

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

The recent developments around the EU's enlargement process suggest that the accession process of the Western Balkans, if ever concluded, will take much longer than expected. The process is set to undergo a significant change, aiming to deliver more sustainable results in bringing these countries closer to the EU, and hopefully to clear out any doubt about the Western Balkans future membership in the EU. This conversation about enlargement should go far beyond the administrative checklist that is the enlargement process and should include much more than just access to EU programmes. The benefits provided at various stages of the enlargement should, in fact, be reformed and substantial.

Although the commitment of the European Union toward supporting both civil society and local authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes is set with multiple EC documents¹, as well in the 2018 Enlargement Strategy, in practice these commitments have been fading away.

When it comes to the role of Local Authorities (LAs) in the Enlargement, they have not been considered as a key layer of governance – which in fact they are – by neither investing in their political role in the process, nor considering them as primary beneficiaries of EU funding. This has been confirmed with the findings of the External Evaluation of IPA II², stating that LAs have not had many opportunities to implement their actions through EU funding. There have been no direct support funds for LAs, no facility for capacity building or for supporting an exchange of experience with peers from the region. Furthermore, there has been no support for promoting partnership and stronger cooperation between Local Authorities and CSOs, although they are the natural partners for promoting and safeguarding local democracy, for nurturing active citizenship and ensuring sustainable local development.

A NEW BOTTOM-UP
APPROACH TO BRING
THE EU CLOSER TO ITS
FUTURE CITIZENS:
**Rethinking the
EU Support to Local
Authorities and
Civil Society in the
Western Balkans**



BALKAN CIVIL SOCIETY
DEVELOPMENT NETWORK



On the other hand, direct financial assistance supporting civil society has been allocated from the IPA I and II, however, the political support has been lacking or at least, decreasing, especially for civil society development and for the recognition of civil society's contribution towards improved government accountability, strengthening, and sustainability of socio-democratic reforms.

As the announced changes of the EU integration process coincide with the forthcoming preparation of the new funding instruments for the post-2020 period, this is a pivotal moment for the future of EU support to civil society, local authorities, and local authority associations. The EU should finally recognize the role of non-state actors in the Enlargement through support mechanisms that go beyond statements and funding.

For this reason, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS) and The Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) have come together to advocate for a bottom-up approach to the new EU integration process. Such an approach will ensure engagement from the local level upwards and support for more meaningful involvement of the civil society and local authorities as key actors for achieving sustainable socio-economic development.

The aim of the workshop is to gather at one place relevant representatives of EU Institutions, representatives of Local Authorities and Local Authority Associations and civil society organizations from the Western Balkan Countries to discuss ways for improving the EU integration process and the new Instruments for Financial support for the benefit of the current and the future EU citizens.

Further readings:

- NALAS Position Paper for the new IPA 2021-2027
Learning from the past preparing for the future: A new bottom-up approach to bring the EU closer to its future citizens
- [BCSDN Opinion 10 Years EU's Civil Society Facility: How to further strengthen and empower civil society in enlargement countries](#)
 - [BCSDN Position paper The future of EU support to civil society](#)
 - [NALAS Position Paper EU Strategy for the Western Balkans](#)

¹ Key documents: EC Communication 2012: 'The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations'; EC Communication 2013: 'Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes'

² IPA II External evaluation: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/ipa-ii-eval-final-report-vol-i_en.pdf Findings