reports and data are formally recognised as inputs into EU reporting, assessment, and conditionality processes. Strengthen structured engagement between CSOs, EU Delegations, Member State embassies, and the European Parliament so that independent evidence informs political dialogue and follow-up.

Early-warning systems on civic space deterioration should be co-designed with independent civil society, with clear indicators and escalation pathways linking alerts to political dialogue, conditionality measures, or protective interventions, ensuring that monitoring functions as a trigger for action rather than a record of decline.

Enlargement Civil Society Protection and Resilience in EU Democracy Instruments

Through the EU Civil Society Strategy and the European Democracy Shield, the European Commission is strengthening its approach to civic space, democratic resilience, and protection against disinformation and foreign interference. Both frameworks increasingly associate enlargement countries with EU-level mechanisms for participation, monitoring, and protection – yet operational guarantees are not clearly defined.

While these instruments aim to strengthen democratic resilience, they also carry implementation risks. In enlargement contexts marked by democratic backsliding, foreign-interference or sovereignty narratives linked to initiatives such as the European Democracy Shield may be used – not only by governments but also by political parties and other influential actors – to portray independent civil society as destabilising, thereby justifying restrictive measures, increased scrutiny of funding, or limiting their participation under the pretext of security or transparency requirements.

Without clear safeguards and participation standards, democracy protection frameworks risk being selectively applied or politically instrumentalised, rather than functioning as safeguards for civic space.

To make these tools accessible, inclusive, and responsive to realities on the ground in enlargement countries, the European Commission should:

Ensure inclusion in EU democracy governance mechanisms

Enable meaningful participation of enlargement civil society in the implementation of the EU Civil Society Strategy and the Democracy Shield, including the European Centre for Democratic Resilience and related early-warning and anti-SLAPP mechanisms. Establish clear participation standards, including representation criteria and feedback obligations, to ensure involvement goes beyond consultation and data provision, and regional expertise is systematically integrated into EU responses.

Effective participation requires institutional alignment across the Commission, FRA, EESC, and the European Parliament, ensuring that civil society evidence translates into dialogue and political follow-up rather than remaining fragmented across separate platforms.

Strengthen protection frameworks against legal and political pressure

Provide clear guidance that anti-interference and transparency measures must not restrict foreign funding, advocacy, or cross-border cooperation of civil society. Respond promptly when governments introduce or replicate “foreign agents”-type measures that undermine legitimate civil society work.

Reinforce rapid protection and support mechanisms on the ground

The European Commission should include enlargement civil society in the deployment of EU-level protection measures, including legal support, emergency funding, and safety protocols for organisations and activists under pressure.

Funding opportunities hinge on CSO inclusion and safeguards

Current discussions on the new MFF emphasise flexibility, simplification, performance-based funding, and broader geographic envelopes, with stronger roles for state authorities as primary recipients, potentially positioning them as gatekeepers to funding. Combined with a growing focus on migration and security rather than human rights and democracy, this raises concerns that support may become less predictable and less accessible to independent civil society, particularly in the enlargement countries.

Under the next EU financial framework, funding opportunities for civil society in the Western Balkans and Türkiye will depend on how Global Europe is designed and implemented, and whether safeguards for independent civil society are embedded. AgoraEU may offer complementary access for some organisations, but it cannot substitute structured and protected enlargement funding.

The transition from IPA to Global Europe carries both opportunity – such as stronger conditionality and diversified funding channels – and risk. Without explicit safeguards, the replacement of the IPA Civil Society Facility could dilute direct support, increase reliance on governments and large intermediaries, and reduce funding for watchdog and advocacy organisations. At the same time, civil society is expected to take on stronger monitoring and accountability roles. Without predictable and protected financing, this expectation is not sustainable.

To safeguard independent and sustainable civil society funding in enlargement countries, the European Commission should:

Embed civic space conditionality across funding frameworks

Ensure that respect for participation, fundamental freedoms, and an enabling environment for civil society are treated as core considerations in funding allocation and implementation.

Apply the smart conditionality principle – when funds are frozen or suspended due to democratic backsliding, those resources should be reallocated from state authorities to independent civil society.

Protect dedicated and direct funding channels for civil society

Secure ring-fenced resources for the Western Balkans and Türkiye within Global Europe, preserving an IPA-equivalent logic for direct funding for civil society.

Expand operational grants, core support, and regranteeing mechanisms to strengthen grassroots. EU funding frameworks should explicitly recognise advocacy, monitoring, and watchdog work as legitimate democratic functions that safeguard rule of law and accountability.

Ensure that a defined share of funding is channelled directly to local CSOs rather than primarily through governments or large intermediaries. Where intermediaries or consultancies are engaged, apply transparent selection criteria and require proven regional expertise and experience working with WBT civil society.

Enable early access to EU internal programmes

Support the early and formal association of the Western Balkans and Türkiye with programmes such as AgoraEU, CERV+, MEDIA+, and Creative Europe, with simplified access modalities that allow a broader range of civil society actors to participate and benefit.

The Way Forward: Two Trajectories For Enlargement Civic Space

If civil society organisations from enlargement countries are structurally and predictably included in the design, implementation, and oversight of EU democracy instruments, they move beyond being beneficiaries of policy and become co-creators of reform. Such inclusion strengthens ownership of the accession process, anchoring reforms in domestic expertise and societal realities. It also reinforces accountability: civil society assumes responsibility not only before EU institutions, but before its own beneficiaries and other stakeholders. When participation is meaningful and governed by clear rules, it builds trust, strengthens independent oversight, and makes enlargement more credible, resilient, and politically defensible in the long term.

The operational choices taken in 2026 will shape how civic space functions within the enlargement process for the next budgetary cycle. Two trajectories are possible.

If safeguards remain declaratory, civic space risks being referenced but not protected in practice. Participation may remain consultative, funding diluted, and monitoring disconnected from corrective action. Over time, this weakens trust in reforms, reduces public confidence in the accession process, and risks presenting enlargement as a geopolitical transaction rather than a democratic transformation. Sharpen it further by explicitly linking this to the EU's own internal rule-of-law credibility. It also undermines the EU's own rule-of-law credibility by creating a gap between the standards it promotes internally and those it enforces externally.

If operational guarantees are embedded, enlargement will be supported by functioning safeguards rather than formal commitments. Independent monitoring will strengthen reform quality, public trust in institutions will grow, and citizens will see that democratic standards are applied consistently and fairly. Civil society participation will not only improve policy design but also reinforce accountability and transparency, making accession a process owned by society rather than negotiated exclusively between governments and EU institutions. In doing so, the EU strengthens not only the resilience of candidate countries, but its own integrity as a community founded on the rule of law.

The direction chosen now will determine whether enlargement reinforces Europe's democratic foundations — or quietly erodes them at a moment when credibility matters most.

