Joint Civil Society Accountability Efforts in the Western Balkans: Call for Participation in the Regional Accountability Community of Practice

Concept Note

Introduction

The [Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN)](#) is a network of 14 civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Balkans with a mission to empower civil society and influence European and national policies towards a more enabling environment for civil society development aiming to ensure sustainable and functioning democracies in the Balkans. Principles of respecting basic rights, cooperation, partnership, tolerance, and dialogue are sustained in our [Code of Conduct](#) and are the values on which we base our work ethics and trace our future actions.

By participating and actively engaging in global alliances, such as the [Global Standard for CSO Accountability](#) and the [CSO](#) [Partnership](#) [for Development Effectiveness (CPDE)](#), BCSDN has gained valuable experience based on internationally recognized common standards that have helped us improve our own accountability practices, positioning the concept of [Dynamic Accountability](#) in the core of our actions and helping us resist and respond to ongoing challenges, and governments' restrictions, negatively affecting the overall civil society development in the Balkans. Through our [Regional Civil Society Development Hub](#), we aim to strengthen the regional cooperation to promote civic space and contribute towards effective, transparent, and accountable work of CSOs in our region.

As part of these efforts, we came up with the idea of launching a ***Regional Accountability Community of Practice (RACoP)*** that will strive towards continuous learning, improving our work, and advancing our accountability understanding and practices. Accountability can be a **lever for change**, and with the RACoP group, we offer an opportunity for discussion and sharing of good practices on how we can respond to the negative trends in our region, particularly the shrinking of the civic space.

The idea for creating the regional community results from BCSDN's membership in the *Dynamic Accountability Community of Practice*. This joint, global initiative by [CIVICUS](#), [Restless Development](#), [Keystone Accountability](#), and the [Global Standard Partnership](#) is a space where a wide range of civil society practitioners jointly share good practices, discover valuable resources, and mutually learn about the topic of Dynamic

Accountability. This concept is explored in length by the [Global Standard](#) - a reference standard for CSOs based on [12 commitments](#) that try to capture a shared understanding of accountability from CSOs worldwide.

Context and Rationale

In its latest report, [People Power Under Attack 2021](#), Civicus Monitor noted that many of the population worldwide live in countries with restricted civic freedoms. In Europe, and more precisely in the Balkans, the governments use various methods to obstruct CSOs' work. These include harassment and physical attacks on journalists, detention of protesters, enacting restrictive laws, using adverse narratives, etc. Despite all pressures and criticism, CSOs should remain consistent and work according to their vision, mission, and goals, building strong alliances or strengthening the existing relationships with the people they work for and with. In order to enhance the external environment and contribute to civil society development in shrinking civic space, CSOs should invest in transformational relationships and [improve themselves "from within."](#)

According to BCSDN's latest research on [Constituency-led](#) [Accountability](#), CSOs in the Western Balkans should dive deep into the essence of accountability and transparency of their work, especially in their effort to create more robust support for defending the civic space. To increase the trust of their constituencies, among which the citizens, donors, and policymakers, CSOs should invest in their internal mechanisms and capacities, putting constituencies and constituencies' feedback at the core of their work and not mainly being tied to donors' funds and requirements. This confirms the need to position the concept of [Dynamic accountability](#) at the core of our work.

Up to date, many practitioners in the Western Balkans have been examining, advocating, and enforcing different ways of practicing Dynamic Accountability. National Codes have been developed in recent initiatives in Albania ([Code of Standards for Non-Profit Organizations in Albania](#)), North Macedonia ([Civil Society Code](#)) and Bosnia and Herzegovina ([Code of Ethics for CSOs in BiH](#)) as well as BCSDN's own [Code of Conduct](#), which are some of the examples that showcase the local understanding and efforts towards accountable and effective Western Balkan CSOs.

However, much more needs to be done in sharing and exchanging the practices and knowledge throughout the region, and a **regional sharing and learning space** is needed. Facing similar challenges, while localizing the whole context and recognizing the need for a holistic approach to CSOs' work in the Western Balkans, BCSDN recognized the need to replicate the global community of practice into the regional context and institutionalize it through the Regional Accountability Community of Practice Group (RACoP).

The relevance of the establishment and functioning of the RACoP is sustained in our efforts to strengthen the civic space in the Western Balkans, where all society's practitioners would operate under supportive national and international legislation, thoroughly enjoying the fundamental human freedoms.

How will the community function?

The Regional Accountability Community of Practice (RACoP) will serve as a regional forum that will contribute to CSOs' efforts in building a more just, effective, and resilient society in the Balkans, supporting the organizations operating in a period of shrinking civic space. Within the community and through structured activities, the members could share their perceptions and efforts towards advancing their work by applying accountable and transparent practices in their everyday activities. The framework of activities and related action plan will be devised together with the RACoP members to ensure it is aligned with their needs and interests and create an environment for meaningful and continuous engagement.

This collaborative space would allow practitioners working at the national and regional levels to gather various perspectives and explore different solutions on how CSOs can use dynamic accountability to foster a more participatory and inclusive approach. Through a co-creation process, participants could explore different strategies and solutions and discuss the lessons learned.

BCSDN will ensure ongoing conversations around different accountability issues of interest to the RACoP members by providing a **safe convening space** for exchange and discussions, online or in-person. In consultation with the members**, key topics of interest** will be identified (*e.g. localization of the accountability discussions, communications to improve CSO legitimacy and public trust, etc*.). To support the activities to be organized together with the RACoP members, but also the members to work on strengthening their accountability practices, BCSDN will be developing and regularly updating a **database of resources (open library)** that will be made available to all RACoP members, as well as regularly sharing relevant information on both regional and global accountability developments. BCSDN will also ensure further regional **alignment with the global community of practice**, aiming to create synergy and enhance shared learning.

Who can join the RACoP group?

Participants' online activism in the RACoP group will not just be limited to BCSDN members and the Regional Civil Society Hub Grantees. Aiming to expand our joint accountability horizons, the community will be open to attracting the interest of additional members, who would like to enhance their legitimacy, transparency, and accountability, and contribute to the overall civil society resilience in the Western Balkans.

How can an organization/network/ activist join the RCoP group?

All groups, or individuals interested in our joint accountability discussion while enhancing their accountable work, could join us by **signing this form** or reaching out to us at: executiveoffice@balkancsd.net.

Next steps/ What to expect?

A Kick-off meeting (September 2022)

After the initial group is formed, an online kick-off meeting will be organized in September 2022 to introduce community members to each other so to define the community's structure that will be flexible and supportive of the planned joint activities. The kick-off meeting will be the community's launching event and will explain the forthcoming priorities.

Online meetings

BCSDN will organize one-on-one sessions and joint community meetings to ensure ongoing conversations around different accountability issues of interest to the RACoP members by providing the relevant resources and convening space for exchange and discussions. In consultation with the members, key topics of interest will be specified.

Online groups

Online groups (google/ outlook) will be created for better coordination. The groups will also be a place where individuals could ask relevant questions, share recent information on essential CSOs' development, and provide different resources upon members' request. The Regional Community of Practice will be a place for networking, and building solidarity, capacity building, creating synergies, and information and knowledge sharing.

Open library

To support the activities to be organized together with the RACoP members, but also the members' own work on strengthening their accountability practices, BCSDN will work on developing and regularly updating a database of resources (open library) that will be made available to all RACoP members, as well as regularly sharing relevant information on both regional and global accountability developments.

Synergies with the Dynamic Accountability Group of Practice (DACoP)

As the establishment of the RACoP has been inspired by the Dynamic Accountability Community of Practice (DACoP), BCSDN will ensure further alignment of the regional with the global community of practice, aiming to create synergy and enhance shared learning. With the Global Standard commitments being used as a conceptual framework to lead contextual conversations around Dynamic Accountability relevant for the organizations from the region members, BCSDN and Global Standard partners could work together on identifying common actions/ stories between them and create interesting, related peer stories coming from different parts of the world (example: environmental protection, attacks on/ protection of journalists, gender equality etc.). Further joint actions would also be considered (e.g., participation at events, sharing success stories, direct consultation etc.) according to the needs and interest expressed on both sides.

Coordination

BCSDN will be responsible for the overall coordination of the RACoP, such as organizing meetings, preparing agendas, and communicating with RACoP members. BCSDN will also link the RACoP and DACoP members and strive to create solid and permanent alliances between the two groups. Nevertheless, considering BCSDN's effort to develop horizontal relationships based on powershift and meaningful engagement, BCSDN will open the debate and give the chance to the RACoP members to be actively involved in the coordination and the agenda-setting activities, thus further strengthening their interest and engagement.

Consent to share form

Considering that the RACoP group will be a resource-sharing space, each member will be asked to sign a *Consent to share form* (Annex 1), giving BCSDN permission to share all the documents conveyed by the members on a separate online platform.

Promotion and visibility of RACoP

To ensure comprehensive and effective dissemination of RACoP past activities and upcoming events, strong dissemination components will be incorporated within the activities with a planned multiplier effect among a wider audience. During the first kick-off meeting, a dissemination plan will be prepared and adopted to ensure wide dissemination of the community's work. RACoP members will be engaged in creating content that promotes both individual and joint practices of accountability, which will be shared through all BCSDN's communication channels. Through social media and BCSDN and RACoP members' websites, all RACoP outputs will be promoted. BCSDN will keep promoting the Community among the Hub's future grantees to increase the pool of interested organizations to learn and strengthen their dynamic accountability practices.

Short survey

As a means to better shape the overall RACoP coordination and functioning, as well as to obtain better members' expectations of the RACoP group and priorities, a [short survey](#) will be disseminated among RACoP members.

Join us in our actions advancing our accountability, strengthening the civic space, and building more resilient communities in the Western Balkans!