

BCSDN Annual Report 2025

ABOUT BCSDN

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

Its **VISION** is that 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.

Its **MISSION** is to protect and expand the civic space through evidence-based and collaborative policy influence on international, European, and national level.

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

1. Advocating for the protection and expansion of civic space;
2. Securing more favourable donor practices for protection and expansion of the civic space; and
3. Strengthening BCSDN mutual learning, coordination, and collaboration for strengthened advocacy on civic space.

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 10 partner organisations, which are equal in their rights and duties as members of the network. 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 is selected on an annual, rotating basis.

The Board is the governing and supervisory 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 Board mandate has started on September 1st, 2023, and its current members are the following:

1. Dren Puka (Kosovo)
2. Aida Daguda (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
3. Klotilda Kosta (Albania)
4. Rana Kotan (Türkiye)
5. Maja Stojanovic (Serbia)
6. Snezana Kamilovska Trpevska (North Macedonia)

Since June 2025, BCSDN's Board has been chaired by Klotilda Kosta, Director of Programs at Partners Albania, bringing extensive experience in civil society development, governance, and programme leadership.

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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, civic space across the region continued to narrow through incremental, often technical restrictions rather than overt legal rollbacks. This shift reinforced a pattern already identified by BCSDN: formal guarantees remain largely in place, while their practical application is increasingly constrained through administrative practices, financial pressures, and targeted narratives against civil society.

In this context, BCSDN focused on strengthening the link between evidence and action. Through the Monitoring Matrix, it provided comparable, region-wide data on civic space trends, while further operationalising its Rapid Alert approach to enable more coordinated responses. This contributed to moving civic space monitoring beyond reporting towards structured, policy-relevant signals for EU and international engagement.

Findings from the 2024 Regional Monitoring Matrix Report confirmed continued deterioration across key areas, including misuse of legal and financial frameworks, increasing use of SLAPPs, shrinking and less predictable funding, and weakening government-civil society cooperation. BCSDN translated these trends into targeted advocacy towards EU institutions, contributing to debates on enlargement, rule of law, and democratic resilience, and calling for clearer civic space benchmarks, stronger conditionality, and structured civil society participation.

In parallel, BCSDN expanded its thematic and methodological work. The integration of a gender lens into the Monitoring Matrix addressed persistent gaps in capturing the realities of women's rights and gender-focused organisations. Follow-up on SLAPPs shifted from analysis to implementation, supporting national-level actions, improving data collection, and increasing visibility of cases across the region.

The year was also marked by significant shifts in donor support, which exposed structural weaknesses in civil society sustainability and reinforced hostile narratives against independent actors. BCSDN responded through coordinated network action and targeted research, contributing to a more structured dialogue on donor practices and advocating for more flexible, predictable, and locally grounded funding approaches.

Through partnerships and coordinated responses, BCSDN strengthened its role as a regional intermediary linking national developments with European and global processes. Its work increasingly focused on ensuring that civic space is not only monitored, but systematically integrated into policy, funding, and enlargement frameworks, while also advancing innovative approaches, including a regional Civic Space Hackathon that co-created practical solutions for monitoring, risk identification, and response to civic space challenges, alongside AI-supported Monitoring Matrix analysis.

Overall, 2025 confirmed a transition towards a more constrained and politically shaped civic space environment. It also reinforced the need for approaches that combine evidence, early warning, and structured policy engagement—areas where BCSDN continues to consolidate its role.

2025 IN FOCUS: WHY OUR STRATEGY MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER

In 2025, civic space across the Western Balkans and Türkiye continued to narrow through gradual and often technical restrictions rather than overt legal change. This includes the misuse of regulatory frameworks, administrative barriers, targeted narratives against civil society, and reduced access to funding and participation. These developments reflect broader political trends, where restrictions are embedded in governance practices rather than formal legislation.

At the same time, external factors increasingly shape the operating environment. The U.S. funding freeze demonstrated the structural dependence of civil society on external support and exposed gaps in donor coordination, predictability, and crisis response. Beyond its financial impact, it reinforced narratives questioning the legitimacy of civil society, highlighting the need for stronger and more coherent protection of civic space.

At EU level, civic space is increasingly influenced by political and strategic priorities linked to enlargement, funding reforms, and democratic resilience. While this creates opportunities for renewed engagement, it also risks sidelining democratic standards in favour of geopolitical considerations. In practice, this is reflected in inconsistent treatment of civic space across policy processes, limited use of benchmarks and conditionality, and weak integration of civil society in reform monitoring and implementation.

These dynamics reinforce the need to move beyond descriptive monitoring towards more operational approaches. In response, BCSDN increasingly focused on structuring evidence into actionable insights and linking monitoring to advocacy and policy processes, while initiating exploration of AI-supported methods to improve consistency, comparability, and timeliness of Monitoring Matrix analysis. This includes further development of rapid alert and early warning mechanisms, improved data comparability, and efforts to ensure that civic space is systematically reflected in EU and donor frameworks.

At the same time, BCSDN adapted its work to emerging challenges by exploring innovative and adaptive approaches, integrating gender perspectives, addressing shifts in donor practices, and strengthening communication and outreach. These adjustments reflect a broader shift towards more targeted, responsive, and policy-oriented engagement.

The overall trajectory points to a more constrained and politically shaped civic space environment, where pressures are increasingly structural and cumulative. This requires approaches that combine evidence, coordination, and clear pathways to action, all of which will define BCSDN's work going forward.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND RESULTS

BCSDN's 2024–2027 mid-term strategy builds on a comprehensive assessment of progress under the previous strategic period and defines the following strategic objectives:

1. To effectively advocate for the protection and expansion of the civic space;
2. To help secure more favourable donor practices for protection and expansion of the civic space;
3. To strengthen BCSDN's mutual learning, coordination and collaboration for strengthened advocacy on civic space.

TARGET GROUP & AREA

BCSDN operates at national, regional, and international levels to support an enabling environment for civil society and strengthen its role in democratic processes across the Balkans. Its primary target group includes civil society organisations (CSOs), particularly networks and resource organisations working on civil society development and contributing to stronger civic space.

BCSDN engages key stakeholders, including public institutions and European and multilateral actors such as the European Union (European Commission, including relevant Directorates-General, European Parliament, and Council of the EU), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the Council of Europe (CoE), and the Open Government Partnership (OGP).

Building on existing partnerships, in 2025 BCSDN continued cooperation with key European and global initiatives, including the European Civic Forum, the CASE Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Accountable Now, and CIVICUS (through AGNA, Vuka!, and the CIVICUS Monitor), as well as the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness. Through these engagements, BCSDN increased the visibility of civil society in the Western Balkans and Türkiye in EU and global processes, contributed to joint advocacy on civic space, and supported coordinated responses to restrictive processes, such as SLAPPs, while advancing work on CSO accountability and effective development cooperation.

BCSDN EO maintained regular engagement with members, providing consultation and mutual support on organisational development, civic space advocacy, and networking. The fee structure was also updated. The network remained financially stable despite a

more constrained funding environment and shifting donor priorities. In parallel, BCSDN engaged with donors and partners to promote more transparent, inclusive, and effective funding practices, while strengthening its internal coordination and operational resilience.

1. BCSDN EFFECTIVELY ADVOCATES FOR THE PROTECTION AND EXPANSION OF THE CIVIC SPACE

BCSDN advances and protects civic space by preventing harmful legislation, supporting enabling changes, engaging in dialogue with the EU, and cooperating with international actors. Its advocacy is grounded in evidence from the Monitoring Matrix and focuses on shaping policies at national, regional, and EU levels.

This strategic goal is set on three pillars:

- I. Effective monitoring of the enabling environment, awareness raising and advocacy;*
- II. Substantive dialogue with the EU; and*
- III. Cooperation with other international actors relevant for the protection and expansion of the civic space in the region.*

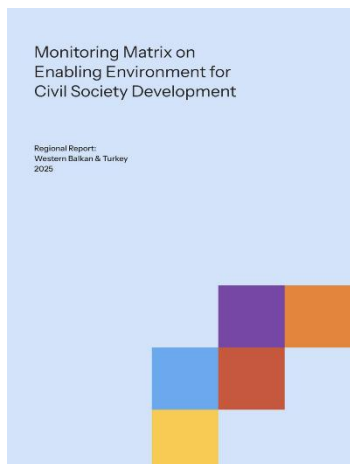
The MONITORING MATRIX is BCSDN's flagship regional tool for assessing the legal, regulatory, and financial environment in which civil society operates in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. It provides structured and comparable data across countries, enabling the identification of trends, risks, and gaps in civic space. Country-level findings informed members' advocacy and coordination efforts, strengthening aligned responses across the network. These findings directly informed members' advocacy and coordination efforts, supporting more aligned responses across the network, while also feeding into national-level engagement with EU Delegations, diplomatic missions, and international partners, and contributing evidence to EU reporting processes, including the Rule of Law and Enlargement Reports.

1.1. Effective monitoring of the enabling environment, awareness raising and advocacy

Monitoring Matrix: Advancing Regional Civic Space Monitoring and Evidence-Based Advocacy

BCSDN remained a key reference point on civic space in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Members produced [seven country reports](#), while BCSDN Executive Office published the [11th Monitoring Matrix Regional Report](#), providing a comprehensive regional assessment of civil society developments in 2024. These findings informed EU-level discussions and reporting, raising the visibility of civic space challenges and supporting their integration

into enlargement policy and funding debates, while strengthening coordinated advocacy and linking national, regional, and EU-level engagement.



The [2024 Regional Report on the civil society environment](#) highlights a continued deterioration of civic space in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, with legal guarantees increasingly undermined by targeted smear campaigns, the misuse of legal frameworks such as AML/CFT regulations, the growing use of SLAPPs, and the re-emergence of foreign agents-type narratives. At the same time, weak and often formalistic government-CSO cooperation, combined with shrinking and unpredictable funding, limit the ability of CSOs to operate and respond to these pressures. The report recommends consistent implementation of legal frameworks, stronger and more structured government-CSO cooperation, and predictable, accessible funding for civil society. It was widely promoted through BCSDN's communication channels and media outlets, particularly in North Macedonia, with website visits reaching 16k and peaking around its publication.

Our regional findings increased the visibility of developments in the Western Balkans and Türkiye in broader European assessments and EU civic space debates. BCSDN contributed the [Western Balkans chapter](#) to the European Civic Forum's Civic Space Report 2025, outlining key regional trends, including pressures on fundamental freedoms, shrinking civic space, and challenges in funding and participation, while also highlighting civil society resilience, risks linked to misuse of legal frameworks, and providing targeted recommendations to strengthen safe and enabling conditions for civic action.

BCSDN contributed to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) [Civic Space Update](#) by drafting the country chapter on North Macedonia. BCSDN EO prepared this contribution as a subcontracted expert input for the [European Policy Institute – Skopje \(EPI\)](#), FRA's national FRANET research partner. The input provided structured analysis across key dimensions of civic space, including monitoring and reporting mechanisms, participation frameworks and consultative bodies, and the broader enabling environment for civil society. It further covered issues related to civil society strategies, legal and policy safeguards, recognition and protection of human rights defenders, and available support mechanisms.

At national level, Partners Albania supported the adoption of a legal amendment introducing VAT exemption on foreign grants, including IPA III funds, addressing a key barrier identified in the MM related to civil society financing.

From Evidence to Policy Dialogue and Advocacy

BCSDN used its civic space reporting to engage in EU-level advocacy, particularly through [high-level policy dialogues in Brussels](#). Discussions with EU institutions, policymakers, and civil society actors highlighted the risks of an enlargement process that prioritises speed over democratic standards and underlined that civic space and civil society participation must be treated as core elements of accession. This included our calls for binding civic space benchmarks, stronger democratic conditionality, and meaningful civil society involvement in reform processes, alongside concerns over declining participation and the weakening role of civil society in the current enlargement approach. These positions were further articulated in BCSDN's policy brief [“The Missing Piece: Why Civic Space Must Be an EU Accession Priority”](#), which translated regional analysis into concrete proposals for embedding civic space safeguards within the enlargement process.



“If the Western Balkans is truly to be integrated, an accelerated accession process must reinforce- not bypass- the democratic foundations that make EU membership desirable in the first place. Civil society is not a threat but an essential pillar of democracy, and its role must be systematically embedded in the EU enlargement process.” Biljana Spasovska, BCSDN ED

BCSDN contributed to regional platforms, sharing insights and comparative analysis. At the [College of Europe Conference in Tirana](#), it highlighted gaps between legal guarantees and their implementation and the practical implications of shrinking civic space. At the [10th EESC Western Balkans Civil Society Forum](#), BCSDN contributed regional data and assessments to discussions on civic space protections, highlighting participation gaps and the risks of weakening civil society involvement in reform processes. At the [13th Point Conference in Sarajevo](#), BCSDN presented findings on funding constraints, restrictive policy trends, and increasing pressure on civil society, linking these developments to the need for stronger safeguards for enabling environments across the region. BCSDN



also contributed to regional discussions at the [EU Conference “Bridges of Experience,”](#) highlighting the role of volunteering as a practical response to shrinking civic space, supporting citizen engagement, cross-border solidarity, and accountability.



“If the EU is serious about democratic transformation in the Western Balkans, civic space must be treated as a core accession requirement, not an afterthought. We need binding civic space benchmarks in the enlargement process, and civil society must be formally integrated and meaningfully involved in the reform processes.” Anja Bosilkova-Antovska, BCSDN Head of Policy and Advocacy

To align responses to shrinking civic space and gaps in civil society participation and funding, in October, BCSDN, together with Partners Albania, convened the regional conference [“Resilient Voices: WB Civil Society in a Changing World”](#) in Tirana, bringing together civil society, institutional, and donor stakeholders to discuss common challenges, align advocacy priorities, and identify joint ways forward. Discussions focused on funding constraints, restrictive legal and policy trends, and the limited inclusion of civil society in reform and EU integration processes. The conference resulted in the launch of the [Declaration on Civic Space](#), setting out shared priorities on safeguarding fundamental freedoms, ensuring meaningful civil society participation in EU integration, and strengthening financial sustainability, and providing a common reference point for follow-up advocacy with governments, EU institutions, and donors.

BCSDN strengthened advocacy capacities through a [Skill and Capacity Lab](#) held within the Democracy & Rights Conference in Copenhagen. The session focused on supporting civil society engagement with EU institutions and policy processes on civic space across EU Member States and enlargement countries. Drawing on our civil society findings and regional advocacy experience, it demonstrated how national developments can be translated into EU-level advocacy priorities, while fostering cross-regional exchange and strengthening skills in evidence-based advocacy and coordinated action.

Regional and National Engagement: Dialogue and Exchange

At national and local level, BCSDN supported more structured civil society–institution dialogue and participation, linking regional perspectives with local processes. At [Civica Mobilitas’ Networking Meeting in Gevgelija](#), BCSDN highlighted the role of Councils for Cooperation among government and CSOs as practical mechanisms for institutionalised

dialogue, emphasising the need for transparent procedures, regular consultations, and clearer follow-up on civil society input at local level. Furthermore, BCSDN [supported](#) civic learning through a youth workshop under the Erasmus+ project, introducing participants to key civic space challenges, including restrictions on participation and freedom of expression, and strengthening their understanding of the role of civil society in democratic processes.

Rapid Alert Mechanism: Mobilising Regional Responses to Civic Space Threats

Building on the [Rapid Alert mechanism](#), BCSDN strengthened its role as a regional hub for early detection and coordinated response to civic space threats, enabling timely alerts, shared analysis, and joint advocacy towards EU institutions, national authorities, and international partners. The mechanism translated monitoring into action, supporting coordinated responses to emerging threats and reinforcing BCSDN's role as a trusted regional actor on civic space.

[Serbia](#) remained a central focus of the Rapid Alert mechanism in 2025 amid intensified pressure on civil society and a deteriorating political environment marked by democratic backsliding. BCSDN responded through timely alerts, public reactions, and coordinated advocacy, including on [cross-border incident](#) involving the detention, expulsion, and entry bans of EU and Western Balkans activists, triggering regional and Europe-wide mobilisation and calls to uphold fundamental rights. It also [addressed](#) smear campaigns targeting Civic Initiatives and its Executive Director Maja Stojanovic in the context of calls for a transparent selection process for the media regulator (REM), urging authorities and stakeholders to counter hostile narratives and protect civic freedoms, and [raised concerns](#) over increasing institutional pressure, including raids on organisations. BCSDN contributed to broader European solidarity, including a [joint letter](#) signed by over 130 organisations, and [responded](#) to developments following mass protests and later [condemned](#) excessive force and documenting violations of the right to peaceful assembly. By sustaining attention on these developments, including Serbia's placement on the [CIVICUS Watchlist](#), BCSDN ensured continued visibility of these developments in relevant discussions.

In [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), BCSDN focused on developments in Republika Srpska related to the so-called "foreign agents" law, [raising concerns](#) about its impact on fundamental freedoms, including risks of stigmatisation, surveillance, and restrictions on civil society. BCSDN highlighted its broader implications for democratic governance and EU integration, calling for its repeal, stronger international response, and continued monitoring. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Rapid Alert mechanism was used to support a positive legislative initiative on civic space. BCSDN issued an urgent call to international actors, including EU institutions and partners, ahead of the parliamentary vote on the Draft Law on Citizen Initiative and Protection of Citizens and Activists, highlighting its potential to strengthen participation and protect activists, including from

intimidation and SLAPPs. This helped reinforce support for the initiative at a critical stage of the legislative process.

Topic in Focus: Gender Equality and Civic Space

Through its research-in-focus on gender equality and civic space, BCSDN strengthened its role in advancing gender-responsive monitoring and advocacy, laying the foundation for more informed and inclusive policy engagement at both national and regional levels.

To address gaps in how civic space monitoring captures the realities of gender equality organisations—often overlooked despite facing disproportionate structural, political, and informal pressures, BCSDN conducted a research-in-focus on the enabling environment for women’s rights and gender-equality focused CSOs. As a key outcome, the Monitoring Matrix methodology was revised to include a structured gender lens. Developed with experts from Akcija Zdruzenska and in exchange with Kvinna till Kvinna, the updated approach introduces gender-responsive indicators and qualitative tools to better capture informal restrictions and inequalities, making the Monitoring Matrix more inclusive and comparable.



The resulting report, [*“The Missing Lens: Rethinking the Enabling Environment for Gender Equality and Civil Society,”*](#) identifies systemic discrimination, political pressure, limited access to resources, and exclusion from decision-making as key challenges undermining gender-focused CSOs. It puts forward targeted recommendations on strengthening legal and policy safeguards, ensuring meaningful participation, improving access to sustainable funding, and integrating gender perspectives into civic space protection. The research combined a review of

existing reports with tailored questionnaires for experts and civil society representatives, covering fundamental rights, financial viability, and state–CSO cooperation. Data collection was carried out by BCSDN members with local stakeholders through 27 expert interviews and 12 focus groups across the Western Balkans. The draft was validated through an online session with members, CSOs, and country experts. This approach enabled broader engagement with actors facing gender-specific challenges and helped identify priority areas for further advocacy and support.

Follow-up on the 2024 Topic in Focus: SLAPPs

BCSDN advanced the shift from research to implementation on SLAPPs in 2025, translating regional findings into concrete national actions and strengthening evidence-based responses across the Western Balkans. Through targeted support to members and partners, this approach increased the visibility of SLAPP cases and strengthened national

advocacy and data systems, while the regional anti-SLAPP coalition served as a platform for information exchange.

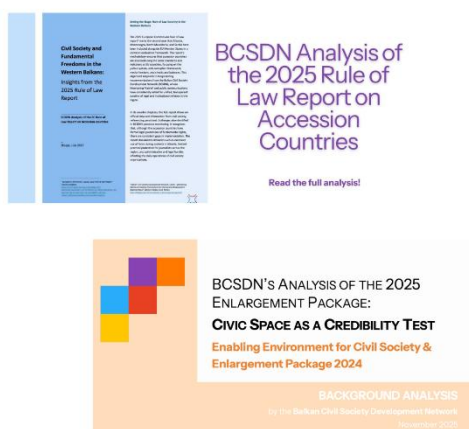
Building on the 2024 Topic in Focus, BCSDN mobilised its network and coalition partners through a targeted call for actions, supporting initiatives focused on legal support, data collection, awareness-raising, and advocacy.

Supported initiatives delivered concrete results across the region:

- Serbia: Increased accessibility of the national SLAPP register through translation and internationalization, strengthening its use in EU-level monitoring and advocacy.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: Advanced advocacy on the Draft Law on Citizens' Initiative and Protection of Citizens and Activists, while establishing the first national SLAPP registry focused on environmental activists and increasing public awareness.
- Montenegro: Strengthened policy and legal debate through a policy paper on transposing the EU SLAPP Directive and a multi-stakeholder roundtable.
- Albania: Raised awareness and improved institutional understanding of SLAPPs through educational tools and a national multi-stakeholder workshop, supporting dialogue on legal gaps and alignment with EU standards.

1.2. Substantive dialogue with the EU

BCSDN played a more prominent role in EU-level discussions, bringing evidence-based analysis and targeted advocacy on rule of law, civic space, and democratic resilience. Its work helped bring regional civic space challenges higher on the EU agenda, inform debates on civil society funding and participation, and reinforce the role of civil society in EU enlargement and democratic governance.



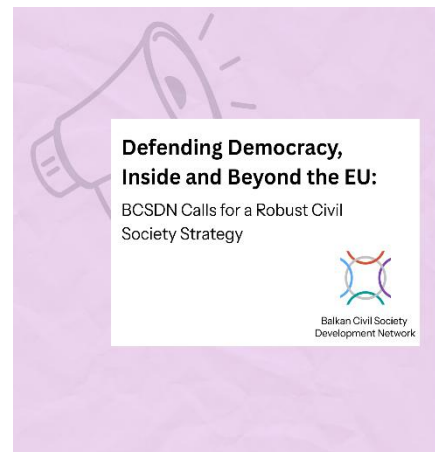
BCSDN drew on [regular analysis of the European Commission's Rule of Law Report](#) and [Enlargement Package](#) for enlargement countries, combining regional and country-level insights on civic space and fundamental freedoms. Building on this, BCSDN highlighted the gap between legal guarantees and their implementation in practice, particularly in relation to restrictions on participation, misuse of legal frameworks such as SLAPPs, and weakening safeguards for fundamental freedoms. It called for these issues to be more consistently reflected in EU enlargement policy and follow-up, including

through clearer expectations on civic space, more transparent and inclusive processes, and stronger support for independent civil society and media

BCSDN contributed to EU-level discussions through its participation at the launch of the 2024 EU TACSO Regional Assessment Report, bringing Western Balkans perspectives into debates on the enabling environment for civil society. In the panel discussion, Anja Bosilkova-Antovska [highlighted](#) political drivers of shrinking civic space, including restrictive narratives, funding pressures, and limits on advocacy, stressing the need for meaningful participation and more sustainable, flexible support for civil society. In this context, BCSDN also underlined the importance of ensuring that Western Balkans civil society is more systematically included in EU programmes and funding frameworks, including ongoing discussions on the next MFF, as well as the need to anchor civic space more clearly within the EU Civil Society Strategy and enlargement process. These positions were further reflected in BCSDN's broader engagement in EU-level policy processes, particularly on funding, participation, and transparency.

At EU level, coordinated use of MM evidence informed discussions around the EU Civil Society Strategy and broader enlargement policy debates, providing input on financing, regulatory frameworks, and civil society participation.

In line with this, BCSDN engaged in EU-level policy processes through targeted advocacy and reactions addressing debates on civil society funding, participation, and transparency. For example, BCSDN [contributed](#) to discussions on the Directive on Transparency of Third-Country Interest Representation, opposing the use of transparency measures to stigmatise or restrict civil society. In [reaction](#) to the European Parliament working group on NGO funding, BCSDN warned against narratives that risk delegitimising civil society and undermining democratic participation. BCSDN also [engaged](#) in EU enlargement debates through reactions to European Parliament reports, calling for clear benchmarks, faster reforms, and meaningful civil society involvement. It further [contributed](#) to the development of the EU Civil Society Strategy, calling for enforceable standards on civic space protection, sustainable funding, and meaningful participation, ensuring equal treatment of civil society across the EU and enlargement countries.



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

BCSDN leveraged strategic partnerships to scale its advocacy beyond the region, bringing WBT civic space concerns into global and European agendas while strengthening collective action and influence across key policy processes.

BCSDN sustained its cooperation with the CIVICUS World Alliance, reporting on civic space conditions across eight Balkans countries and contributing regular updates that placed regional developments in the global spotlight and fed into mechanisms such as the CIVICUS Watchlist. This engagement was further strengthened in 2025 with the [appointment](#) of BCSDN's ED, Biljana Spasovska, to the CIVICUS Board of Directors, recognising the network's expertise and increasing its influence in global decision-making.

BCSDN continued to play an active role within the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), contributing to global advocacy on financing of development and civic space. Through CPDE, BCSDN engaged in the FfD4 process, contributing to responses to both the [Zero Draft](#) and the [first draft](#) of the outcome document, calling for transformative financing, stronger safeguards for civic engagement, and inclusive, accountable global frameworks. BCSDN also [supported](#) CPDE's call for action in protecting global solidarity amid the U.S. foreign aid suspension, stressing the implications of abrupt funding cuts for civil society globally.

BCSDN engaged with the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Western Balkans, using civic space evidence to inform regional governance discussions. In March, it [called](#) on OGP members to address covert attacks on democracy, including hostile narratives, political pressure, and misinformation, and urged stronger commitments to safeguard independent civil society participation and democratic accountability.

BCSDN's engagement with European networks and institutions continued to grow, enhancing its influence on EU policy processes that affect civil society. Through membership in the European Civic Forum (ECF), BCSDN contributed to coordinated EU-level advocacy for expanded civic space protections and more inclusive decision-making. Membership in the CASE Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe provided a strategic platform for coordinated action against strategic lawsuits suppressing public participation. BCSDN also actively contributed to discussions within the FRA civic space group, bringing regional insights into EU-level exchanges on emerging challenges affecting civil society.

BCSDN remained actively engaged with the EESC in 2025, contributing to EU enlargement discussions and strengthening the role of civil society in EU policymaking. Through the Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) Initiative, it also advanced perspectives from the Western Balkans and Türkiye in EESC processes and consultations. This engagement also [contributed](#) to Kosovo's inclusion in the initiative, following coordinated regional advocacy with partners, strengthening equitable representation and further integrating regional civil society into EU consultative processes.

BCSDN strengthened regional collaboration through the [Civic Space Hackathon](#), bringing together NGOs, activists, legal experts, communicators, and civic tech actors to co-create practical solutions to emerging civic space threats. Through an open call, multidisciplinary teams developed ideas to counter disinformation and smear campaigns, improve strategic communication, strengthen cross-border solidarity, and enhance transparency and access to resources. The initiative complemented BCSDN's Rapid Alert work by generating solutions to improve early detection, monitoring, and response. Two [winning ideas](#) by Blink 141-43 (North Macedonia) and IPAK (Serbia)

focused on countering gendered disinformation through creative public engagement and on automating data collection for civic space monitoring.

2. SECURING MORE FAVOURABLE DONOR PRACTICES FOR PROTECTION AND EXPANSION OF THE CIVIC SPACE

Donor agendas and policies continue to shape the environment for civil society in the Western Balkans, particularly in the context of limited public funding and weak philanthropy. While international support remains essential, gaps persist in aligning donor approaches with local needs, including limited consultation, weak local ownership, and reliance on short-term, project-based funding. In response, BCSDN engages with donors to promote more transparent, inclusive, and sustainable funding approaches grounded in development effectiveness principles.

Donor research and evidence-based advocacy

In 2025, BCSDN responded to developments in donor support to civil society through analysis, advocacy, and communication. In response to the U.S. funding freeze, it mobilised the network, aligned responses, and called for greater donor flexibility and coordination. It also produced regional research on donor practices to inform engagement with donors and stakeholders.

The U.S. funding freeze significantly affected civil society in the region, increasing financial instability, exposing gaps in donor coordination and predictability, and fuelling hostile narratives against civil society and independent media, including smear campaigns targeting BCSDN members. In response, BCSDN brought members together to assess the impact and align responses, including exchanges on emergency support and funding flexibility, and issued a [joint public statement](#) calling for recognition of civil society as a key democratic actor and for coordinated efforts to safeguard civic space and counter disinformation.

Building on these developments, and in the context of broader shifts in donor priorities across the region, BCSDN strengthened its evidence-based engagement on donor practices by publishing the regional research, [Donor Support, Civic Space and the Future of Civil Society in the Western Balkans](#). To inform the analysis, BCSDN held targeted discussions with key donors alongside consultations with civil society actors, ensuring the research reflects both strategic priorities and on-the-ground realities. The report examines how current donor approaches shape the resilience and sustainability of civil society, highlighting key challenges:

- limited consultation and local ownership in donor strategies
- fragmented coordination and shifting donor priorities

- reliance on short-term, project-based funding over core support
- complex compliance requirements that constrain CSOs' strategic space

These findings point to structural risks for civil society sustainability and independence. These findings informed targeted recommendations by BCSDN to promote more flexible, coordinated, and locally grounded funding models, aligned with Development Aid Effectiveness principles. Through dissemination and advocacy, the research informed dialogue with donors and stakeholders on improving funding practices to better support resilient civil society and protect civic space.

BCSDN disseminated the findings and recommendations to donors, CSOs, and international stakeholders to support policy dialogue on donor practices. This included [presenting](#) the research at regional forums, such as the SMART Balkans Regional Conference 2025, highlighting the need to move beyond project-based funding towards more flexible, trust-based, and sustainable support for civil society.

3. STRENGTHENING BCSDN MUTUAL LEARNING, COORDINATION, AND COLLABORATION FOR STRENGTHENED ADVOCACY ON CIVIC SPACE

Strengthening learning, coordination and collaboration within the Network

In 2025, BCSDN strengthened its effectiveness as a coordinated, evidence-based network, improving the quality and consistency of its monitoring and advocacy. Enhanced internal alignment, knowledge sharing, and governance contributed to stronger collaboration and more coherent regional action. These efforts were reflected in increased member satisfaction and improved transparency and communication across the network.

BCSDN strengthened coordination, collaboration, and mutual learning across the network throughout the year. Key governance processes, including the Annual Council and two Board meetings, focused on aligning priorities and guiding the network's strategic direction. The Annual Council also enabled members to review progress, agree on key plans, and exchange insights on civic space developments and advocacy efforts.

BCSDN continued regular exchanges with members to share updates, strengthen coordination, and support joint action, informing three editions of the Internal Digest. It also maintained an online resource database on key civil society topics to support knowledge sharing across the network.

Members expressed their overall satisfaction with the network's continued work and recognised BCSDN as a relevant, credible, and much-needed regional platform, as validated by the results of the annual members' feedback survey. The overall member

satisfaction for 2025 stands at 74.09%, marking a decrease compared to last year's 86.67%. The survey revealed positive appreciation for the work of the Executive Office (74.64%), representing a decrease compared to last year's 90%, while members particularly recognised the EO's responsiveness, expertise, and continued commitment during a demanding transition period. The satisfaction rate for the internal and external communication and cooperation of the network stands at 72.22%, showing a decrease compared to last year's 86.67%, while members continued to rate most positively external communication, transparency, accountability, and solidarity among members. The satisfaction rate for the functioning and activities of the network in 2025 stands at 75.40%, compared to 83.33% last year, while members continued to highlight the relevance of implemented activities, particularly the Monitoring Matrix, advocacy outputs, donor-related research, and the Civic Space Hackathon, as key contributions of the network. Despite the lower scores recorded this year, the feedback demonstrates that members remain strongly committed to the network, value its role and achievements, and provided constructive suggestions aimed at further strengthening cooperation, communication, and long-term sustainability.

Communications 2.0

In 2025, BCSDN moved beyond rebranding into more focused and strategically guided communication. Building on the foundations set in 2024 and a more structured communications approach, communications became more consistent and better aligned with the network's advocacy and regional work, with increased media presence.

BCSDN developed a [Communication Strategy](#) to guide both its own communication and coordination with members. This supports better alignment between internal priorities and network-wide advocacy, and ensures more consistent communication.

Stakeholder engagement increased, supported by expanded social media outreach and more regular email communication. By the end of the year, the BCSDN website reached 58K total views, continuing the increase from the previous period. Much of this engagement came from our policy briefs, the Hackathon, media coverage, regional research on civil society environment, and the Report on donor shifts, as well as continued interest in our findings. Furthermore, the 2024 Monitoring Matrix Reports- both national and regional- achieved significant traction despite being released late in the year, garnering over 1.5K dedicated webpage views. This level of engagement shows the increasing relevance of our monitoring work and strengthens BCSDN's role in protecting civic space in the region.

This year, key project outputs were further promoted on Facebook and Instagram, reaching more than 50,000 people across the Western Balkans. Engagement metrics have maintained a steady upward trajectory:

- Web Traffic: Building on the previous increase, webpage views continued to rise, driven largely by our policy briefs, the Hackathon, media coverage, the Report on donor shifts, and the latest Monitoring Matrix reports.
- Social Media Expansion: Our Facebook community grew beyond 7.2K likes and 6.4K followers, while our LinkedIn community surpassed 2.5K followers, reflecting deeper professional engagement. Following our strategic exit from Twitter, our expansion onto Instagram has proven highly successful, providing a dynamic space for visual storytelling.
- Flagship Tools: The [Email Alerts](#), serving over 1,500 subscribers, remains our most direct and influential communication channel, complemented by our Internal Digest, which provides a comprehensive recap of our internal regional accomplishments.

In the end of the year, we also delivered an [annual recap](#), providing a short overview of our activities and key developments throughout 2025.

BCSDN strengthened its presence in mainstream media, bringing its findings to a wider public. This resulted in coverage across both traditional and digital news outlets:

- Press Releases: We issued more than six press releases that were featured by [several mainstream and online media organisations](#) in the region.
- Broadcast Presence: Our regional work gained high-level visibility through a featured TV appearance on Telma and a formal statement provided to Sitel, the largest media outlet in North Macedonia.

Looking ahead, BCSDN has defined plans for continued public engagement. In collaboration with Zar Ptica, we developed a concept for a media campaign planned for the first half of 2026. These efforts aim to further strengthen our digital presence and support broader public awareness of the importance of protecting civic space in the region.

Further strengthening its communication approach and regional engagement, BCSDN, in partnership with TÜSEV and TACSO, contributed to the [“Western Balkans and Türkiye Regional Hope-Based Communication Bootcamp”](#) in Istanbul. The initiative resulted in a practical guide equipping CSOs with strategic tools to strengthen their communication and public trust through hope-based messaging.

Refining and strengthening our advocacy approach and tools

BCSDN strengthened its advocacy through better coordination, improved tools, and more consistent use of evidence. Through internal workshops, the network ensured more comparable assessments across countries and integrated gender-responsive insights into the Monitoring Matrix. A quarterly-updated online database on civic space developments was also introduced to support more structured data collection across the network.

Advocacy coordination was further strengthened through regular internal exchanges. Two online advocacy meetings, together with an internal follow-up meeting after the Brussels

advocacy visit, enabled members to align priorities, coordinate messaging, and advance joint responses to emerging civic space challenges. The Annual Council meeting also helped define advocacy priorities for 2025, setting a shared direction across the network.

Consolidate membership and network's sustainability

BCSDN continued consolidating its membership and strengthening the network's sustainability amid a significantly more constrained funding environment. Following Sida's decision to shorten the implementation period of the current programme for one year, due to the broader withdrawal from regional funding, BCSDN prioritised safeguarding core capacities and network coherence while actively exploring alternative funding sources. The network engaged in strategic discussion among members on sustainability risks and opportunities, strengthened internal coordination, and pursued new funding applications to mitigate the impact of Sida's accelerated phase-out. Together, these steps helped maintain BCSDN's capacity to adapt and sustain an active and engaged membership, while supporting the network's longer-term stability in a more challenging funding environment.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

1. Evidence Needs to Translate into Early Warning and Action

Engagement with EU institutions in 2025 confirmed that evidence alone is insufficient to trigger timely or consistent response. While BCSDN's Monitoring Matrix is recognised, its use remains largely descriptive and retrospective within EU processes. This highlighted the need to move towards more structured, forward-looking approaches that translate evidence into prioritised signals and clearer entry points for action. This lesson directly informs BCSDN's direction for 2026, including the development of an early warning approach that links monitoring with timelier and more operational engagement.

2. Innovation Requires Investment and Methodological Clarity

The increasing complexity and volume of civic space data highlighted the limits of manual monitoring approaches. Initial steps towards exploring AI-supported tools for the Monitoring Matrix confirmed their potential to improve efficiency, consistency, and timeliness of analysis. At the same time, this requires careful methodological design, quality control, and internal capacity to ensure that technological integration strengthens, rather than undermines, the credibility and comparability of findings.

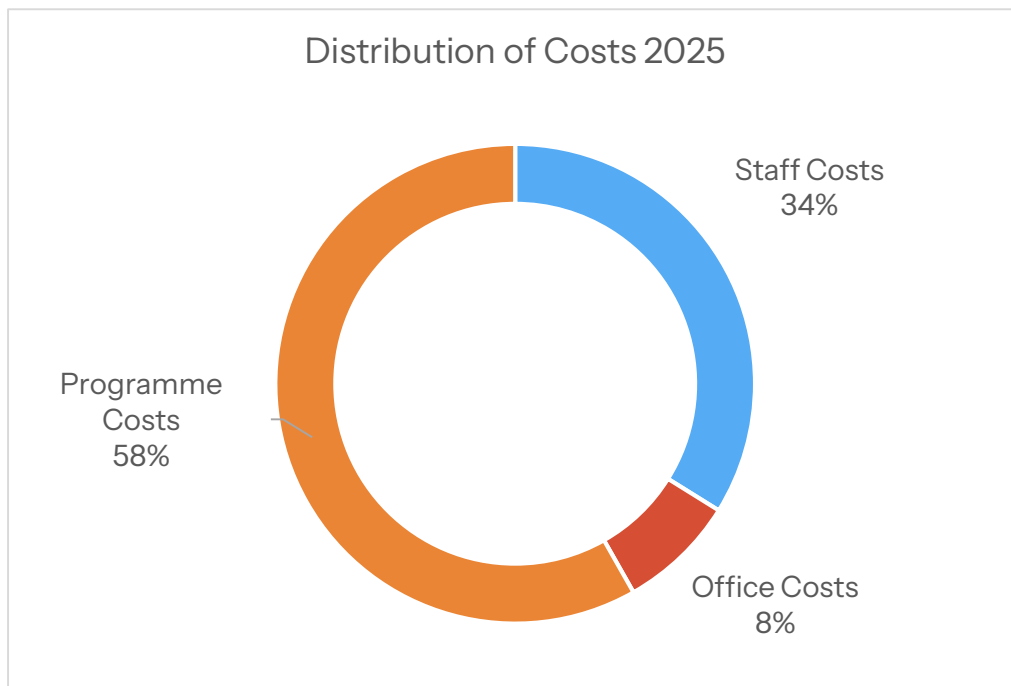
3. Funding Uncertainty Directly Affects Operational Stability and Strategic Focus

The U.S. funding freeze and broader donor shifts exposed the extent to which external funding volatility impacts not only civil society at large, but also BCSDN's own planning and delivery. Reduced predictability affects prioritisation, continuity of activities, and the ability to maintain strategic focus, often requiring short-term adjustments and reallocation of resources. This underlined the need for more resilient funding structures, diversification of support, and continued advocacy for funding models that provide stability for core functions such as monitoring and coordination.

4. Internal Coordination Must Match External Ambition

Expanded engagement at EU and regional level, combined with a broader scope of work, placed additional pressure on internal coordination and capacity. While collaboration across the network remained strong, 2025 demonstrated the need for more structured internal processes to ensure prioritisation, alignment, and effective use of resources. Strengthening the links between monitoring, advocacy, and communication will be critical to maintain impact as external demands continue to grow.

III FINANCIAL REPORT



Income Source	Received
Membership Fee	4,450 €
Sida	468,493 €
RBF Core Funding	35,383 €
Civicus CSM	15,126 €
Other revenues	57,018 €
Total	580,470 €



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