



WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

21– 23 January, 2020
Skopje, North Macedonia
REPORT

Introduction

In the framework of the EU-funded Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organizations in Western Balkans and Turkey (EU TACSO 3) project, **Western Balkans and Turkey Regional Civil Society Forum** took place between 21 and 23 January, 2020 in Skopje, North Macedonia.

The Forum had three purposes:

- to discuss the state of the enabling environment and civil society development in the Western Balkans and Turkey based on the findings of the **Regional Needs Assessment Report of Civil Society of the Western Balkan and Turkey**;
- to discuss the upcoming review of the **Guidelines for EU support to civil society in the Enlargement region, 2014-2020 (EU Civil Society Guidelines)**;
- to discuss the lessons-learned from the **Civil Society Facility (CSF) support** as a basis for civil society input into programming for civil society assistance beyond 2020.

The Forum **gathered 108 representatives** of civil society, public authorities, EU representatives, donors, experts and other stakeholders in the area of civil society development in the region of Western Balkans and Turkey. Participants discussed the current state of affairs of CSOs in the region, as well as joint actions that the EU, the national public authorities and CSOs can implement to address the challenges to a healthy and strong civil society. (*Forum Agenda and the List of participants are available in Annexes 1 and 2*)

Besides providing the platform for discussion and action planning for civil society stakeholders, the Forum had a great media coverage and visibility in North Macedonia.

The state of affairs of the civil society development and conducive environment in the WBT

The Draft report on the **regional needs' assessment of civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey was presented** and discussed with participants. Tanja Bjelanovic, EU TACSO 3 Capacity Building expert, explained the purpose, the process and the methodology used for the assessment, while Tina Divjak, the lead researcher on behalf of BCSDN (Balkan Civil Society Development Network) presented the main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

The Draft report was then discussed with participants in the panel and in subsequent 8 working groups, including seven groups divided by each IPA Beneficiary and a group providing regional perspective. The **main suggestions** steaming from the working groups' discussion, and thematically **grouped**, are:



NEW/IMPORTANT INSIGHTS	ROLE OF CSOs	RECOMMENDATIONS TO EU AND EU TACSO 3	RECOMMENDATIONS TO OTHER STAKEHOLDERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider refugee crisis and migration of young people in the report; • Specific needs of mid-sized CSOs and gap in support for them; • Strong polarization within CS; • Emergence of new citizens movements vs. Civil society; • GONGOs and PONGOs¹ have negative influence on politics; • Difficulties to work on local level and need to define and understand grassroots; • Basic freedoms area should include child's rights; • Cooperation with gov. sector often depends on individuals/personal contacts; • Lack of operational grants and long term-funding; • Specific and huge needs for support to grassroots and community-based CSOs and for regional networks; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking and platforms/ hubs for exchange and public dialogue needed; • EU coherence needed: political and operational; national and regional; • Stronger links between "traditional" CSOs and grassroots, mutual learning and understanding needed; • Self-regulation to set standards (transparency and accountability), including children participation; • Re-granting CSOs to make it simple and result-based; • Introduce vouchers for trainings, pay travel expenses; • More programme and mission-driven approach; • Strategic approach to fundraising and constituency building; • Improve M&E; • Improve communications; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSOs should actively participate in the new Guidelines development; IPA and CSF processes: programming and implementation; • EU should increase financing through CSOs vs. INGOs; • EU should provide operational grants to small and mid-sized CSOs with simplified procedures (no PRAG); • Evaluation experts should be engaged for EU-funded projects; • Consider refugee crisis in interventions with CSOs; • Cooperation of CSOs with central registry needed for accurate data; • Strategic support is needed with networks and grassroots; • Support to the members of CSO Councils is needed; • Long-term and tailor-made approach to capacity building and sub-granting should be applied, including trainings; • Difference in needs of big CSOs and grassroots to be considered; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve tax framework: philanthropy, income for CSOs etc.; • Adjust Laws on entity level in Bosnia and Herzegovina; • Simplify procedures for foreign volunteers; • Provide and coordinate around basic data; • Invest in infrastructure for CSOs (NRCs, voluntary centres, Capacity and legal aid providers, etc.); • Improve public consultations and the role of CSOs, including local level; • Local level: change law on self-government (Turkey); build capacity; increase role in funding for CSOs, councils/bodies; • Improve state funding models; • Introduce real "operational" grants; • Coordination at regional level: donors, governments, CSOs; • Increase public funding for CSOs through institutional support;

¹ GONGO (Government Non-Government Organization); PONGO (Political Non-Government Organization)



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff fluctuation within CS and dependence on individuals; • CS participation in EU accession process is not sufficient; • Lack of accurate data (include data from register in N. Macedonia; Up-date data for Bosnia and Herzegovina: 27,000 in 2019; • Reconsider the relevance of draft documents (strategies that are not adopted) and of those that are adopted but not implemented; • Correct the report for N. Macedonia (attacks on the 22 CSOs lasted 3 years; only CSOs financed by OSF and USAID have been targeted; • Open Society Foundation support to grassroots to be included; • Include public servants' network for N. Macedonia; • Include data on voluntarism from the Development Plan in Turkey, and refer to "public benefit" status. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large scale public campaigns on fundamental freedoms; • Build trust, communicate, learn from global examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practices in re-granting should be shared; • Develop CSO capacity for voluntary management; • Gender equality should be mainstreamed in TACSO activities; • More regional activities are needed which could contribute to national-level mechanism for monitoring transparency of public funding and legal environment for child protection; • Data and statistics are needed on funds available for programming of donor funds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councils for CSOs should improve communication with CSOs (Turkey-plan deputy members).
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Summary of participants' input from working groups is available in Annex 4.



As a general conclusion, the **draft Report has been validated by participants**. There are many commonalities among IPA Beneficiaries, and some differences (see especially the cases of Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, as briefly described in the above table).

The discussion focused in particular on: violation of fundamental freedoms; the lack of data on CSOs; the need to support grassroots and networks; the need to introduce strategic and flexible funding models for CSOs; the need for long-term and tailor-made approach to capacity development and sub-granting; the need for overall regional coordination, communication and networking among various stakeholders relevant for the development of civil society. Some new insights have been gained such as the need to consider refugee crisis and youth migrations as relevant facts as well as to fill the gap in support to mid-range CSOs. The necessity for an increased CSO participation in the EU-related processes has also been expressed (EU Guidelines development, IPA, CSF etc.).

Full Regional Needs Assessment Report draft PPP is available in Annex 3.

IPA III preparation and current state of affairs

Massimo Mina, DG NEAR, Unit A4 “MFF, Programming and Evaluation” presented the draft architecture of IPA III (future EU financing support for EU accession and candidate countries for 2021-2027 period) and the Commission’s interest to consult the civil society about the current proposal.

The main features of the new instrument are: **no specific country allocations**, widows and strategic response approach for IPA Beneficiaries to request financing in **5 areas**. The areas are: (1) Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights, Democracy; (2) Good Governance, Acquis Alignment, Strategic Communication and Good Neighbourly Relations; (3) Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity; (4) Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth; (5) Territorial and Cross-border Cooperation. The support will be performance-based. Civil society, together with climate, gender, rights-based approach and public administration reform remain as **cross-cutting issues**.

The discussion mainly evolved around the future of support to civil society within IPA III and the process of programming and **space for civil society to participate** in this process alongside public authorities in each of the beneficiary country. Also, it was discussed how to best **link the new EU Guidelines for Support to Civil Society to the new IPA III architecture**.

EU TACSO 3 will facilitate an on-line consultation with civil society on IPA III and make available the video and PPP from the presentation on its project website. The **consultation was preliminary opened till 12 February** and further extended till 9 March 2020. Direct questions to the responsible persons dealing with IPA III preparation in the DG can also be addressed, via a functional mailbox.

More information on the IPA III presentation and on the consultation are available in Annex 5.



Civil Society Facility beyond 2020

So far, the Civil Society Facility (CSF) has offered new and **useful ways to support civil society** both from a regional and IPA Beneficiary perspective balancing divergent needs and trade-offs. CSF is guided by the EU Civil Society Guidelines, and it contains a mix of synergetic **implementation modalities**: operating and action grants, services/technical assistance, sub-granting.

The Mid-term **evaluation of CSF** has been finalised in 2017 and its key findings and recommendations were presented by Ms Liselotte Isaksson, from DG NEAR, Unit D5 „ Western Balkans and Regional Cooperation“. The **key recommendations** are: promoting shared learning; replicating innovative approaches; allowing for an inception phase within grants; improving monitoring and evaluation; insisting on full integration of cross-cutting themes and improving visibility.

It was agreed that extensive **consultations and constant evolution** are important for further CSF programming and implementation. It was concluded that it is important to adjust thematic focus in line with new needs; to have core/operational support, longer grants and increase sub-granting; to increase the media portfolio; to decentralise the capacity building portfolio by using directly CSOs; to have more focus on grassroots; to put more attention to visibility.

Also, basic rules for sound financial management against an uneven capacity of CSOs is a challenge. CSF **should continue** by focusing on addressing the growing concerns over shrinking civic space, including focus on grass-root organizations and initiatives as well as (regional and thematic) networking/peer-to-peer. It was recommended by civil society that it was important for CSF to rely on local CS infrastructure rather than international agencies.

PPP on the Civil Society Facility is available in Annex 6.

EU Civil Society Guidelines, 2014-2020: Towards revision

When opening to the panel discussion on EU CS Guidelines, Nicola Bertolini has pointed out that in comparison to how many funds are available for civil society, there are not enough (quality) project proposals. He also underlined the importance to engage young people and to have “new faces” involved in the consultation processes.

All panelists concluded that having the EU Civil Society Guidelines has been **very useful** so far as they were elaborating fundamentals of the civil society. They gave an opportunity to take stock on different needs and they have mostly been used as a key reference for EU support to civil society and to show impact in support to civil society. The main challenges that have been identified were: the fact that **very few stakeholders know their existence (a “closed circle”)**; and the fact that they were **not formally adopted by the EC**, which brings the issue of ownership and commitment (not being a political tool).

With this in mind, it has been recommended to enable **easy communication** on the EU Civil Society Guidelines and to promote it stronger so it is accessible to a greater number of stakeholders. Also, it was suggested to **prioritize addressing the governments** in IPA Beneficiaries, as not only the EC and CSOs are concerned. It should be aimed at **making the EU Civil Society Guidelines more formally linked to** the EU accession process/acquis. The challenge to make reference to the EU Civil Society Guidelines in EC Country Reports has been raised as



they are not formally adopted. However, it was pointed out that the EU Guidelines should more clearly rely on the soft acquis (e.g. EU Convention on Women's Rights), and could benefit from the model of public administration reform (PAR) which is very-well elaborated in the EC Country Report even though PAR is not part of the Acquis.

It was pointed out that now is **the right time** to start the process of the development of the new Guidelines. Several **factors were recommended** to be taken into account when creating the revised document:

- Back to the basics: *What is the ultimate reason to support civil society?*;
- Change the environment and the IPA Beneficiary individual context, and make sure to address the challenges in the region: focus on core freedoms; anti-money laundry; linkage between privacy and transparency; importance to express all freedoms online etc.;
- Define and accept national-level benchmarks;
- Focus more on qualitative indicators, for better insight (e.g. GONGOs and PONGOs) and also think of cost-effectiveness (surveys are expensive);
- Link to the performance-reward mechanism under IPA and the "Fundamental first" principle under IPA;
- Compare with other international standards and align with other horizontal processes like Berlin process, look for opportunities to merge all processes dealing with civil society and make complementarity with regional initiatives;
- Develop standards and monitoring mechanisms (better framed monitoring system is needed, targets and indicators);
- Create policy community, people who understand what are the key principles and raise awareness on key concepts.

The panel was concluded with the **launch of the process of public consultations** on the revision/development of the new Guidelines, which will take place in the course of 2020 and will be facilitated by EU TACSO 3 project.

Following the panel discussion, **three working groups on the three areas** of the Guidelines (conducive environment, civil society-public institutions' relations and capacities of CSOs) were organised with the aim to collect initial inputs for the review of the EU CS Guidelines. The main conclusions of all three working groups are as follows:

- The **EU CS Guidelines are very relevant** and should consider the new developments in terms of deteriorations of the fundamental freedoms in some of the countries.
- They should further look at the **local level**, although monitoring of some elements might be limited or difficult.
- The **involvement of governments** in the revision as well as in its implementation is crucial. Also, their involvement in the annual monitoring process is suggested in order to foster the decision-making process at the government level based on the EU CS Guidelines and monitoring findings.
- The revision **process** will be facilitated by EU TACSO 3 and should be as **inclusive** as possible. Prioritisation or separation of approach per areas of the EU CS Guidelines could be introduced.
- **Inclusion of new emerging issues** in all areas as presented in the Regional Needs Assessment report need to be addressed.
- Introduction of **quality indicators** is needed.



Working Group 1 on conducive environment

The main issues raised were:

- Fundamental issues that mainly relate to the need for **political support** → need for EC to address them via political measures such as EC Country Reports;
- Introduction of indicators/benchmarks related to **new emerging issues** such as anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism measures, anti-corruption policies, protection of privacy vs. transparency of CSO work, access to public information, of establishing/scaling of GONGOs and PONGOs;
- Need for benchmarks on the practice of **termination/closing down** of organizations by governments (e.g. Turkey);
- Need to monitor **equal treatment of CSOs comparing to other entities**, i.e. business; **volunteering** and **employment** to be considered from the aspect of freedom of association, not just as a measure of sustainability;
- Need to define indicators for **local level** where possible.

Working Group 2 on relations public institutions-CSOs

The main issues raised were:

- **Widen definition of scope of consultations:** encompass other acts of public interest, and local government decisions (due to practice to exclude consultation on by-laws e.g. urban planning acts);
- Measure **access to working groups for drafting legal/policy acts** – early involvement; add **access to information** on draft legal/policy acts (during the full policy circle); add **sufficient time to comment; degree to which input is taken into account & feedback/publication** of consultation results;
- Introduce additional indicators on **quality of structures and mechanisms** in place for dialogue and cooperation between CSOs and public institutions (i.e. frequency of sessions, right of CSOs members of the Council to initiate the session, adequate follow-up of Council conclusions and recommendations);
- Mainstream standards of public consultations in PAR related Direct Sector Budget Support contracts (**financial conditionality**).

Working Group 3 CSO capacities

The main issues raised were:

- Sub-granting is an important part of EU funding, which should be **evaluated as CB tool**; add **monitoring and evaluation** at the organisational level;
- Include quality indicators for **CSO visibility** (e.g. measurement of the CSO actions conducted), not only the public perception;
- Add indicators on **media reporting of CSOs**; introduce further **quality indicators**;
- Add new groups of indicators in relation to **constituency building** and **effects of service provision**;
- Include stronger component of **gender equality** as cross-cutting issue;
- Create **the Guidelines on Sub-granting of EU support to smaller/local CSOs**, incl. set of standards, rules and procedures to be followed.

See Annex 7 for full summary of working group discussion on EU CS Guidelines.



Overall conclusions

The **Draft Regional report on the need's assessment** of the state of civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey was **validated** by the Forum participants.

A **possibility for civil society to get involved into development of** the future EU financing support for EU accession and candidate countries for 2021-2027 period (**IPA 3**) has been **opened** at the Forum.

It has been concluded that **Civil Society Facility should continue** by focusing on: addressing the growing concerns over shrinking civic space; grass-root organizations and initiatives as well as (regional and thematic) networking and peer-to-peer exchange.

The process of the **revision of the EU Civil Society Guidelines has been launched** at the Forum with participation of civil society.

The necessity for an **increased CSO participation in the EU-related processes** has been expressed (EU Guidelines development, IPA, CSF etc.).

EU TACSO 3 mandate and activity plan has been **introduced** to participants of the Forum, emphasizing its regional perspective and **facilitation role** between the EU DG NEAR and civil society. Detailed (tentative) plan for **capacity development** and People to People programme has been presented to Forum participants.

Evaluation and feedback

Very few participants left notes on the spot as a feedback to the Forum:

- *Much to improve next time*
- *Better time planning, all sessions were in delay*
- *Shorter presentations and more interaction*
- *Warmer room*
- *Better food*

Participants have also left their inputs on interactive board sending **messages** of great importance for civil society development on three topics: networking; capacity building; (re)acting.

Media promotion

The event had **great visibility in media**, particularly on social media, i.e. around 190 new regional followers of the EU TACSO 3 Facebook page has been gained, mostly from among CSOs. Participants of the Forum and other CSOs have shared the content on the EU TACSO 3 Facebook page daily. There were more than 7,800 EU TACSO 3-page views and more than 5,000 engagements during the Forum. Most of the comments were very positive, with only one comment criticizing the Forum.



Annexes

- Annex 1 - EU TACSO 3 Regional CS Forum 21-23 Jan 2020 Agenda*
- Annex 2 - EU TACSO 3 Regional CS Forum 21-23 Jan 2020 List of Participants*
- Annex 3 - Regional Needs assessment Report draft PPP*
- Annex 4 - Needs assessment Working groups' inputs*
- Annex 5 - IPA III preparation - CSO consultation*
- Annex 6 - Civil Society Facility EU TACSO 3 Skopje January 2020*
- Annex 7 - Summary of working group discussion on EU CS Guidelines*