

Balkan Civil Society Development Network



IPA III TO CONTINUE PROMOTING CIVIC SPACE IN THE ENLARGEMENT COUNTRIES

Since 2008, the EU has been supporting civil society in Western Balkans and Turkey through the Civil Society Facility (CSF), under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Over the years, the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) has followed the evolution of EU's financial support modalities and the progress of the CSF towards **better responding to the needs of CSOs** in the pre-accession countries¹, but there is still more to be done so the EU's support to civil society improves further its effectiveness and efficiency, in a way that it contributes to a more vibrant, resilient and stronger civil society.

Civil society in the new IPA III financial framework for the period 2021-2027 remains **one of the priorities for intervention** within the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and democracy thematic window. An important novelty in the IPA III is that civil society is also a **cross-cutting theme** in all five windows. The

amount of funding, scope, priorities, and modalities of support to CSOs under the IPA III are yet to be determined, as the IPA programming is being finalized.

In times of growing constraints to civil society operations in the enlargement countries, as well as in the EU, and increasing undemocratic and illiberal sentiments – further exacerbated with the COVID-19 pandemic – it will be crucial that the EU continues to **firmly support a more enabling civil society environment**, as a precondition for the existence of a strong civil society. Investment in civic education, civil society infrastructure and joint action would also be crucial to achieve this. The IPA implementing mechanisms should provide **clear basis for defending the civic space** and for responding to its immediate threats.

¹ BCSDN, 10 Years IPA CSF: How to Further Strengthen and Empower Civil Society in Enlargement Countries <http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/BCSDN-Position-on-the-future-of-EU-support-to-CS.docx.pdf>

² BCSDN Position on IPA III - The Future of EU Support to Civil Society: <http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/BCSDN-Position-on-IPA-III.pdf>



The EU should more effectively **respond to cases of shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding** in IPA beneficiary countries, and establish, to that end, close collaboration with organizations that regularly monitor the civic space on national level and alert of serious breaches. In such cases, instead of decreasing country allocations through the IPA III, funds should be reallocated to CSOs, enabling civil society to counter back such democratic relapse. While doing this, the EU can still make a strong political message and 'punish' unacceptable government behavior, without penalizing the whole society. Furthermore, in a situation of - what it seems - decreasing transformative power of EU, it might be the long-term investment the EU is looking for in safeguarding rule of law and good governance in the enlargement countries.

With this in mind, the EC should **not consider assigning responsibility to governments** for the management of EU funds for civil society yet. Most of the enlargement countries still lack sound, independent and transparent mechanisms for distributing public funds to CSOs³, and have misused them for exerting influence over the civil society. Therefore, before the EU assigns the management of its funds for CSOs to national authorities, it should first condition national governments to consistently manage their funds for civil

society, in a clear and transparent manner. This should be the minimum criteria for demonstrating readiness to manage EU funds for civil society and a true willingness to use these funds as an investment to the overall societal development, rather than a tool to undermine and control civil society.

To contribute to the stronger financial viability of the civil society in enlargement countries, the new IPA III would have to address the lack of alternative funding sources on one hand, and the insufficiency of philanthropic culture, unfavorable tax framework, and absence of transparent public funding on the other. Building on positive experiences with operational grants and long-term framework partnership agreements during IPA II, the EU should further utilize similar instruments and **aim for increased core and long-term support for CSOs** rather than short-term project support. This becomes even more important for the Western Balkans having in mind the harmful effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the already weak financial viability of the civil society in the region. For CSOs to be able cushion the blow of the pandemic, the EU needs to adjust its support mechanisms towards more flexible operational support, ensuring CSOs' sustainability and supporting their immediate efforts, recovery needs and shifted priorities.

³ BCSDN, Monitoring Matrix Regional Report 2019: http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/76-6-Final-Regional-Monitoring-Matrix-Report_FN.pdf

Operational grants are also important for further supporting and enhancing regional cooperation. Considering the significant deficit of donor support for regional actions, such support will enable CSOs to work together strategically for tackling the common socio-economic challenge across the region. **Stronger, strategic and more flexible support to regional initiatives** will enable the creation and sustainability of platforms for solidarity and collaboration among CSOs, will bring new momentum to the post-pandemic cooperation in the region, and will go hand in hand with the efforts for regional integration and the creation of the Regional Economic Area.

An additional challenge would be for the EU to balance between supporting well-established and successful organizations whose existence and mission depend greatly on the EU funding, and encouraging the development of a more vibrant civil society by supporting new CSOs or civic movements. New models for support to civil society should recognize CSOs as equally legitimate and relevant partners in the socio-economic development of the countries, ensuring **different modalities to respond to the diversity of CSOs** and their capacities are in place. Sub-granting modalities, which are aimed at reaching small and grassroots organizations, need to be revised and simplified, taking into account the principle of proportionality and the experience of implementing CSOs, to allow for better access to EU funding.

In the case of **technical assistance or contracting services related to civil society** development, CSO's local knowledge, strong-expertise, long-standing relations with stakeholders, and the possibility to ensure ownership of project outcomes should be appropriately weighted in the selection criteria as opposed to what international consultancies offer. In addition, preference should be given to contracting organizations, rather than individual CSO experts – who are eventually contracted by consultancies in most cases – thereby not distorting the value of the sector.

Finally, we welcome the broad consultations with civil society in the early stage of the IPA III development. Still, we stress the importance of **structured inclusion of CSOs in all phases of the IPA III process** – the preparation, implementation and the monitoring of the use of the future IPA III funds. This should also apply to the preparation of the Strategic Responses by the IPA beneficiaries, where the responsibility of consulting civil society may rest with the governments, but should be promoted – if not required – by the EU itself. Having in mind the long process of preparation of the IPA, we also stress the importance of transparency and timely information-sharing throughout the process, which would allow for informed and meaningful contributions from the civil society and all stakeholders.



The European Union should commit to an effective programme and revised funding modalities to support the development and sustainability of civil society in Enlargement countries and its contribution to the accession and reform processes⁴, by ensuring the following:

- The CSF continues under IPA III and supports actions aimed to promote all three aspects of the civil society enabling environment, continuous civil society capacity building, and direct grants for CSO actions and operations;
- Responding to the shrinking of civil space through applying the principle of performance and supporting civil society action in fighting democratic backsliding;
- Core/operational support is provided to CSOs nationally and regionally, with CSOs more efficiently pursuing their core missions instead of responding to calls for project proposals with predetermined priorities;
- Locally driven and/or existing CSO networks of strategic importance with a track record of performance are strengthened and supported;
- A balance is ensured between continuing to support well-established EU-funded organizations, and supporting new CSOs or civic movements;
- Different modalities of support are in place within the IPA III that are appropriate to the diversity of the sector, recognizing the civil society as a legitimate partner for achieving socio-economic development;
- Sub-granting rules are coherently implemented, and are revised and simplified, taking into account experiences of CSOs that have been implementing sub-granting schemes;
- A clearer definition of targeted CSOs, longer periods of implementation, more flexibility, and more coherent implementation throughout the EU and the EUDs is in place.
- Regular assessment on the results of EU's own investment towards the targets set in the Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries, as well as regular consultations with CSOs, support the planning of the future EU support for civil society.

⁴ BCSDN Advocacy Platform towards the EU : <http://www.balkancsdn.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/58-7-BCSDN-Advocacy-Platform.pdf>

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