



RESILIENT VOICES

Western Balkans Civil Society
in a Changing World

REGIONAL CONFERENCE
1 OCT 2025, TIRANA, ALBANIA

#CIVILSOCIETYWB



RESILIENT VOICES

Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT



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Balkan Civil Society Development Network and Partners Albania for Change and Development extend their sincere gratitude to all participants for their active engagement and valuable contributions during the conference. Special thanks go to the keynote speakers and panelists for sharing their insights and experience, which enriched the discussions on civic space, EU integration, and the future of civil society in the Western Balkans.

We are grateful to the representatives of civil society organizations from across the region, government institutions, and EU bodies, as well as to our colleagues from European networks and partner organizations, whose perspectives fostered a dynamic and constructive exchange.

We also extend our sincere gratitude to the European Commission, to the Delegation of the European Union to Albania, and to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for their longstanding partnership and support in advancing civil society dialogue, regional cooperation, and democratic development.

Finally, heartfelt thanks go to everyone who contributed to the preparation and success of this conference, a truly collective effort that reflects the spirit of collaboration and shared vision for a more resilient and participatory civic space in the Western Balkans.

CONFERENCE CONVENERS



RESILIENT VOICES

Western Balkans Civil Society
in a Changing World

The Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) is a regional network comprising civil society organizations from the Western Balkans and Türkiye, committed to protecting and expanding civic space and enhancing the sustainability of the civil sector. Through evidence-based advocacy, regional monitoring, and joint policy influence, BCSDN works to ensure that civil society is recognized as a vital partner in democracy, governance, and EU integration processes. The network also fosters collaboration, mutual learning, and solidarity among its members to amplify the collective voice of civil society and contribute to inclusive and sustainable development in the region.

Partners Albania for Change and Development is an independent Albanian non-profit organization established in 2001, dedicated to advancing civil society and fostering cross-sector collaboration to strengthen democratic governance and sustainable economic development. The organization actively contributes to European and regional initiatives that promote civic engagement, philanthropy, and social innovation. Its work is structured around four key programmatic areas: enabling environment for civil society, entrepreneurship and social innovation, philanthropy and support infrastructure, and transparent and participatory governance. Partners Albania is a member of the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN).

Building on their long-standing partnership and shared vision for a vibrant and resilient civil society, Partners Albania and BCSDN jointly organized the regional conference “*Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World*”, held on 1 October 2025 in Tirana, Albania. Rooted in their common commitment to evidence-based advocacy and regional cooperation, the conference provided a space for dialogue, reflection, and joint action on the evolving civic space in the Western Balkans, setting the stage for a shared vision toward democratic transformation and European integration.

AT A GLANCE



RESILIENT VOICES

Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World

The Regional Civil Society Conference **“Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World”** took place in Tirana, Albania, bringing together over 150 participants, including civil society leaders, policymakers, government representatives, donors, media, and members of the diplomatic community from across the Western Balkans and the European Union.

Organised by Partners Albania for Change and Development and the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), with the support of the European Union (EU) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the conference provided a high-level platform for regional dialogue and exchange.

The discussions reflected the current state of civil society amid democratic reforms, shrinking civic space, limited funding, and the ongoing EU integration process. Through keynote speeches and three thematic panels, participants explored the key challenges and opportunities shaping the sector’s resilience in a rapidly changing environment.

The first panel examined civic space and the legal environment, focusing on emerging trends and the need for enabling frameworks for participation. The second addressed civil society’s role in EU integration, highlighting regional practices of dialogue, reform monitoring, and cooperation with public institutions. The third panel explored funding futures, assessing donor shifts, opportunities for public funding, and sustainable models to strengthen the long-term resilience of the sector. Each session was followed by Question and Answer (Q&A) sessions enabling an effective public engagement.

The conference reaffirmed the essential contribution of civil society to democratic governance and European integration, and its irreplaceable role in ensuring transparency, accountability, and citizen participation across the region.

This document is a summary of the speeches, panel discussions, and participants’ contributions during the conference. It is widely shared with all stakeholders involved in the event, as well as with the general public.

OPENING REMARKS

Ms. Juliana Hoxha

Director, Partners Albania for Change and Development

Opening the Regional Civil Society Conference “Resilient Voices”, Ms. Hoxha emphasized that the event reflects the shared determination of civic actors to sustain democracy and European integration amid shrinking civic space and funding uncertainty. She noted Albania’s tangible progress in the EU accession process, five of six negotiating clusters opened and 28 of 33 acquis chapters under negotiation, marking the country as a frontrunner alongside Montenegro. This progress, praised in Brussels as “fast and determined,” was recognized by Commissioner Kos, who underlined that the accession process cannot rely solely on governments. It must involve parliament, civil society, and the private sector since broad inclusion builds consensus strengthens public trust, and ensures reforms are sustainable.



Ms. Hoxha pointed out that while civil society across the Western Balkans plays an indispensable role, engaging citizens, providing expertise, and monitoring institutions, the environment remains uneven. In Albania, the 2019–2023 Civil Society Roadmap was only partially implemented, and the new one has been delayed for two years. Consultation processes often remain formalities, public funding mechanisms are opaque and inconsistent, and the electronic registry law has yet to be enforced after three years. These institutional barriers, combined with negligible incentives for philanthropy, continue to hinder the sector’s growth.

She further noted that donor withdrawal, particularly the abrupt halt of USAID support and cuts by bilateral donors, has left significant financial gaps, with EU funding unable to meet all needs. Nonetheless, important opportunities are emerging through the forthcoming EU Civil Society Strategy and the establishment of Joint Consultative Committees that link Western Balkan CSOs with EU institutions, providing structured channels for policy input. Concluding her remarks, she stressed that the conference aims to identify how civil society can connect these European-level processes with national realities, secure long-term sustainability, and ensure that civic actors in the Western Balkans are not merely participants but active shapers of the civic space agenda in Europe.

Ms. Biljana Spasovska,

Director, Balkan Civil Society Development Network

Ms. Spasovska welcomed participants warmly, reflecting on Albania and Montenegro as front-runners in the EU accession process. She emphasised the responsibility of civil society to voice concerns, provide recommendations, and contribute to stronger civic space as an integral part of the region’s European future.

She stressed that this conference was conceived as a targeted platform to raise awareness of challenges and opportunities for civil society in the Western Balkans, particularly amid the shrinking civic space and limited operational capacity. Ms. Spasovska highlighted the dramatic impact of the abrupt USAID withdrawal on



CSOs, including destabilising effects beyond finances, such as rising delegitimising narratives. She explained BCSDN’s role in monitoring the enabling environment in the Western Balkans, noting a concerning trend of shrinking civic space and the negative impact of abrupt donor withdrawals, particularly USAID. Ms. Spasovska highlighted the results of regional research, which show volatility in the donor landscape, including reductions and withdrawals by key international donors, collectively affecting civil society’s financial sustainability.

She emphasised the need for domestic public funding to act as a stable resource rather than a tool for political manipulation, particularly in the context of democratic backsliding.

Concluding, she encouraged participants to actively contribute to discussions and to collaborate in drafting a joint declaration as a tangible output of the conference, guiding future steps and strengthening the resilience and impact of civil society.

H.E. Silvio Gonzato (video message)

Ambassador of the European Union to Albania

Unable to attend in person, H.E. Ambassador Gonzato addressed the conference via a video message, emphasising that the EU accession process is a whole-of-society project. He stressed that civil society organisations (CSOs) must actively participate, bringing their expertise, hands-on knowledge, and sectoral insight into consultations and policymaking. CSOs also play a crucial role in monitoring government actions and ensuring accountability. He highlighted the importance of joint consultation committees with the European Economic and Social Committee as platforms for CSOs to engage in accession negotiations. Participation and consultation of civil society, he noted, are fundamental requirements under the political criteria for functioning democratic institutions.



The Ambassador expressed concern over the shrinking civic space, noting that CSOs and journalists often face smear campaigns, adverse legislative changes, and sometimes verbal or physical threats. In response, the EU continues to support a vibrant and independent civil society and independent media, which are essential for a healthy democracy. He outlined key EU support mechanisms, including the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy, as well as calls for proposals addressing diversity, equality, and inclusion. He further noted that, as discussions advance on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU aims to ensure that resources for external action and civil society support remain adequate to address current and emerging challenges. While EU funding cannot fully replace the withdrawal of US support, he reassured that commitment to fundamental values such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights remains strong. In conclusion, Ambassador Gonzato reaffirmed that civil society must remain a proactive, vocal, and engaged partner in the EU enlargement process, helping to shape the region's future, uphold accountability, and safeguard shared European values. He also thanked Partners Albania and the Balkan Civil Society Development Network for their ongoing dedication to strengthening civil society in the region.

Mr. Tedi Dobi

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Justice, Government of Albania

Mr. Dobi expressed gratitude to Partners Albania and civil society organisations for their continued collaboration. He referred to the three key pillars of democratic functioning – an independent judiciary, free media, and a vibrant civil society, noting that these are mutually reinforcing and essential for safeguarding the rule of law. He referred to recent cooperation with the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), including workshops on disaggregated data collection, hate crime, and hate speech, as examples of how civil society expertise strengthens national efforts in human rights protection. As Chief Negotiator for Chapter 23 (Judiciary, Anti-Corruption, Fundamental Rights) and the political criterion on democratic institutions, he described government efforts to support civil society, including addressing delays in the electronic registry, VAT exemptions and reimbursement procedures, and institutional culture changes to improve practical implementation of legislation.



Highlighting Albania's progress in the EU integration process, he referred to the adoption of interim benchmarks and the establishment of Partnership Platform for European integration, which currently include 71 active civil society organisations. He also mentioned the forthcoming new Criminal Code, underlining that the Ministry is committed to conducting inclusive and meaningful public consultations, enabling CSOs to provide substantive input. In conclusion, Mr. Dobi reaffirmed the Ministry's commitment to strengthening collaboration with civil society, recognising its indispensable role in policy development and EU integration, and encouraged open dialogue and active engagement throughout the conference.



If you were unable to join us live or would like to revisit the discussions, the full video recording of Opening Remarks is now available. [You can access the video at the following link here.](#)



PANEL 1: CIVIC SPACE AND LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EU

Moderator:

- Ms. Alma Mustajbasić, Public Policy Program Researcher, Civic Initiatives

Panelists:

- Ms. Anja Bosilkova-Antovska, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Balkan Civil Society Development Network
- Ms. Bora Muzhaqi, Vice Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Europe and Foreign Affairs in Albania
- Ms. Eszter Hartay, Program Director, European Center for Not-For-Profit Law
- Ms. Hanna Hanses, Policy Manager, Philea - Philanthropy Europe Association
- Ms. Kerttu Willamo, Civic Space Project Officer, European Civic Forum

This panel explored how the legal, political, and financial landscape is shifting for civil society in the *Western Balkans and at the EU level*, and which strategies may help defend civic space amid growing pressures. Drawing on recent regional research such as BCSDN's Donor Support, Civic Space, and the Future of Civil Society in the Western Balkans (currently in consultation and expected to be published soon), the discussion connected evidence, policy trajectories, and practical responses emerging from both EU and regional contexts.

Across the interventions, panelists underscored that shrinking civic space is no longer confined to restrictive practices but increasingly shaped by legislation itself. As Ms. Bosilkova-Antovska emphasized, while most countries in the region once had broadly aligned legal frameworks with European standards, recent years have brought laws whose provisions or enforcement have unintentionally, or at times deliberately, restricted civic activity. Foreign-agent initiatives, expansive anti-terrorism definitions, and draft criminal-code amendments penalizing protest actions illustrate these concerns. Such measures, coupled with police raids, public smearing, surveillance, and anti-gender backlash, contribute to an atmosphere of constraint. These developments are confirmed by over a decade of data from the Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, which tracks fundamental freedoms, financial viability, and state-civil-society cooperation. In this environment, uncertainty and risk have also led to forms of self-censorship, a challenge reflected in regional and EU-level analyses alike.

At the EU legislative level, speakers highlighted ongoing processes that could substantially influence the enabling environment for civic actors. Ms. Hartay examined the implications of the [EU Anti-Money-Laundering and Counter-Terrorism-Financing Package \(AML/CFT\)](#), entering into force by 2027, which introduces a single rulebook, enhanced due-diligence standards, and a new supervisory authority (AMLA). While the package aims to safeguard the financial system, its uniform application may impose heavy compliance requirements on small CSOs, including those operating crowdfunding platforms or cross-border, potentially constraining their financial operations. Equally significant is the forthcoming [EU Civil Society Strategy \(2025\)](#), expected by late 2025 (DG JUST Consultation), described as a landmark opportunity to position CSOs as genuine actors in democracy, rule of law, and human rights rather than as service providers.

Ms. Willamo highlighted its three main pillars, support, engagement, and protection, as crucial for translating EU values into practical safeguards for participation and autonomy. Closely related discussions included the proposed Directive on European Cross-Border Associations (ECBAs), intended to harmonize cross-border association rules, and the Defence of Democracy package, where proposed transparency requirements on foreign funding were viewed as needing clearer safeguards to distinguish advocacy and lobbying from legitimate civic dialogue.

The financial ecosystem for civil society was another recurrent theme. Ms. Hanes, representing the philanthropic sector, underlined that restrictive fiscal norms across Europe limit mission-related investments, require perpetual endowment preservation, or confine foundations to traditional grant-making, reducing their ability to support innovative or impact-driven enterprises. The region's civil society remains heavily dependent on external aid as public funding is scarce or politicized, and philanthropic culture remains nascent. In several contexts, funding distribution favours organizations close to governing structures, leaving others reliant on short-term donor cycles. The shift in global donor priorities, including the U.S. funding withdrawal, has further exposed the fragility of this model. In this context, the new [Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\) 2028–2034](#) (European Council Overview) and the proposed [AGORA EU](#) programme, which consolidates CERV and Creative Europe, were cited as essential instruments to sustain civil-society engagement and ensure long-term financing mechanisms aligned with EU priorities.

The institutional dimension of EU integration featured strongly in the discussion. Ms. Muzhaqi, drawing on her role as Vice Chair of the Albanian Parliament's Committee on Europe and Foreign Affairs, reflected on efforts to strengthen structured dialogue with civil society through formal consultation mechanisms, digital platforms, and advisory groups to support policy transparency and inclusivity in the EU integration process.

Mr. Hoic provided the perspective of the [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#), which facilitates structured participation of Western Balkan organizations through its Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, Joint Consultative Committees with Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania, and the Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative, a network of 147 civil-society representatives contributing to EESC opinions and dialogues with EU institutions, now being extended to include Kosovo.

Through these mechanisms, the EESC amplifies the voice of organized civil society from the region in shaping EU policies and fosters mutual understanding between enlargement countries and EU member states. These instruments were recognized as valuable bridges connecting the realities of enlargement countries with EU policymaking structures.

Finally, the panel emphasized resilience, solidarity, and partnership as the means to confront these challenges. Building regional and thematic alliances, coordinating shadow reporting in accession processes, and communicating more effectively with citizens were identified as essential steps for defending civic space. Participants underlined that the EU must back its rhetorical commitments with consistent political and financial support, and that democratic reforms and integration processes cannot be sustainable without a protected civic space.

Q&A Discussion

The exchange raised key concerns about the implications of the forthcoming EU Anti-Money Laundering and Counter, Terrorism Financing (AML/CTF) Package for civil society. Participants questioned how new compliance obligations for donation-based crowdfunding platforms could affect access to banking and fundraising, warning that de-risking practices by banks might further constrain CSOs' financial operations.

The need for structured dialogue among regulators, financial institutions, and civil society was highlighted to prevent unintended barriers to philanthropy and local giving, and to safeguard the diversity of funding sources essential for civic independence.

Another recurring issue concerned the limited feedback and responsiveness in public consultation processes. Despite improved access through online platforms, engagement often remains one-way and time constrained.

Participants called for stronger mutual accountability, better information flow, and more consistent communication to ensure that consultation mechanisms enable genuine participation within the fast-moving EU integration agenda.



If you were unable to join us live or would like to revisit the discussions, the full video recording of Panel 1 is now available. This session featured insightful contributions from our panelists.

[You can access the video at the following link here.](#)

We invite you to watch and reflect on the perspectives shared, and to continue the conversation within your own communities and networks.



PANEL 2: SOCIAL ACTORS IN THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

Moderator:

- Mr. Aleksandar Krzalovski, Director, Macedonian Center for International Cooperation

Panelists:

- Mr. Petar Knezevic, Expert, Centre for Development of CSO (CRNVO), Montenegro
- Ms. Bojana Selakovic, National Coordinator, National Convent on the European Union in Serbia (NK EU)
- Ms. Eridana Cano, General Director, Albanian State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination
- Ms. Dajana Cvjetković, Project Manager, The Center for Civil Society Promotion (CPCD), Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Ms. Hristina Koneska Beroska, State Counselor, Secretariat for EU Affairs of the Government of Republic of North Macedonia
- Mr. Ivan Blazević, Expert in Democratic Participation and Social Justice Initiatives, Croatia

Across the Western Balkans, civil society participation in EU integration is mediated by a patchwork of mechanisms, some formal and functional, others ad hoc or stalled, shaped by political will, administrative capacity, and EU-facing coordination. The discussion highlighted replicable instruments, lessons from country practice, and post-accession risks that affect whether social actors can contribute meaningfully to reforms.

In Montenegro, participation through the EU–civil society Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) was presented as a channel that broadens civil society beyond NPOs to include trade unions and other organized actors. As Mr. Knežević noted, the JCC’s value lies in surfacing gaps between policy design and on-the-ground needs and in relaying them directly to EU institutions; recent experience with Chapter 23 benchmarks illustrates how civil society can be sidelined when not explicitly reflected in the benchmarks, reinforcing the need to embed participation requirements in negotiation milestones and to expand JCC transparency and outreach so a wider range of CSOs can engage.

In Serbia, the National Convention on the European Union (NCEU)—a cross-sector platform modeled on the Slovak experience—was designed to institutionalize consultation across negotiation chapters. Ms. Selaković described how, despite formal recognition, the mechanism’s influence diminished in the absence of political will for membership-oriented reforms; inputs were gathered but rarely integrated, leading the platform to withdraw from institutional processes in 2024. The model’s original promise, structured dialogue across government, academia, professions, and NPOs, remains valid if coupled with demonstrable commitment to uptake and feedback.

In Albania, the [Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#) and its Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) were presented by Ms. Cano as a performance-linked framework that ties disbursements to verified reform steps across five pillars (private sector and business climate, human capital, digital, green/energy, and fundamentals). A national coordination architecture, technical working groups chaired at deputy-minister level, finance ministry audit functions, and a central coordinator, aims to align evidence, verification, and public communication. Memoranda with CSOs for monitoring and an open invitation via the civil society council were cited as means to keep participation active throughout design, implementation, and impact review.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ms. Cvjetković described a contrasting landscape: no stable, obligatory mechanism for CSO participation in EU integration, fragmented monitoring initiatives, including an informal coalition producing shadow reports and thematic networks such as “Partnership 27”, and limited responsiveness from authorities and international counterparts. The lesson offered was pragmatic: where governments resist inclusion, coalitions that bridge watchdogs, communities, academia, and social partners can raise the political cost of exclusion and sustain evidence-based shadow reporting even when formal channels are closed.

In North Macedonia, Ms. Koneska Beroska emphasized that inclusion must be designed to fit national context, not copied wholesale. Prior involvement of CSOs in Sector Working Groups and EU programming demonstrated tangible value, shadow reports and rule-of-law coalitions (e.g., “blueprint” groups) have informed administration planning, but future arrangements should be formalized within the negotiation structure and paired with unified CSO positions and consistent, evidence-backed contributions. Open calls run by the Ministry of European Affairs for CSO participation in sector groups were cited as precedent to institutionalize this practice.

From a post-accession perspective, Mr. Blažević warned that the window for civic influence is widest during accession; after membership, some participation mechanisms atrophy “on paper,” private donors withdraw, and policy leverage declines. Safeguarding civic space post-accession therefore requires broad, purpose-built coalitions (from local service providers to watchdogs), strategic use of EU-level tools (e.g., strategic litigation, European Public Prosecutor’s Office), and engagement with business actors where EU rules align incentives, such as the Corporate Sustainability

Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), to expand alliances on rule-of-law, labor, and environmental standards. The extension of Roam-Like-at-Home to candidate countries was noted as an example of EU policies that can be phased in pre-accession, creating tangible gains that reinforce pro-integration coalitions.

Taken together, the panel’s cases point to ingredients for success that can be replicated: (1) hard-wiring participation into benchmarks and negotiation structures (e.g., via JCCs, sector groups, or national conventions

with formal uptake and feedback duties); (2) performance-linked frameworks that make CSO monitoring consequential (as with the RGF's verified reform steps); (3) coalitions that cross siloed constituencies and persist through shadow reporting when formal access narrows; and (4) post-accession safeguards that retain consultation practices and leverage EU-level legal and regulatory tools. Where these elements are present and resourced, civil society's contribution to EU integration shifts from episodic consultation to structured co-production of reforms.

Q&A Discussion

The discussion that followed centered on how participation in EU integration must move beyond consultation toward genuine co-production of change, particularly ensuring that grassroots organizations can bring forward the needs of the communities they represent before accession agreements are finalized. Participants raised concerns over tokenistic or pro-forma consultations, where governments conduct public hearings at late stages of policy drafting, undermining both trust and the sense of ownership in reforms.

The dialogue also reflected tension between calls for a “unified civil society voice” to improve coordination and the recognition of pluralism as intrinsic to civil society, with participants emphasizing that diversity of perspectives, including between mutual-interest and public-benefit organizations, should be preserved. Further issues discussed included the fragile trust between government and civic actors, the need to institutionalize participation mechanisms early, and the erosion of confidence that occurs when civil-society leaders transition into politics without maintaining civic accountability.

Several interventions underscored that partnership and trust must be cultivated over time, through transparency, reciprocity, and the alignment of consultations with substantive decision-making rather than procedural compliance.



If you were unable to join us live or would like to revisit the discussions, the full video recording of Panel 2 is now available. This session featured insightful contributions from our panelists.

[You can access the video at the following link here.](#)

We invite you to watch and reflect on the perspectives shared, and to continue the conversation within your own communities and networks.



PANEL 3: FUNDING FUTURES – NAVIGATING DONOR SHIFTS AND BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY

Moderator:

- Ms. Klotilda Kosta, Director of Programs, Partners Albania for Change and Development

Panelists:

- Ms. Enrica Chiozza, Head of Sector for Civil Society, Social Inclusion, and Human Capital Development at the Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST), European Commission
- Ms. Lisa Curman, Programme Specialist, Unit for Western Balkans and Türkiye, Europe Department, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
- Mr. Dren Puka, Director of Kosovar Civil Society Foundation
- Mr. Miodrag Milosavljevic, Deputy Director, Open Society Foundations Western Balkans
- Ms. Risena Xhaja, Chief Administrator, Agency for the Administration of Seized and Confiscated Assets (AAPSK) in Albania
- Mr. Ionuț Sibian, Executive Director, Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF), Romania

The discussion on funding futures focused on how civil society in the Western Balkans can adapt to a changing donor landscape and build sustainable systems for long-term resilience. Panelists addressed donor priorities, public funding frameworks, philanthropy, and post-accession lessons, emphasising that sustaining civic action requires both financial and institutional innovation.

The donor landscape and priorities were central to the exchange. Ms. Chiozza outlined the European Commission's assistance under IPA III (2021–2027), allocating around half a billion euros for the Western Balkans and Türkiye. The framework focuses on strengthening the enabling environment for civil society, fostering institutional partnerships, and enhancing organisational capacity.

Drawing on TACSO monitoring, civic space was reported to have worsened in parts of the region, with dialogue often more feasible at the local level and expertise lacking in digitalisation, energy, and transport. Continued EU engagement was underscored through the forthcoming EU Civil Society Strategy led by DG JUST. From the bilateral perspective, Ms. Curman reaffirmed Sweden's commitment, describing Sida's flexible, trust-based model that prioritises core and institutional support to build resilience and accountability. Open calls directly accessible to local CSOs are being expanded to reduce sub-granting layers and enable organisations to set their own priorities.

Public funding systems were discussed as essential national infrastructure. Mr. Puka shared Kosovo's 2015 framework for CSO financing, featuring open calls, mixed evaluation commissions, prior consultation on funding priorities, and a public contracts portal. Progress includes multi-year grants in several ministries, though administrative limitations, small awards, and stigma toward established organisations persist. Refining regulations, clarifying institutional roles, and building civil-servant capacity were highlighted as priorities for effective implementation.

Regional and philanthropic responses gained prominence amid donor withdrawals and EU budget pressures. Mr. Milošević described the consolidation of Open Society Foundations Western Balkans into a single regional structure focused on EU integration, just energy transition, and digital transformation. This approach promotes pooled donor resources, stronger cross-border cooperation, and closer ties between Western Balkans CSOs and EU partners, demonstrating how coordinated advocacy and regional solidarity can reinforce sustainability even with limited funds.

Innovative national models were showcased through Albania's social reuse of confiscated assets. Ms. Xhaja presented how this mechanism links community benefit with sustainability by allocating seized property to CSOs for social or institutional purposes. Between 2024 and 2025, 38 assets were distributed, and the first open call drew 29 CSO applications. Projects such as My Tradition in Elbasan illustrate how social reuse can combine economic and social value, though ongoing grant support remains essential for maintenance.

Reflecting on the post-accession period, Mr. Sibian highlighted Romania's long-term model for civil-society resilience beyond donor cycles. Since the 1990s, an independent fund operator has channelled nearly €200 million through instruments such as the EEA/Norway Grants (10 % earmarked for civil society), the Swiss Cooperation Programme, and national sources. The mechanism functions through a coordinated system in which funds are pooled into multi-annual programmes, administered by a neutral intermediary, and distributed via open calls combining institutional and project support.

This model allows for predictable funding cycles, joint donor oversight, and transparent monitoring, while maintaining operational independence from government. Complementary measures, including a corporate sponsorship law, tax-redirection of up to 3.5 %, and donation systems via direct debit and SMS coordinated by the Association for Community Relations, sustain a growing network of 16 community foundations linking local donors with civic initiatives. Built progressively after EU accession, these mechanisms illustrate how integrating public, private, and philanthropic funding streams under independent administration can create a stable ecosystem for civil society. They underscore the value of establishing similar frameworks early in the enlargement process to ensure transparency, reliable funding, and evidence-based advocacy that safeguard civic independence.

In conclusion, the discussion underlined that sustaining civil society in the Western Balkans requires rethinking funding systems beyond project cycles. Protecting civic space, expanding flexible and core support, creating transparent national mechanisms, and strengthening regional cooperation were identified as key directions for financial resilience, institutional strength, and lasting civic impact.

Q&A Discussion

The discussion focused on fairness, capacity, and innovation in funding. Participants raised concerns about the balance of EU support between international and local NPOs, the limited capacity of public grant-makers, and the need for context-specific models of core funding that reflect local realities.

Examples from Kosovo and Montenegro illustrated both progress and gaps in grant administration, underscoring the importance of joint design with civil society. Several participants questioned regranting through international intermediaries, arguing that it can weaken local ownership, while others called for more creative and risk-tolerant mechanisms to support experimentation and new ideas. The session closed with appeals for greater transparency and a fairer distribution of funds, reducing repetitive support to a small circle of established organisations and widening access for credible new actors.



If you were unable to join us live or would like to revisit the discussions, the full video recording of Panel 3 is now available. This session featured insightful contributions from our panelists.

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LOOKING AHEAD

The conference concluded with a shared sense of realism and resolve. Through three interconnected discussions, participants examined the evolving role of civil society in the Western Balkans amid shrinking civic space, shifting donor priorities, and the urgent need for sustainable support systems. Across all panels, the exchanges revealed both the vulnerabilities and the adaptive capacities of the sector, pointing toward a renewed commitment to regional cooperation and collective advocacy. Taken together, the conference reaffirmed three essential conditions for a resilient civil society: a safe and enabling environment, inclusive and trust-based participation in governance, and diversified, transparent, and locally rooted funding models. Participants agreed that sustaining democracy in the Western Balkans requires not only donor alignment but also regional solidarity and shared advocacy toward European institutions.

As a tangible outcome of this dialogue, participants agreed to prepare a [Joint Declaration](#), reflecting the key principles, recommendations, and commitments emerging from the discussions. The Declaration, presented in the following pages, embodies a collective pledge to strengthen civil society's voice, resilience, and contribution to the region's democratic and European future.



[The complete gallery of photographs illustrating the main sessions and highlights of the conference can be accessed here.](#)

CONFERENCE DECLARATION

Declaration of the Regional Conference “Resilient Voices: Civil Society in a Changing Western Balkans” Tirana, 1 October 2025

We, civil society from across the Western Balkans, gathered in Tirana on 1 October 2025 for the Regional Conference “Resilient Voices: Civil Society in a Changing Western Balkans,” united in our commitment to democracy, human rights, and European integration of our region. At a time when civic space in the Western Balkans is under pressure, donor support is declining, and reforms linked to EU integration are advancing unevenly – with some countries progressing and others backsliding – we reaffirm the irreplaceable role of civil society as a watchdog, partner, and driver of democratic change. Without civil society, there is no democracy, no enlargement, and no European future for our region.

1. Defending Civic Space and Democratic Standards

Civic space in the region is under severe pressure, with stigmatization, disinformation campaigns, and attacks on civil society actors threatening the irreplaceable role and contribution of civil society. We call on:

- Governments to uphold democratic standards, repeal hostile laws to ensure freedom of association and expression, and establish an enabling legal and institutional framework for civil society, aligned with the EU integration process.
- The EU to apply consistent civic space standards inside and beyond the Union through the upcoming EU Civil Society Strategy, making civic space a credible benchmark for Enlargement and holding governments accountable by linking democratic backsliding to financial and political consequences.
- Protecting organizations, activists, and journalists from attacks, intimidation, surveillance, and politically motivated pressures, with effective legal and financial mechanisms.

2. Civil Society as an Actor in the EU Integration Process

The renewed momentum for EU enlargement presents a critical opportunity that must be used to anchor civic space protection into the accession process.

- EU institutions must protect civic space as a core and measurable benchmark for accession, with civic freedoms embedded in the Enlargement Acquis under Chapters 23 and 24, and linked to IPA and Growth Plan disbursements. All funding instruments for governments should earmark a share for civil society participation – ensuring early accountability, space for independent monitoring, and long-term sector resilience.
- EU-related reforms must be grounded in local realities and inclusive consultations, rather than formalistic exercises that erode trust and legitimacy. Civil society should participate in a meaningful and structured manner in both the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of all EU-related reforms.
- The forthcoming EU Civil Society Strategy should explicitly include the enlargement countries, and the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should offer clarity on the EU integration prospects and dedicated support mechanisms for civil society in the region.

3. Sustainable Funding and Operational Autonomy

The current funding landscape, marked by withdrawal, reduction, and shifting priorities of key donors, as well as ineffective and often politicized public funding systems, compromises the sustainability and resilience of the civil society sector.

We ask for:

- Donor modalities to shift from fragmented projects to core, adaptable, and multi-year institutional support, building resilience rather than relying on short-term interventions.
- Governments to establish transparent, accessible, and accountable public funding mechanisms that safeguard the independence of CSOs.
- The EU to continue direct partnerships with local CSOs and to reform funding models so that resources reach those with legitimacy and impact, not only state institutions, while avoiding overreliance on international intermediaries.

4. Commitment of Civil Society

Despite hostile environments and scarce resources, we reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to strengthen democracy by engaging with our constituents and citizens, to monitor reforms, defend rights, contribute our expertise to co-create policies, and act with professionalism, accountability, and solidarity. We commit to strengthening cooperation across the region, staying connected to EU institutions and networks, and innovating to sustain our role, being the voice of citizens whose interests and rights we represent.

We call upon all actors to undertake the following urgent steps:

To Governments in the Western Balkans:

- Accelerate reforms that safeguard democratic institutions and fundamental civic freedoms.
- Ensure meaningful participation of civil society in all EU-related reforms and all phases of the policy-making processes.
- Establish transparent and accountable mechanisms for public funding of CSOs.

To International Donors and the European Union:

- Reinforce support for civil society through direct partnerships, flexible and longer-term core funding, securing the independence and resilience of the sector.
- Integrate resilience and flexible protection mechanisms into funding portfolios, ensuring that smaller and grassroots organizations are not left behind.
- Uphold civic space as a benchmark of democracy and enlargement. To Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans:
- Continue working with persistence and courage, strengthening cooperation and solidarity at the national and regional levels.
- Maintain high standards of integrity and accountability, ensuring that our role in protecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law remains unimpaired, even in times of crisis.
- Diversify funding and invest in building deeper roots and constituencies in local communities to reduce vulnerability to external pressures.

We pledge to continue engaging with institutions at all levels, monitoring and reporting on civic space developments, and holding all actors accountable for safeguarding and expanding the space for civil society in the Western Balkans.

