

Constituency Led Accountability in the Western Balkans



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CONSTITUENCY LED ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Regional Report: Western Balkans 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are important actors within civil society and democratic processes. They provide checks and balances, hold governments accountable, and raise unheard voices by advocating on a wide range of topics, including protection and promotion of human rights, poverty alleviation, improving infrastructure, creating opportunities to bring citizens' participation and equity in decision-making. During the COVID-19 crisis, CSOs have stepped up beyond expectations to support citizens in many ways, often offering services outside their usual programmes.

Yet, according to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), 9 out of 10 people in the world live in countries where civic freedoms are severely restricted. In Europe, most common violations include the detention of protesters, intimidation, physical attacks and harassment of journalists and HRDs, and passing of restrictive laws. Around the globe, governments use a multitude of tactics like harassment, censorship, intimidation, and false narratives to restrict activities and delegitimize civil society and civic movements. While some of these narratives are results of negative attacks, CSOs should remain open and alert despite criticism, especially in these times marked by inequality, insecurity, health crises, and climate change challenges.

Globally, while dealing with sustained attacks on human rights and a global democracy crisis, the civil society sector also faces internal challenges such as power imbalances and somewhat insufficient connection from the people they work for. In some cases, there is a lack of implemented accountability mechanisms or processes that guarantee equality, inclusion, and diversity, alongside insufficient participation of local communities whose lives have been impacted by CSOs' decisions in all aspects of CSO's work.

Improving the external environment to enable civil society development in shrinking civic space requires improvement "from within". In the Western Balkans, the importance of accountability and transparency of CSOs' work and its impact on creating a more enabling environment for civil society requires further exploration. Due to lack of resources and lack of internal mechanisms and capacities, most CSOs apply very few feedback and general accountability mechanisms. Even when this is done, those are mostly tied towards the donors rather than their direct beneficiaries and partners. To increase the trust of their constituencies, the citizens, donors, and policymakers and build more robust support for defending the civic space, CSOs need to improve their standards of more transparent and accountable ways of work.

The current context and the different demands from stakeholders for CSOs to be more accountable are a call to reconsider **how CSOs understand and practice accountability and its implications on resilience, trust, and impact.**



UNPACKING ACCOUNTABILITY

Shifting the focus of accountability towards stakeholders and mainly towards constituencies is a global trend that still gets traction very slowly. Moving beyond traditional accountability allows for a more holistic approach that broadens the concept of CSO accountability.

To unpack what accountability means for civil society, this study gathers several examples of definitions and processes, which also served as an inspiration for the analysis provided in the second part of the study. The following definitions have been used for the purpose of this study:

Accountability is the essential interface between CSOs and stakeholders through which interactive high quality, trustful relationships are fostered, reiterated, and re-enforced. To counter negative narratives and ensure a transformative shift in power, a more dynamic form of accountability must be implemented - responsive to the people CSOs work for through community engagement and closing the [feedback loop](#) (communicating to respondents how their feedback was taken into account).

According to the [Resilient Roots](#) programme designed to measure the link between accountability and resilience, *Primary Constituent Accountability* establishes dialogue mechanisms with the people or groups an organization works for and with. The results of those dialogues guide the decision-making and future actions of the organization. CSOs should go beyond transparency and static, traditional forms of accountability and practice *Dynamic Accountability*, grounded in meaningful engagement processes with all-inclusive, participatory, and continuously practiced stakeholders.

Accountability:

Being held responsible for the CSO's policies and actions by - and answerable to - its primary constituencies. Accountability to be highly context-specific and constantly evolving, with organizations needing to adapt the nature of their relationships with their primary constituents according to changing situations.

Primary Constituent:

A primary constituent is an individual or a community that the CSO aims to assist or sees benefit from its work. The CSO attempts to create change on behalf of or empower this individual or community to make the change themselves. In most cases, CSOs have multiple primary constituencies. While the exact categorization of a primary constituent is ultimately up to the CSO to determine, key advocacy targets (government or donors) for the organization should not be regarded as such.



Dynamic Accountability:

Creating a transformational relationship between a CSO and its stakeholders, making the whole organization's work adaptive to the stakeholders' needs. It means recognizing the involvement of all stakeholders in CSOs' work as the key to rebalancing unequal power dynamics. To achieve systemic change in a power shift within and outside the organization, the people we work for becoming the recognized CSO work drivers that affect their own lives.

Fundamental tenets in a nutshell:

- Meaningful stakeholder engagement - inclusive, participatory, and responsive
- Let people's voices drive our decision-making
- A continuous dialogue with stakeholders and improvements based on feedback - closing the feedback loop
- Wide range of stakeholders – internal as well as external – but “primary constituents” are key
- Agile and adaptive programming
- Reduce power imbalances and build mutual partnerships

Meaningful stakeholder engagement in CSO accountability implies giving space for people and institutions to participate in all aspects of the CSOs' work, from the implementation to the decision-making process. Upward accountability acknowledges that donors and governments have power in the more traditional sense over CSOs, whether through resource provision, regulation, or other means. Downward accountability, on the other hand, is a call to shift the power dynamics between CSOs and the people they work with and for, bringing them to the forefront. [Both types of accountabilities](#) recognize the power relations between different actors. However, these two relations do not happen in a void. Power dynamics with all stakeholders outside and within organizations should be acknowledged and better understood by CSOs. Advocating solely for more downward accountability runs the risk of having a limited understanding of the root causes the CSO is trying to address, or it can undermine the possible harm the CSO's work can have on other people inside or outside the organization. A more systemic approach is needed, taking into account the participation of all stakeholders and the impact of CSOs' work on the power dynamics between stakeholders through time.

GROWING CONSENSUS ON CONSTITUENT LED ACCOUNTABILITY

Several international initiatives have put increased focus on the accountability of the civil society sector in recent years, and there has been a growing consensus of requesting more participation and direct dialogues with all actors in the CSOs' work.

The recent [OECD DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#) addresses together three inter-linked pillars of how development cooperation and humanitarian assistance providers enable civil society by:

- 1) respecting, protecting, and promoting civic space;
- 2) supporting and engaging with civil society; and
- 3) incentivizing CSO effectiveness, transparency and accountability.



These three pillars address a constellation of challenges impeding civil society actors from reaching their full potential. DAC members have expressed considerable concern that diminishing respect for human rights and democracy in a context of rising autocratisation around the globe is eroding the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression, posing a real threat to civic space. DAC members have also agreed that while civil society actors have played critical roles in the COVID-19 response, recovery, and resilience-building, there are opportunities to enhance their effectiveness, transparency and accountability. The coherence and complementarity are central, and addressing any of the three pillars alone would not be sufficient to enable civil society actors to maximize their varied contributions.

The EU Commission has developed the [Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Region](#), which serve to:

- clearly define objectives and provide a framework for guiding EU's political and financial support for CSO engagement, participation, and development in Enlargement region;
- guide aspirant countries in the adoption of strategic frameworks or specific actions and their implementation in support of creating stimulating participatory democracy, especially with regard to civil society participation in public policymaking and EU integration process;
- define objectives regarding an environment conducive to civil society and building of capacity and resilience of CSOs to be effective and accountable independent actors.



In line with the new resilience approach, the Objectives, Results, and Indicators in the draft Guidelines 2021-2027 are reformulated to focus on the organization being led and rooted by its members/ constituency. Some of the examples that demonstrate the constituency accountability demand can be seen clearly in the resulting framework:

OBJECTIVE	 RESULT	 INDICATOR
Capable, transparent, and accountable CSOs	CSOs' internal governance structures follow the principles of good governance.	Actual role of governing and/ executive bodies is in line with their legal role/expectations of members/ - constituencies
	CSOs can communicate the results of their activities to the public.	
Strategically led and supported CSOs	CSO activities are guided by the long-term mission, vision, and goals defined by its members and can consistently follow them in their actions	Number of CSOs, which have clearly defined VMG by its members; Use of stakeholder analysis and feedback mechanisms from constituency/members
	CSOs pursue public good in their work.	Percentage of public trust in CSOs (in general public)

The [Global Standard for CSO Accountability \(GS\)](#) is a global effort to transform how civil society operates from a civil society perspective. The Global Standard englobes the dynamic accountability approach to foster effective learning, responsiveness, positive horizontal relationships between stakeholders, and trust with the general public when adequately implemented. Beyond being the right thing to do to safeguard CSOs' legitimacy and credibility, it is also rational as a two-way dialogue with stakeholders to ensure organizations address constituents' needs effectively and sustainable actions.

Co-developed in consultation with more than 1500 grass-root, local, regional and international CSOs, the Standard is built on a set of global principles and is a free, easily adaptable accountability reference for organizations of all sizes and contexts setting attainable and realistic standards. Its framework consists of 12 Commitments, divided into three clusters, including global values (4), how organizations transform their work externally (5-8), and how organizations are accountable from within (9-12). Together, the clusters guide CSOs in transforming their accountability practices by putting the people they work for and with at the core of their work.



According to the [Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles](#), CSOs are effective as development actors when they "demonstrate a sustained organizational commitment to transparency, multiple accountabilities, and integrity in their internal operations." Transparency, mutual and multiple accountabilities, and internal democratic practices reinforce CSO values of social justice and equality. Transparency and accountability create public trust while enhancing CSO credibility and legitimacy. Democratizing information, increasing and improving its flow among all stakeholders, including political actors, strengthens civil society and democratic culture. Transparency is an essential pre-condition for CSO accountability. Accountability is not limited to financial reporting but should maintain institutional integrity and a mutual public reckoning among development actors, mainly focusing on accountability with affected populations. Community-based CSOs often have particular advantages in implementing local grassroots accountability processes.



REGIONAL OVERVIEW: (CONSTITUENT) ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In the face of COVID-19, CSOs showed their potential for resilience and took the initiative to respond to the increasing needs of their constituents during the pandemic. CSOs across the region developed new activities to respond to the needs generated by the pandemic, supporting vulnerable communities, organizing awareness-raising campaigns, offering educational programs, and supporting services to victims of domestic violence, which increased in many countries during the pandemic-related lockdowns.

While this demonstrates that the relationship between CSOs and constituents has been improving, especially when it comes to CSOs providing social services, the survey findings indicate that the approach used by CSOs is frequently one-sided communication and not a dynamic process of accountability.

Constituency building has been closely related to the accountability of organizations, i.e., the efforts to communicate effectively with and respond to those the organisations claim to represent. Findings from the survey underpinning this research show that CSOs still lack awareness and practice in establishing mechanisms to channel their constituency's opinions and preferences into the organisation's work as a way of ensuring its legitimacy. On the other hand, networks consider themselves more effective in engaging with external stakeholders to achieve their goals. While many CSOs improved their relationships with constituents in 2020, the fact that these efforts relied primarily on ICT use meant that some populations were inevitably left behind.

In the years affected by the pandemic, the survey and focus groups conducted by BCSDN in 2021 and further interviews in 2022 showcased that **accountability** has remained a significant aspect to be improved when it comes to CSOs capacities and practice. Although the general state of CSO capacities has not changed significantly, the research indicates an increased awareness among the CSOs on improving **communications, advocacy, or constituency-building**.

The survey, focus groups, and interviews conducted during 2021 showcased that most CSOs still lack a longer-term strategic orientation regarding their operations, primarily due to insufficient stable funding to support their core work and sustainability. Findings show that CSOs in the Western Balkan countries still lack awareness of the importance of evidence-based advocacy but acknowledge their relatively low skills for gathering data. The general lack of success in decision-making influence incited CSOs to engage more with their constituencies, mobilizing citizens to support their advocacy efforts. This has been especially evident concerning environmental issues affecting local communities in almost all countries, for example, the initiatives against the construction of small hydro powerplants and the protection of rivers in Albania and Serbia, or the protection of Sinjajevina Mountain in Montenegro from the conduct



of military exercises, where local communities self-organized in advocacy, media appeals, and direct action to protect the natural resources. This means that awareness of the importance and benefits of constituency building is rising, even though the practice is still not broadly developed.

The research also showcased that CSOs in most countries do not go beyond the basic publishing of relevant information about their organisations when it comes to **communication**. The availability of organizational information, particularly data about the staff and governing bodies, is still relatively low for many CSOs and networks. Many CSOs in the region still do not have a website or do not regularly update their content.

Transparent communication of CSOs remains a crucial issue that, among other things, affects the level of trust in CSOs among the citizens. While 80% of CSOs in Serbia ranked their PR and visibility from good to excellent, no significant increase in the citizens' trust in CSOs was noted in public polls. Still, a small number of respondents (11%) to a survey by the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) think that it is CSOs that are solving citizens' problems in Serbia (in contrast to 65% that think it is the local government). A discrepancy between CSOs' perception and citizens' attitudes is reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Namely, over 80% of surveyed CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina think that citizens trust CSOs. At the same time, CSO representatives in focus groups and interviews note that general skepticism and negative stereotypes about civil society are still present among citizens. Compared to last year, CSOs assess that citizens in Kosovo feel more reluctant towards civil society. According to the 2020 survey, 42% of CSOs think the sector can be trusted, and 40% think CSOs are doing a good job. No significant change since last year is noted in Montenegro, where CSOs are ranked the 10th most trusted institution, while the educational system, the Orthodox Church, and the health system enjoy the highest level of trust among Montenegrin citizens. Similarly, in North Macedonia, public trust in CSOs is ranked after trust in education and health institutions, police, and media. The situation is most favorable in Albania, where CSOs are the third most trusted domestic institution, after religious and educational institutions, similar to last year.

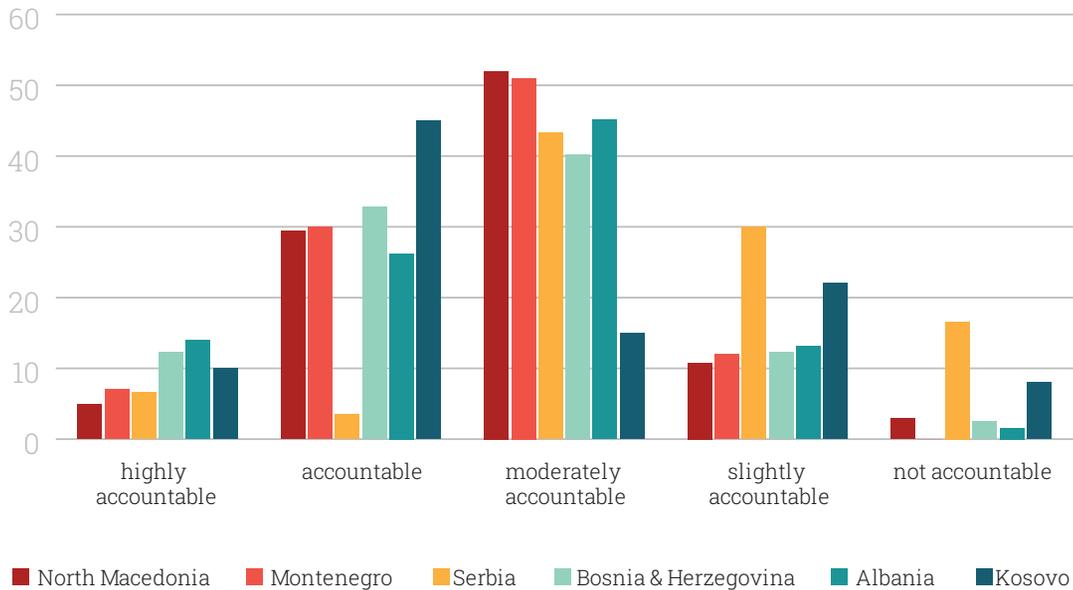
In 2021, the survey demonstrated an improvement in the **internal governance** systems and capacities of CSOs in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, as more CSOs reported to have internal documents, such as codes of conduct, rules of procedure, HR/employment policies, etc. in comparison to previous years. In Albania, the National Resource Centre (NRC) played an essential role in supporting CSOs in developing their internal policies. According to the interviewed CSO representatives in Kosovo and North Macedonia, such positive change has been donor-driven rather than self-initiated. Donor requirements for increased transparency and accountability have been noted throughout the IPA Beneficiaries. However, internal acts such as gender policies, anti-discrimination, anti-mobbing procedures, conflict of interest prevention procedures, or occupational safety and health procedures are still notably missing and applicable only to larger-size organizations. Codes of ethics have been reported as the most commonly developed internal documents by CSOs (e.g. over 70% of survey participants in Kosovo and 76% in Albania reported having this in place). On the other hand, networks rarely have a code of conduct, gender equality policies, or mechanisms to resolve conflicts of interest, despite having clear organizational structures and internal documents developed.

Spotlight on CSOs Accountability in the WBT

For a more in-depth analysis of CSOs' perceptions on accountability, the EU TACSO 3 Survey results were used as an instrumental data source, thus contributing to greater objectivity in the process of data gathering and data comparison. A wide range of CSOs from all Western Balkans assessed the level of accountability of CSOs in their respective countries on a scale from 1-5 (from not accountable at all to very accountable).



Chart 1 - CSO Accountability perceptions in the Western Balkans



The graphic above shows that most CSOs across the Western Balkans assess the accountability of the sector similarly in their countries. Most organisations indicate that CSOs are moderately accountable. However, two country cases stand out: firstly, 45% of Kosovar organisations indicate that CSOs are “accountable”, which in comparison to the other countries is a significantly higher figure. At the same time, a quite high percentage of 30% of Kosovar CSOs labelled the actability as “slightly accountable” or “not accountable”, showing different perceptions of accountability within the sector. Secondly, the Serbian case stands out. Nearly half of the respondents claimed that CSOs are “slightly accountable” or “not accountable” (46.6%), while only 10 % of the CSOs deemed the sector is “highly accountable” or “accountable”. Finally, it is notable that CSOs in Montenegro did not attribute the score “not accountable”. The majority of respondents in Montenegro (52%), North Macedonia (52%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (40.18%) and Albania (45.1%) assessed the overall accountability of CSOs as “somewhat accountable”. Detailed assessments per country are available in Annex 1.

Overall, no striking differences are identified in the CSOs’ perceptions and how they assess the overall level of accountability in the respected countries. Conversely, most CSOs’ responses range between “somewhat accountable” and “accountable”. The survey results also show that, when assessing their own CSOs’ accountability, majority of the respondents consider themselves transparent and accountable, but individually assess themselves as more transparent than they assess the sector as such.



Spotlight Case Study: North Macedonia & Bosnia and Herzegovina

To mainstream important but diverse issues in the presentation of data, the findings from North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were used as case studies in which CSOs' responses were disaggregated by organizations' level of operations (national and local) and size of budget (small with less than 5.000 EUR annual budget; medium, from 5.000 EUR to 500.000 EUR; and large, more than 500.000 EUR annual budget), thus enabling analysis of different viewpoints.

The country comparison of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina assessing differences on a **national and local level** as regards the accountability of CSOs does not identify major differences. In both cases, CSOs operating on a national level have been labelled as being more accountable than local organisations. In the Macedonian case, the difference between the local and national level is particularly high: 49 out of 64 national level CSOs are considered "highly accountable" or "accountable", while in comparison only 8 out of 45 local level CSOs are labelled "highly accountable" or "accountable". In the Bosnian case, a similar trend of national level CSOs being considered more accountable is visible. It is remarkable that none of the 108 questioned Bosnian CSOs identifies an organisation as "not accountable". Also, only 4 out of 53 local level organisations are considered as "slightly accountable" and none of the national level organisations in this category.

Chart 2 - Accountability per operational level North Macedonia

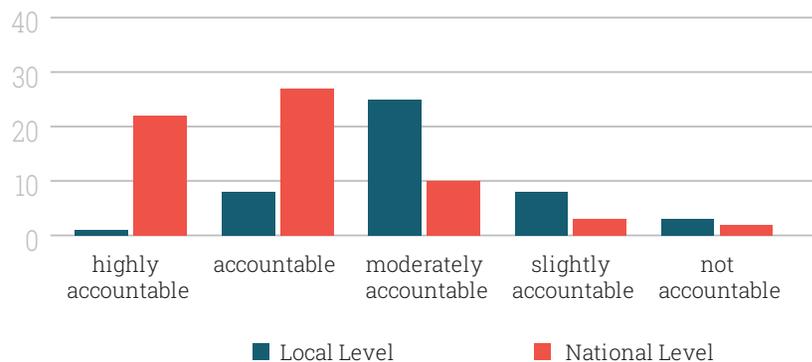
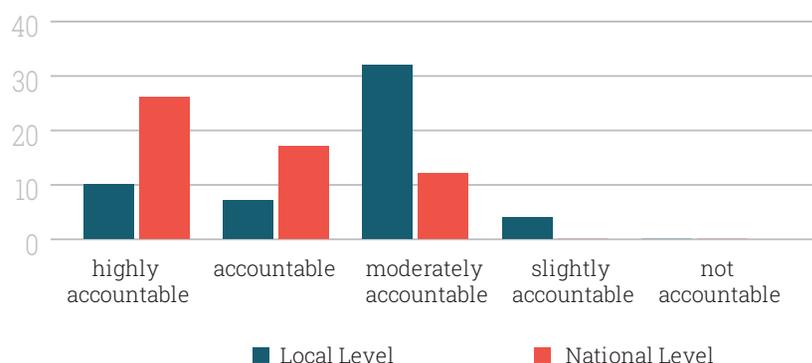


Chart 3 - Accountability per operational level Bosnia and Herzegovina





The size of an organisation’s budget and its impact on the perceived accountability in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, shows that Bosnian CSOs with small budgets are doing particularly well in comparison to their Macedonian counterparts (25 out of 68 organisations labelled “highly accountable”). On the overall in both countries, CSOs show a high level of accountability and the performance of organisations having a small budget is remarkably positive, while CSOs with big budgets are perceived as less accountable.

Chart 4 - Accountability per budget size North Macedonia

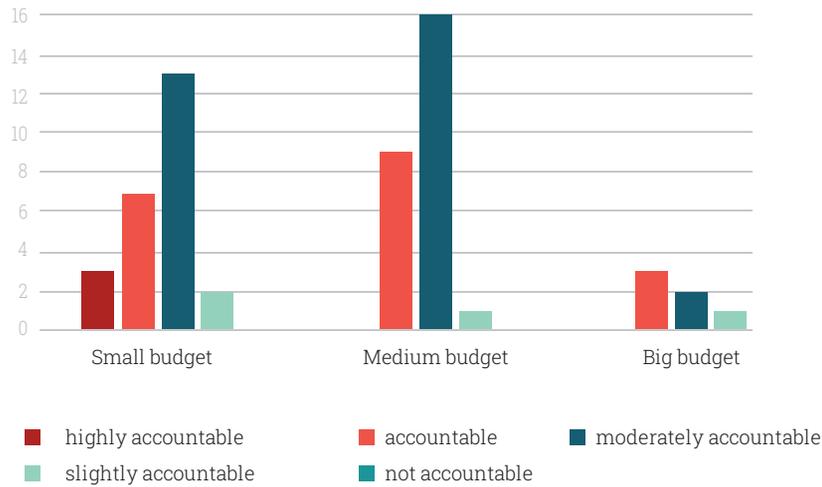
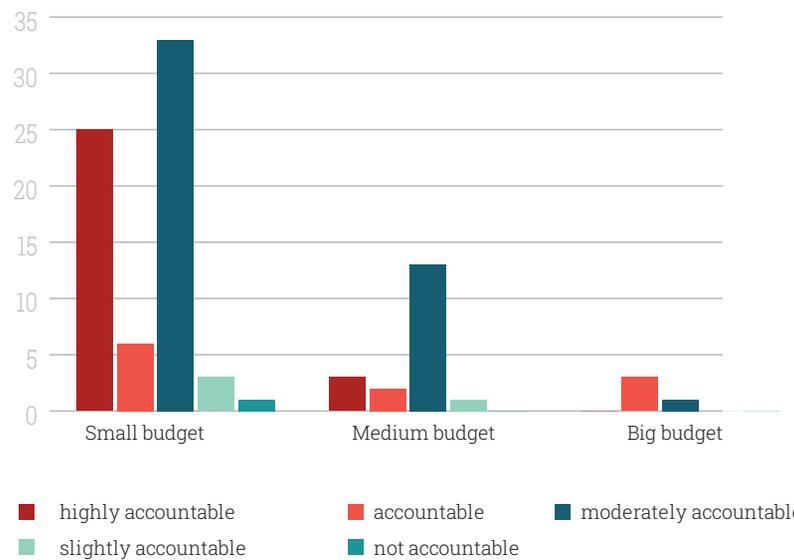


Chart 5 - Accountability per budget size Bosnia and Herzegovina



PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY DRIVERS

I. (Re) Defining Accountability and constituency building practices

A standardized understanding of civil society terminology is crucial for nurturing common ideas and shared learning of specific civil society trends. Establishing unifying language could further solve different problems and misconceptions while using it, particularly in cases where the terminology is donor-driven, and the community's knowledge and experience is not entirely taken into consideration.

To deepen the understanding of CSOs' capacities and accountability, BCSDN conducted additional interviews with stakeholders to determine the level of constituent-led accountability and further needs.

Interviews results conducted in 2021 show that both CSOs and donors/capacity-building providers in the Western Balkans do not provide a united understanding of the terms "constituencies" and "accountability." Conversely, the interpretation of the terms varies per organizations' goals or the socio-political context in which they operate. Some organizations reported they face **difficulties defining the term "constituency."**

"We are a bit perplexed of what the term constituency means, as a definition. We are confused if it means "consistency" or "constituents" - like the group that you are accountable towards. If it is in the sense of showing accountability, then we are accountable towards member organizations". (The Coalition of NGOs for Child Protection, KOMF - Kosovo)

CSOs also differentiate themselves, their mission, and goals as per their primary constituencies. In some cases, the organizations **define their primary constituencies** as the beneficiaries of their services. For example, advocacy human rights organizations have described how they are primarily accountable through their legal services to those that need it. Big organizations, such as alumni organizations, reported having a large constituency composed of representatives of the alumni community, youth, and business representatives. Representing various vulnerable categories, the constituency of grassroots organizations is significant also. Some big organizations include the general public as their primary constituency, but did not provide an insight whether this is due to their capacities allowing them to target a wider group or possibly failing to recognize what is their primary constituency.

On the other hand, donors often indicated that CSOs could not connect with citizens directly. According to the interviewees, one of the mistakes CSOs often make is identifying all citizens as their constituency. They indicate that a better connection should be established with the local communities and CSOs, and treat them as a real constituency. This goes in hand with Resource Centers' perceptions that numerous CSOs are uncertain who their primary constituents are, targeting all citizens, from those working at the local community level to those operating at the national level.



Regarding the **definition of “accountability,”** the interviews present that the organizations usually align accountability with the **actions that include their primary constituencies.** Thus, service-providing organizations align accountability with services they provide to their primary constituencies, regardless of whether they are included in the project. Similarly, most grassroots organizations responded that they are accountable when working and helping people. A significant number of advocacy-human rights organizations throughout the region indicated that their programs had been drafted and developed with the participation of their constituencies. While defining accountability, some donors and capacity-building providers reported direct work and supervision by primary constituents. Under the Civil Society Resource Centre in North Macedonia, an open call for small action grants for advocacy on the local level was implemented, supporting grantees to improve their contribution to the community and improve the relationship with their constituencies. A positive example is the initiative of establishment of a local body for representation of the interests of the Roma community and its involvement in the public policy creation in the city of Kocani.

In certain instances, the interviewees align accountability with transparency or legitimacy. For example, small organizations align accountability with **transparency** for establishing donors’ trust by sharing monthly activities and financial reports. According to capacity-building organizations and donors, transparency precedes accountability. This is identified in CSOs’ openness to their users and the public. Advocacy-human rights organizations reported their transparent work when carrying out annual audit reports and publicizing critical information about all projects and donors on their websites. Similarly, some service provider organizations said they practice accountability by reporting on their work, sharing relevant and up-to-date information, and publicizing their products. Service provider organizations also indicated that public audit-reporting of the CSOs’ financial performance could influence the degree of trust.

Grassroots organizations align accountability with **legitimacy** when reporting they are familiar with the needs and challenges of the communities they work for and with. Their constituencies’ voice is embedded in their work without drawing a clear line. According to them, accountability is an opportunity for new initiatives where local actors will join their actions and contribute the intensive networking opportunities. Advocacy and human rights organizations reported that they engage individuals as a source of information that helps them identify problems for which the community is not very vocal. The Resource Centers align accountability with legitimacy when reporting that suggestions and proposals from the field were accepted and incentives were allocated in response to project needs, as well as when saying that “accountability” contributed to the visibility of the locals, adapting the organizations’ strategy to the needs of the target group.

“In the implementation of those projects where constituency accountability was more visible, the beneficiaries and the target groups were more involved, the sustainability was more promising as well as the fact that the beneficiaries were more willing to take on ownership of the actions and the results achieved” (RCGO, Resource Center, North Macedonia)

Another perception that majority organizations share is aligning accountability with **gaining trust**, creating a better public image, and building strong ties with the primary constituents.

“The essence of trust is consistency between what is said and what is done. When the CSOs act somewhat, transparently, and with integrity consistently over time, their constituencies come to know what to expect from them.” (Civica Mobilitas, Donor/ Capacity-building provider, North Macedonia)



In some cases, interviewees align accountability with **responsibility**. However, differences exist in how CSOs define “responsibility.” While part of the advocacy and human rights organizations and capacity building organizations link responsibility with organizational structure, role, strategy, and/or procedures, grassroots and service provider organizations, on the other hand, allude to responsibility as reacting and providing support and services to people in need.

In one instance, an advocacy human rights organization linked accountability with the full implementation of the international agreements on human rights that the countries have ratified. In contrast, a capacity-building organization reported that establishing accountability is one of the critical tasks of management. Responsibilities are manifested over time and are related to how an employee acts in the organizational environment. Donors ascribe accountability to regularly reporting on the project implementation progress and measuring the impact and change.

II. Communications & Feedback

Open feedback and strategic communications are vital in keeping organizations accountable to their constituencies. Investing in the proper feedback mechanisms and communication tools enhances two-way communication and closes the feedback loop. Constituencies feedback is crucial for CSOs to improve their impact and performance and verify or transform their efforts’ direction. CSOs should ensure their communication recalls their values and purpose, and the use of feedback goes [beyond the mere collection of opinions, perceptions, and needs](#). During the interviews conducted in 2021, all CSOs shared a similar experience about communications and feedback, generally reporting one-way relations without a strategic approach.

Most CSOs and donors use various **communication** channels to reach their constituencies, such as websites, email, and social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram). Some CSOs reported publishing all information online and sending newsletters and periodic information to their constituencies. Most service provider organizations and capacity-building organizations indicated they had established more regular communication mechanisms with citizens via phones and Viber groups. Some advocacy human rights organizations produced and distributed leaflets, visual materials, promotional videos, messages, banners, etc. Other CSOs have also reported creating different citizens-oriented formats, such as videos, handbooks, guidelines, infographics, and press releases in print and electronic media. Finally, some respondents reported communicating via mainstream media, while others (capacity-building organizations) communicate via phone or video calls.

Direct contact was reported as the most preferred method among the organizations. One of the well-established organizations said:

“We try to meet with them regularly in concrete actions, but meetings are rather not formal - more like creating “a social tie.” We cooperate with our constituencies for a common cause.”
(Democracy for Development (D4D, big organization, Kosovo)

While the advocacy human rights organizations indicated to have organized roundtables and surveys to communicate with their primary constituencies, grassroots organizations reported visiting them on the streets and in their homes. The majority of the organizations also organize various events, such as conferences, workshops, roundtables.

One of the most common gap concerning communication is the lack of funds. More problematic in each country is the lack of designated communication or a PR officer allowing efficient communication. The advocacy human rights organizations have also reported that they do not have a strategic approach to communication but are acting upon an informal



strategy. Conversely, the big organizations said that although there is specialized staff working on communication and a detailed communication plan exists, there is a lack of communication channels and dynamics, especially when the communication is done ad hoc.

For successful CSOs' operations, **feedback** from all constituencies involved in their work is essential. Survey results show that big organizations and advocacy human rights organizations collect feedback in each project's stage, starting from setting the strategic goals and tasks, designing actions, and implementing the activities and evaluation. Several CSOs reported they use feedback to adapt their projects i.e. based on changing contexts or their constituencies' needs. One of the advocacy human rights organizations said that feedback was essential in the final stage of the project in the form of quality control and verification of assets.

Overall, CSOs identify the needs of their constituencies in a variety of ways, ranging from direct contact and feedback to comprehensive surveys. There are formal and informal ways of collecting feedback. Traditional methods include surveys, evaluations, questionnaires, interviews, regular follow-up of grievance procedures, book of impressions, evaluation forms, and short meetings. The informal feedback mechanisms include all other means, such as emails or messages they receive from their primary constituents, as well as comments on social networks. Open, in-person conversations and direct communications with citizens are essential to grassroots organizations since this helps them see what citizens know and think about specific topics. CSOs reported that the feedback mechanism serves as an indicator for further improvements of the organization's work. Despite the various means of collecting feedback, there is an evident lack of systematically using these feedback processes.

Apart from using different communication tools and direct in-person ties with their beneficiaries, both donors and big organizations addressed the lack of feedback and the non-formal level of communication. What is deemed missing is two-way communication with communities. One of the key challenges regarding this issue, identified by the prominent CSOs, is that they still face many donors who only support CSOs primarily at the project funding level, which undermines them from operating more strategically.

The respondents have shared different perspectives concerning closing the feedback loop and acting upon feedback received. Few grassroots and capacity-building organizations aligned feedback with the change they made in their action or programme after a request or action from the community. In certain instances, interviewees reported on CSOs' rapid response during an emergency or humanitarian call or cases involving answers to specific administrative issues. An advocacy human rights organization aligned the feedback with inciting internal organizations' change, while capacity-building organizations aligned the feedback with project success.

One of the donors reflected on their practice of feedback mechanisms and indicated that feedback gained from the project participants provides ideas to their grant recipients about improving project activities. They also confirmed that organizations that tailor their approach to achieving desired project results based on the feedback from their target audiences become donors' success stories.

III. Institutionalization and locally rooted action

When assessing institutionalization of accountability practices CSOs mainly focus on internal policies and procedures. An institutionalized partnership on another hand is characterized by formalized CSOs' commitments to meaningfully engage with the communities they serve in realizing common goals. Through the institutionalized partnership especially on a local level, CSOs are involved in a regular dialogue with communities to implement actions of common importance in an accountable way. The mutual collaboration empowers both communities and CSOs to more strategically engage in processes of mutual interest and influence discussions in ensuring the citizens' needs will be taken into account. When communities are included in the process, they bring bottom-up incentives to demand action and accountability. Established on well-developed structures and pre-determined roles, the two-way communication along with the relevance of the community feedback are the two intertwined characteristics of locally-led partnerships that contribute to its future success and sustainability.

When assessing the institutional links with locally rooted partnerships and constituencies, the 2021 questionnaire results reveal that **partnership with local stakeholders** exists in all aspects of work. Still, it is not standardized with formal processes.

Most grassroots organizations reported that cooperation with larger CSOs occurs spontaneously, without a clear strategy. Conversely, they follow what CSOs do without getting involved unless there is a prior agreement. On the other hand, they reported being open and proactive in cooperating with citizens directly, providing relevant information and services daily, such as: helping their communities organize or establish into associations, assisting in the announcements' preparation and dissemination, community organizing, etc.

Grassroots organizations indicated that their community influence grows stronger as constituency support grows, enabling more citizens to join their actions. Several advocacy human rights organizations reported that most of their staff operates in the field, thus building strong ties with the people they work for. Their constituency is a source of information embodied in their work that helps them identify problems the community is not vocal about. Some advocacy human rights organizations reported that they regularly maintain relations with the beneficiaries and constituencies. According to them, networking is essential in working in the field, contributing to greater visibility of CSOs' action and more opportunities for change. Similarly, capacity-building organizations reported that the relationship with their constituencies should be strong and not determined by work without a strategic approach. On the other hand, service provider organizations insist on a co-production relationship with beneficiaries where the services created should include the ones concerned, thus increasing the mutual trust.

Donors' perceptions differ significantly from CSOs' statements about how CSOs include their constituencies in responding to local needs and resolving local problems. In contrast, they claim that the activities and reactions of the CSOs in the last few years speak about CSOs' connections only when a problem arises, while in everyday activities, this cooperation is not well established. Several donors urge CSOs to find a balance between cooperating with local communities and



CSOs. They also reflected on the need to support the legitimacy to those CSOs who are not in a position of power by directly working with them and more coalition building.

None of the grassroots organizations reported a strategic approach to internal organization or communication concerning institutionalization. Conversely, they shared their action based upon needs. Advocacy human rights organizations mentioned having established annual plans, statutes, and regulations with defined responsibilities of the governing bodies. Several of them indicated they had established institutional policies such as Code of Conduct, Finance Manual, Complaint Mechanisms, annual financial reporting, etc., but also that have adopted an additional rule of procedures, such as mechanisms on the protection of employees from sexual harassment, and mechanisms for security and safety at work, Conflict of Interest and Discretion Prevention Policy. Moreover, service provider organizations reported their institutionalization by implementing acts and protocols, such as procedures and regulations on work, including code of conduct, forms of financial and narrative reports, and internal reports implying accountability measures. The big organizations outlined the availability of information on annual reports and all activities carried out, all products on the website, and other communication channels.

Civil Society Resource Centre from North Macedonia shared its experience as an example of a more formalized partnership. They reported that during the implementation of the grant scheme, as a donor/ capacity-building provider, they encourage their constituencies to involve the local authorities and sign a memorandum for cooperation with them. The applicants were also guided to consult their constituency, consider their needs when preparing their project applications, and present the project results to the broader audience on the local level, particularly how they responded to their concerns at the end of the project. The National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania reported close ties with their constituencies after establishing and institutionalizing the Code of Standards for NPOs, a self-regulatory mechanism for the sector that aims to improve the work effectiveness, good governance, transparency, and accountability of non-profit organizations. A similar initiative exists in North Macedonia, where the Civil Society Code was established in September 2021 with the aim to strengthen the self-regulation system and contribute to greater professionalism and accountability in the CSOs' operations, while building greater trust among the general public.

Examples of Self-Assessment Tools

Investing in self-regulation mechanisms is a part of the Western Balkans CSOs' efforts to strengthen their constituent accountability. The examples below, are examples of (online) self-assessment tools in the region, all crucial for organisations to assess their internal structures and capacities more broadly. The tools' reflections and feedback could assist CSOs in developing and providing better services to their constituencies and communities they serve. Assessing the broad civil society context could also strengthen CSOs' efforts in creating a more robust civic space in the Western Balkans.

STANDARDS4NPOS IN ALBANIA

BCSDN member Partners Albania for Change and Development has recently launched [Standards4NPOs](#), available both in Albanian and English language. This innovative online self-assessment tool scores and provides recommendations on questions enclosed in 4 guiding principles and 7 commitments, assessing: organizational integrity, good governance, openness and transparency, responsible advocacy, partnerships, financing, fundraising and resource management, and the management of human resources. The tool could be used through web and mobile app. The assessment is made in a way to support Albanian CSOs in their work towards the Code of Standards but it is not limited to it. It can be beneficial for all CSOs in Albania and beyond in the Western Balkans.

RENDIRAPP IN NORTH MACEDONIA

[Rendir App](#), a dynamic self-assessment tool designed to improve CSO accountability against the Global Standard for CSO Accountability was translated into the Macedonian language with BCSDN and MCIC's help in 2020. Rendir App is a chance for Macedonian CSOs to easily improve their strategic capacities through self-regulation. The tool structured in questions, divided into 3 areas, encompassing 12 aspirational commitments, helps organisations recognize their internal strengths and areas for improvement. By using the Rendir App, the organisations could learn about their present performance and trace better and sustainable future actions after recommendations and feedback are received.

CSO DEVELOPMENT INDEX MONTENEGRO

CSO Development Index is a tailor-made tool that tracks the CSO capacity and development through 5 dimensions based on specific indicators. The methodology serves as a guideline for CSOs development. The tool is useful for self-assessment, incorporating instructions on using the methodology for regular internal organizational assessments. It focuses on civil society self-regulation and further contributes to increased horizontal learning among organizations.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this context of the Western Balkans, where CSOs constantly face unstable environments and civic space obstructions, establishing trust and horizontal relationships with their constituents to address the sector's potential shortcomings and enhance impact is essential. CSOs perceive that they engage with different stakeholders and build trustful relationships while data on their value to the public and data that shows effective results in their democratic ways of work is still scarce.

The donors' programming and demand still influence the understanding and practice of accountability towards the people they work with and for. While visible through the interviews, local informal practices are not well documented and considered part of the accountability process.

Shifting accountability towards constituents takes time. BCSDN hopes to initiate this reflection and calls upon CSOs, their stakeholders, and especially the donors in the region to further work on creating a common understanding on:

- **Lexicon:** The language and terms currently used by CSOs and stakeholders are not standardized and locally rooted. It is often donor-driven and does not capture the reality of the relationship between the civil society organizations and their communities. For example, oftentimes, CSOs align accountability with transparency (establishing donors' trust by sharing and publicizing activities and results, financial and audit reports), or with legitimacy (familiarity with people's needs and challenges of the local communities). The alignment of accountability with public trust and responsibility, as well as with the implementation of international agreements and management tasks, should not be undermined as well.

CSOs in the Western Balkan countries and their stakeholders should commit to a unifying terminology and subsequently practice that would reflect better the local context and adequately create civil society support to that reality.

- **Communication and Feedback Loops:** CSOs' communication in the Western Balkans is often one-sided, aiming to inform the partners, the public or satisfy donors and legal obligations. The ad hoc practice of talking to communities is often not recognized in their formal ways of work. Increasing communication and investing in feedback mechanisms are slowly being recognized by donors and capacity-building organizations; nevertheless, the biggest obstacle in practice is the lack of human resources and funding for such actions.

Feedback is an essential component of inclusive and responsive decision-making, assisting CSOs to enhance their programs, performance, and impact, thus showing accountability to their constituencies. Changing internal practices through open communication with stakeholders, CSOs will also close the feedback loops and increase the overall level of trust. CSOs and their constituencies in the Western Balkans should improve knowledge and close



feedback loops as an integral part of their work. Through effective feedback processes and strategic, two-way communication, the organizations should directly communicate with the citizens, becoming more aware of their needs and create more opportunities for cocreation and participation. Greater funds and professional HR, for communications personnel to enhance efficient communication and outreach is needed.

• **Partnerships:** When it comes to practicing accountability, the institutionalization of practices has been recognized by formal CSOs and is increasingly developing. In certain cases, the approach is limited to donor-requested accountability mechanisms limited to traditional policies and processes. While organically happening, local partnerships with communities and their efforts are not seen as part of the accountability processes.

CSOs should recognize establishing local-partnership with constituencies as essential to their mission and accountability. The partnership should be institutionalized and based on clear strategies and roles through which CSOs will establish better mutual connections on an everyday basis, not only when problems arise and acting upon needs. Furthermore, CSOs should permanently invest in activities to 'institutionalize' and further enhance their cooperation with locally-rooted organizations. In this way, the CSOs will strengthen the concepts of mutual trust and accountability, ensuring continuity and sustainability of their actions.

Donors and other stakeholders should reconsider project implementation funding to partner with local organizations. Providing core and unrestricted funding to a local organization and its partners should be prioritized. The provision of additional funding from donors will strengthen CSOs' capacities and will add to institutionalizing organizational accountability systems in the long run. Greater institutional support will contribute to greater CSOs' flexibility in their prompt response to their community needs, also.



METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted from November 2021 to February 2022, and several methods were used to collect data. The main instrument of the analysis and the data-gathering source were the **interviews with civil society organizations (CSOs) and donors** in the 6 Western Balkan countries. The study aimed to gather qualitative data on the perception of CSOs and donors across the region about constituencies, the way they (or their grantees) perceive and practice accountability, how they collect and act upon feedback received, the way they invest in accountability, etc. The analysis was also compiled on relevant literature gathered through desk-research of available secondary sources focusing on pertinent other reports on CSOs' capacities.

Each BCSDN member from the Western Balkans was asked to identify and interview national actors who could share their perspectives and experience regarding constituency accountability. This analysis takes stock of all the information and lessons learned from previous BCSDN surveys and experiences. The selection of interviewees was based on purposive, non-probability sampling and targeted CSOs' representatives relevant for the thematic area. The interviewees include donors/ capacity-building providers (resource center, Donors program that supports capacity building, Donor general- EU, Public institutions providing support to CSOs), and CSOs (Grassroots organization- a movement that has had success/ results in the last year, Service provider organization, Advocacy human rights organization, Big organization (e.g. a sustainable organization active in the last 20 years). Overall, 18 CSOs, and 14 Donors/ Capacity Building providers answered the survey, ensuring higher responsiveness and facilitating open exchange. All interviewees from the 6 Western Balkan countries are used and compared. Table 1 presents the list of interviewees.

The interviews were conducted to increase the understanding and scope of the main issues regarding constituency accountability and its specifics and further explore the identified country-specific issues. From the information gathered, it can be concluded that the terms accountability and constituencies have acquired various definitions and interpretations among different actors. The methodology design has no theoretical base to guide interviewees in providing united answers and understanding on constituent accountability. Conversely, the respondents interpreted the terms by following the context in which they operate, their specific missions and goals, and the target groups and beneficiaries they serve and cooperate with.

In addition to the interviews, data was collected through a survey implemented by the country researchers in May-June 2021 and used also for the purposes of the 2020 Assessment of the State of the Enabling Environment and Capacities of Civil Society in the Western Balkans and Turkey, commissioned by the EU funded project Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organizations (EU TACSO 3). The survey, aimed to assess the capacities of CSOs in the Western Balkans and Turkey, was based on the Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries for the period 2014-2020 and was extended to include additional questions of interest on the topic of accountability. For the purpose of the EU TACSO Survey, a total of 591 CSOs were interviewed throughout the Western Balkan region (Albania: 121, BiH: 116, Kosovo: 101, Montenegro: 52, North Macedonia: 108, and Serbia, 93 respondents). To that end, the BCSDN



research team designed a survey covering additional aspects that were utilized for the purpose of this research, and the data collected allowed for more in-depth and accurate data compilation. Desktop research was also done, which also included a general overview and analysis of the Global Standard for CSOs Accountability, CIVICUS's Resilient roots programme, CPDE Istanbul principles documentation, and the USAID Civil Society Organizations Index (CSOSI) for the Western Balkan countries 2018-2020.

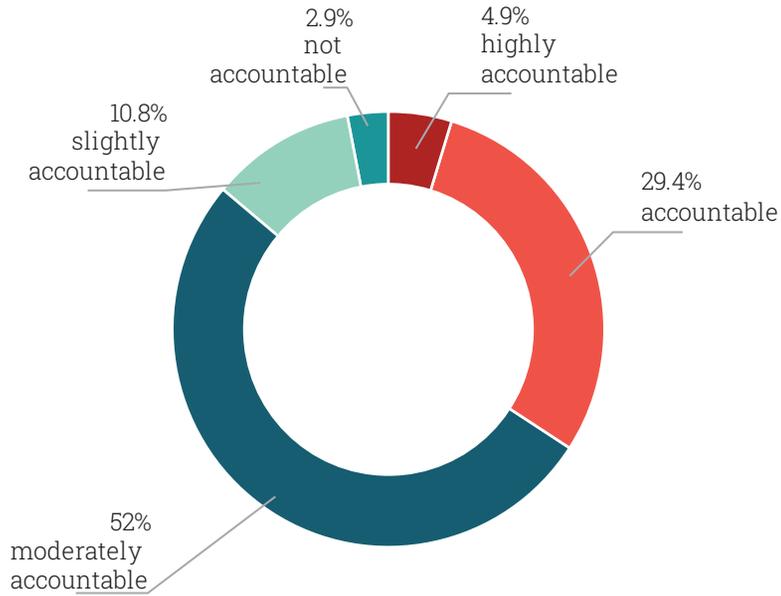
From all information analyzed, it can be concluded that the information gathered from the survey aligns with the information collected from the desk research conducted.



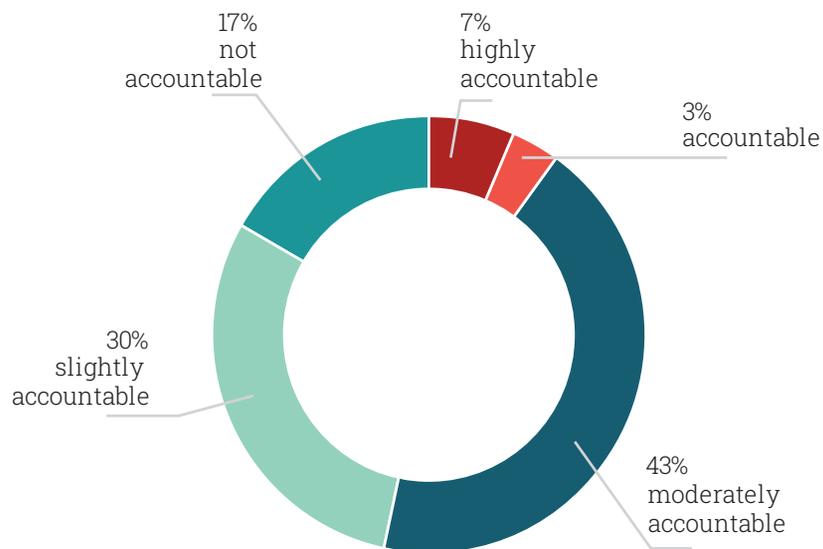
ANNEX I

CSO accountability in the Western Balkans: Country overview

North Macedonia

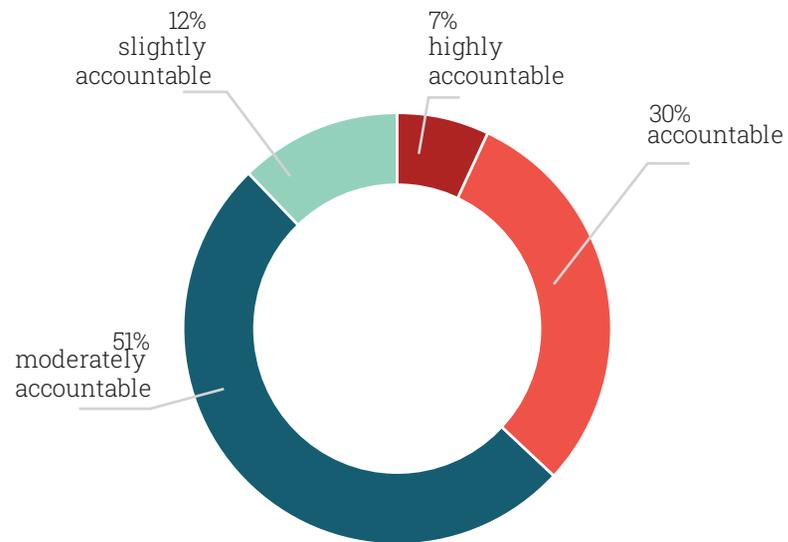


Serbia

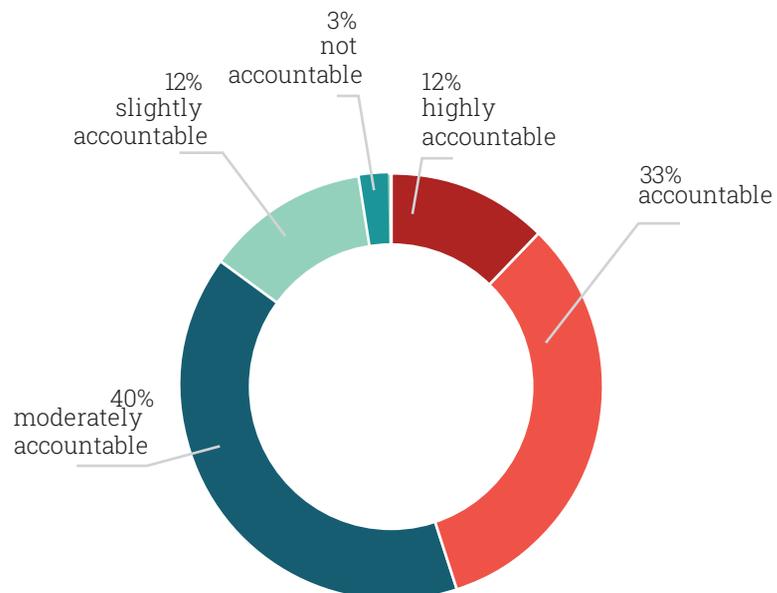




Montenegro

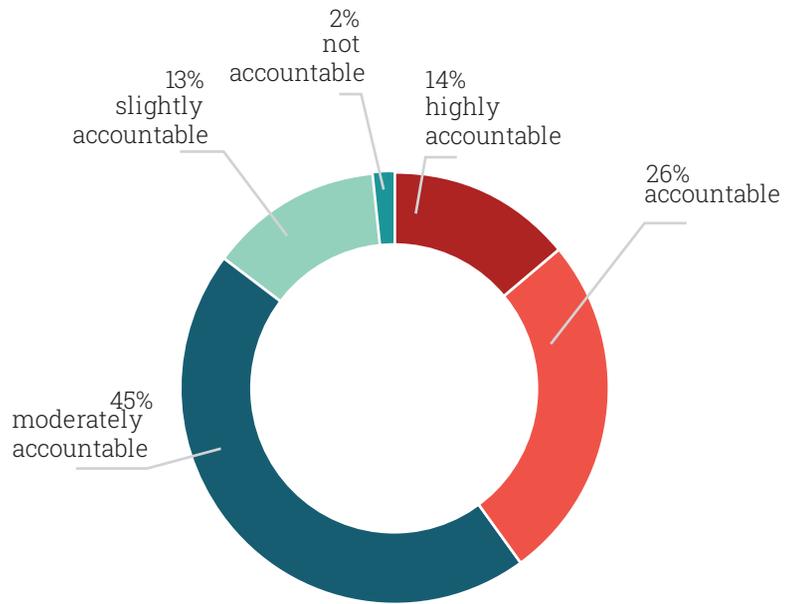


Bosnia & Herzegovina

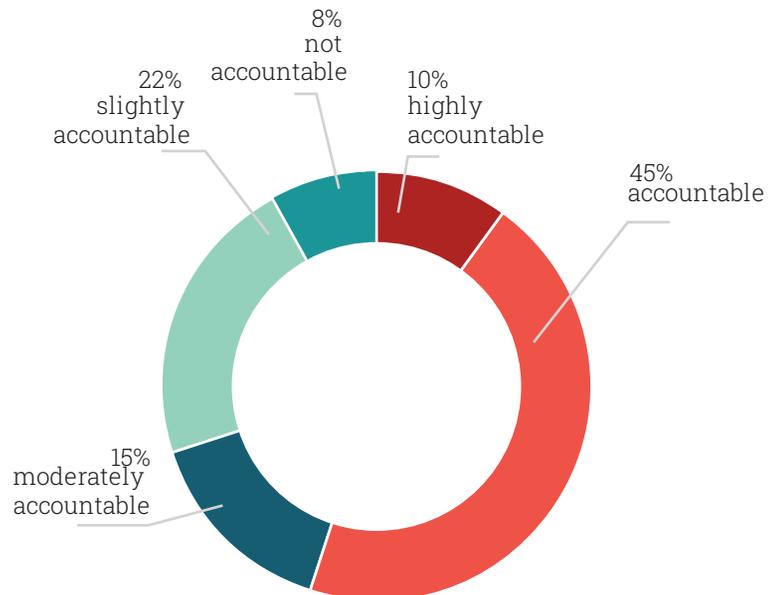




Albania



Kosovo





List of interviewees

Albania

- Initiative for social Change –ARSIS
- The Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF)
- National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Education resource center Thinkerica
- Fondacija Muharem Berbić
- Center for Civil Initiatives
- Transcultural Psychosocial Organization

Kosovo

- Democracy for Development (D4D)
- Civil Rights Programs - Kosova (CRP/K)
- The Ideas Partnership, TIP
- Norwegian Embassy in Kosovo
- European Union Office in Kosova

Montenegro

- TACSO
- RC Montenegro
- Fund for Active Citizenship
- Aktiv Zone
- Institut Alternativa

North Macedonia

- Secretary of the Platform of CSO for fight against corruption
- National Resource Center for CSOs
- CIVICA mobilias team as part of The administrative grantee scheme of Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- EU TACSO Expert
- Centre for Civic Communications

Serbia

- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- USAID
- National Research Council (NRC)
- Polekol, Belgrade
- ProTok.21, Smederevo
- PAKT, Loznica
- Center Living Upright, Novi Sad
- Da se zna, Belgrade
- Center for human rights, Niš
- Belgrade center for human rights
- Lawyers' Committee for human rights (YUCOM), Belgrade
- Belgrade Open School



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