



Balkan Civil Society  
Development Network

## BCSDN ANNUAL REPORT 2025:

# Operating in a Constrained Civic Space in the Balkans: From Monitoring to Action and Innovation





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## BCSDN JOURNEY 2025

### I. Civic Space in the Balkans: Formal Legal Stability, Restrictions in Practice

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

### II. Continued Monitoring and Reporting on the Civil Society Environment in the WBT

Through the Monitoring Matrix, BCSDN provides comparable regional data, translating trends into targeted advocacy for clearer civic space benchmarks and stronger democratic conditionality in the EU enlargement process. This reflects a shift from descriptive reporting toward more structured, policy-relevant inputs for EU and international engagement.

A key step has been addressing the “missing lenses” in our data. By integrating a structured gender lens, we introduced gender-responsive indicators to better capture systemic discrimination and informal restrictions affecting gender equality organisations.

### III. Responding to Donors "Funding Freeze" and Global Shift

The year was marked by significant shifts in donor support, notably the U.S. funding freeze, which exposed structural weaknesses in civil society sustainability. This volatility did more than impact finances; it reinforced hostile narratives questioning the legitimacy of independent actors.

In response, BCSDN produced a report on **Donor Support and Civil Society in the Western Balkans**, and advocated for a more structured dialogue on donor practices, pushing for funding models that are flexible, predictable, and locally grounded. We highlighted that external funding volatility impacts the strategic focus of the entire sector, underlining the urgent need for diversified support and the protection of core functions like monitoring and advocacy.



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## IV. Advancing Protection Against SLAPPs

Following our 2024 research, 2025 was a year of implementation. We transitioned from analyzing Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) to supporting concrete national actions. This included improving the accessibility of national SLAPP registers to strengthen their use in EU-level monitoring and advocacy.

Our efforts contributed to tangible legislative debates, such as supporting a policy paper on transposing the EU SLAPP Directive in Montenegro and advocating for the Draft Law on Citizen Initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina to protect activists from intimidation.

## V. Integrating Innovation in Civic Space Monitoring and Analysis

We advanced beyond traditional methods by launching a regional Civic Space Hackathon. This initiative brought together diverse actors to co-create practical solutions for monitoring and risk identification—ranging from tools to counter disinformation and strengthen public trust to models for funding transparency and cross-border solidarity. Contributions from teams such as Blink 42-21 (winner), IPAC (second place), while we simultaneously explored AI-supported analysis to improve the consistency and timeliness of our regional findings.

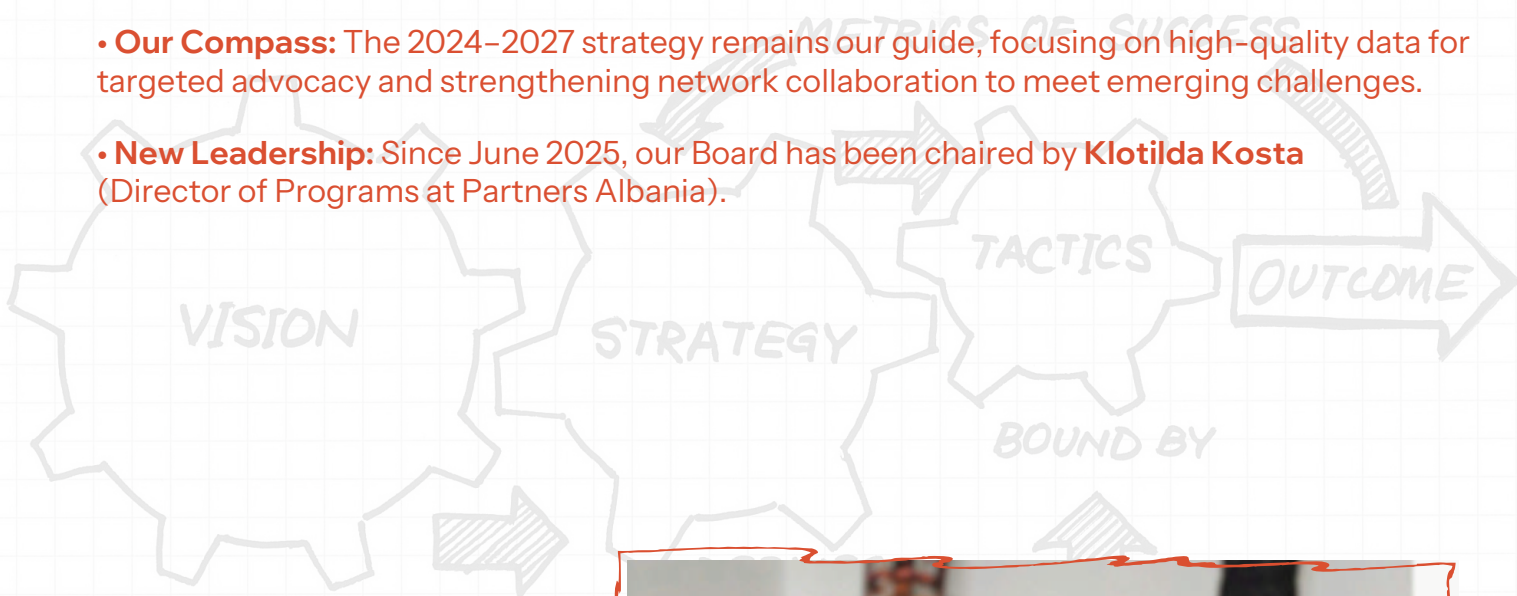




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## What You Should Know About Us

- **Strategic Mission:** BCSDN remains a regional network dedicated to protect and expanding civic space through evidence-based policy influence.
- **Our Vision:** A Balkan region integrated into the EU, featuring inclusive democracies and an enabling environment for civil society.
- **Our Compass:** The 2024–2027 strategy remains our guide, focusing on high-quality data for targeted advocacy and strengthening network collaboration to meet emerging challenges.
- **New Leadership:** Since June 2025, our Board has been chaired by **Klotilda Kosta** (Director of Programs at Partners Albania).



### Call-out Box

"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."

> — Biljana Spasovska,  
BCSDN Executive Director





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## Core Activities & Milestones in 2025

- **Monitoring and Advocacy:** Published the **11th Monitoring Matrix Regional Report**, providing a comprehensive assessment of civil society developments across the region.
- **Targeted Outreach:** We leveraged multiple media channels to share our findings with **16,000 + people**, while our broader advocacy efforts engaged a significant number of EU and international stakeholders, including representatives from EU institutions and international organisations.
- **Countering SLAPPs:** Shifted from regional analysis to supporting national-level actions, strengthening awareness and understanding of SLAPPs, and increasing the visibility of cases.
- **Expert Contributions:** Prepared the North Macedonia chapter for the **EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Civic Space Update**, contributed updates to the **CIVICUS Monitor** for the Western Balkans, and authored the Western Balkans chapter for the **2025 European Civic Forum's Civic Space Report**.
- **Network Resilience:** Updated our internal policies and maintained financial stability despite a constrained funding environment and global donor shifts.

In 2025, we used a new communication strategy to make our data more accessible and actionable for international decision-makers and to counter hostile narratives against civil society.





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## OUR IMPACT IN 2025

# STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: Advocating for the Protection and Expansion of Civic Space

### Activities, Results & Impact

- **Achievement:** Comprehensive civic space analysis across 7 countries.
- **Impact:** Findings served as direct input for the EU Progress, reports and Rule of Law Reports for accession countries and the **EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)** update.
- **Reach:** Over 16,000 website visits; key findings presented to high-level stakeholders in Brussels.

### Countering SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation):

- **Achievement:** Operationalized national SLAPP registries in Serbia.
- **Impact:** Increased visibility of legal harassment, triggering national policy debates in Montenegro regarding the transposition of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive.

### Gender - Responsive Monitoring:

- **Achievement:** Integrated a structured gender lens into the Monitoring Matrix methodology.
- **Impact:** Uncovered systemic, informal barriers facing women's rights organizations that were previously invisible in standard reporting.

### Our Advocacy Messages & Asks

**"Civic space is not a technicality; it is a democratic standard."**

We call on the EU to implement **binding civic space benchmarks** within the enlargement process to ensure democratic accountability.

**"Stop the legal harassment of activists."**

Governments should adopt immediate legal safeguards to protect journalists and activists from meritless, intimidatory lawsuits.

**"Democracy is incomplete without a gender perspective."**

International institutions must recognize threats against gender-focused activists as a primary indicator of shrinking civic space

**Achievement:** Developed comprehensive insights by bridging European Commission reports with ground-level data on civic space and fundamental freedoms.

**Impact:** Exposed the "Implementation Gap" between legal theory and practice, specifically regarding SLAPP lawsuits and participation restrictions.

**Impact:** Contributed to EU enlargement policy discussions by promoting clearer expectations for civic space and more transparent, inclusive processes.

**Achievement:** Represented Western Balkans civil society perspectives at high-level EU and international forums, contributing to key discussions on civic space, enlargement, and democratic governance.

**Impact:** Shifted the debate toward addressing the political drivers of shrinking space, such as restrictive narratives and advocacy limits.

**Achievement:** Positioned civil society needs within ongoing discussions for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

**Impact:** Secured a stronger case for sustainable and flexible funding and the systematic inclusion of Balkan CSOs in EU strategic frameworks.



## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: Securing Favourable Donor Practices

### Activities, Results & Impact

#### Advocating for Sustainable Funding:

- **Achievement:** Engaged in strategic dialogue with the EU and international partners following the U.S. funding freeze.
- **Impact:** Raised donor awareness of withdrawal risks; Monitoring Matrix advocacy contributed to **VAT exemption** for foreign grants in Albania.
- **Result:** Shifted the conversation toward "locally-led" and flexible funding models.
- **Monitoring Donor Policies:**
  - **Achievement:** Developed specific policy recommendations for donors based on regional monitoring data.
  - **Impact:** Coordinated with **CIVICUS** to elevate regional funding challenges to the global stage.

### Our Advocacy Messages & Asks

**"Civil society sustainability requires predictability, not ad-hoc support."**

We advocate for **long-term, lexible, and core funding** that allows CSOs to remain independent and resilient during geopolitical shifts.

**"Donor shifts must not leave frontline activists behind."**

Donors must establish protective "exit strategies" or transitional mechanisms when changing strategic priorities in the region.



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## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: Strengthening BCSDN Coordination and Collaboration

### Activities, Results & Impact

### Our Advocacy Messages & Asks

#### Rapid Alert Mechanism:

- **Achievement:** Immediate response to restrictive "foreign agent" laws in RS (BiH) and systemic pressure in Serbia.
- **Impact:** Catalyzed international condemnation and put pressure on authorities by alerting global networks and EU bodies.

#### Innovation & Technology (Civic Space Hackathon):

- **Achievement:** Hosted the first regional hackathon and explored AI-supported analysis for monitoring.
- **Impact:** Enhanced the network's capacity for early-warning signals and timely risk identification using digital tools.

#### "Resilient Voices" Regional Conference (Tirana):

- **Achievement:** Adoption of the **Joint Declaration on Civic Space**
- **Impact:** Solidified regional network cohesion and defined unified advocacy priorities for upcoming engagements with the EU and governments in the region.

"No attack on civil society will go unnoticed."

Regional solidarity is our strongest shield against authoritarian trends. We must act as one to defend the many.

"Innovation in the service of democracy."

We must harness new technologies to be faster and more precise in protecting our shared democratic values.

"United in diversity, stronger in action."

Regional cooperation is the key to influencing processes in both Brussels and the Western Balkan capitals.



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## Defending Democracy Together: Our Path Forward

As we navigate an era of shifting global priorities and tightening civic space, the mission of BCSDN has never been more vital. Our 2025 findings reveal that while the challenges are evolving, our collective resilience is also growing.

### Our 2026 Strategy Focus:

- **Turning Data into Defense:** We will continue to use the Monitoring Matrix to provide the evidence needed to challenge restrictive policies and advocate for binding civic space benchmarks in the EU accession process.
- **Ensuring Sustainability:** We are leading the call for more flexible, predictable, and locally-grounded funding models that protect the core functions of civil society during times of geopolitical, financial transition.
- **Innovating for the Future:** From regional hackathons to AI-supported monitoring towards early warning mechanism, we are embracing new tools to stay ahead of threats and strengthen the voices of activists across the Balkans.





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