

Going back to the Roots of Democracy

How can the EC further empower the civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey to strengthen the transformative power and the credibility of the EU accession process?

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For years, the Balkan Civil Society Development Network ([BCSDN](#)) has been following the EU's approach in supporting civil society in the enlargement countries, advocating for recognizing and supporting the civil society as a competent and democratic partner in the EU accession process. We have based our recommendations on the findings from the monitoring conducted through our [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#), on our extensive experience as a network, and on the individual experience and knowledge of our member organizations which are the leading CSOs supporting civil society development in their respective countries.

To reinstate the EU's credibility and strengthen the accession process, the EC should revive its focus to the [Roots of Democracy](#) – further empowering civil society. Civil society is a key actor that contributes to more accountable governance and more open and deeper democracies - what we believe should be primary aims and gains of the EU accession of the region.

“To enhance efforts to promote a conducive environment for CSOs in partner countries.”

1. The EU's contribution to the enabling environment is related to its general political leverage in the pre-accession countries specifically, and within its Enlargement Policy generally. The stronger this political leverage, the more significant its positive pressure towards the national governments in implementing standards for enabling the environment for civil society.
2. The Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries [aimed to provide a coherent body of such EU principles and standards](#) embodied in a common regulatory framework against which future/aspiring countries should be measured. While the Guidelines ensured a joint understanding of what an enabling environment is, they failed to provide an effective framework of *Civil Society Acquis*. The new Guidelines 2021-2027 point out that they are intended also for the EU staff in analyzing the state of affairs concerning civil society in the IPA beneficiaries, including as part of assessing progress towards the Copenhagen political criteria. So far, civil society is screened

within the Political criteria as one of the four pillars of Democracy, however it is incoherently and in varying detail reported across countries, with an absence of a direct reference to the Guidelines.

3. Other than the Guidelines, other recent developments towards creating a more coherent approach and regulatory frameworks at the EU level should be reflected in the EU Enlargement Strategy i.e. new annual European Rule of Law Mechanism for EU Member States and a call for EU Civil Society Strategy. Many of the **principles and standards** of what consists of an **enabling environment can also be integrated into** the main body of the EU Acquis for the future members - whether in the **Negotiation frameworks or within the Stabilization and Accession Agreement (SAA) frameworks.**
4. The standards set with the Guidelines **should be translated into the national strategies (or measures) for civil society development.** This would not only provide an operationalized mechanism for monitoring, but also a leverage for apt action towards Enlargement countries, where backsliding would have ramifications and progress would bring concrete benefits. In cases of serious breaches, instead of decreasing country allocations through the IPA, funds should be reallocated to CSOs, enabling civil society to counter back such democratic relapse.
5. **EU Delegations (EUDs) should be the main promoters and supporters of the Guidelines.** They should improve the understanding, significance given to, and the outreach of the Guidelines, including by introducing this document in regular discussions and dialogue at a higher level with a wide range of governments actors, civil society and other donors, ensuring more substantial and coordinated support for the implementation of the national policies and strategies for an enabling environment.
6. The **monitoring** of the Guidelines must follow a revised, well-defined, and systematic **methodology**, which will enable solid, reliable and **credible findings and recommendations** to inform EU's policy-making and be integrated in the programming. The Methodology used by TACSO for monitoring the Guidelines is not appropriate and does not provide extensive evidence and a relevant and realistic picture about the state of play in the Western Balkans and Turkey.
7. The findings from the monitoring of the **Guidelines should be linked** to the framework for following **the implementation of the IPA CSF.** There should be a clear overview of how the EU supported projects contribute to the achievement of EU objectives/EUG standards. A comprehensive database for all EU supported projects, where they could report their contributions against the Guidelines objectives, will ensure better information on the impact and results vis-à-vis the Guidelines. Furthermore, it will also raise awareness about the enabling environment and push civil society to focus on how they contribute to it, encouraging joint contributions. Finally, it will contribute to the transparency and accountability of the EU support.

"To promote a meaningful and structured participation of CSOs in domestic policies of partner countries, in the EU programming cycle and in international processes."

8. The **EU should implement and demand the public institutions respect genuine consultation processes with civil society**, especially on policies and legislation that are directly related to EU accession reforms, in order to strengthen CSOs' effective participation in policy and decision-

making. To this end, it must not focus on quantitative criteria, as it supports the trend of “tick-the-box” consultations without proper opportunity for wide engagement of those who are really affected, at the same time allowing for GONGO activities and influence.

9. To **improve** the currently weak **relationships with civil society**, EU delegations must be open and responsive to the calls and alarms by civil society. The involvement of different delegation representatives (not just the civil society focal points) in the discussions with CSOs should be encouraged, while ensuring the EUD staff stand by the EU values.
10. **Consultations with and inclusion of CSOs are key for the success of the IPA III CSF and Media Programme** and should be structured, timely, and transparent, ensuring effective participation of civil society in all phases of the process – the preparation, implementation, and monitoring of the use of the future IPA III funds. Civil society should also be consulted in the planning of the regional and of the technical assistance in the countries.

“To increase local CSOs' capacity to perform their roles as independent development actors more effectively.”

11. In the **planning and implementation of support**, the EU must make sure **to contribute to the capacities and sustainability of local civil society**. Technical assistance for civil society development can be redundant and not cost-effective. This approach hinders the locally owned and well-established processes, and undermines CSOs' local knowledge, expertise, long-standing relations with stakeholders, and the possibility to ensure ownership of project outcomes. Assigning the implementation of the IPA CSF predominantly to international agencies further undermines the local civil society.
12. In line with current best practices for most effective donor support, there should be more **focus on core and long-term support for CSOs as well as more flexible support**. Different modalities to respond to the diversity of CSOs should be used, and to ensure a balance between supporting well established and successful organizations whose existence and mission depend greatly on the EU funding (especially as public funding is limited for such organizations), and supporting new CSOs or civic movements for encouraging the development of a more vibrant civil society. CSO should also be the main beneficiaries for the support for enhancing regional civil society cooperation.
13. **Subgranting** is indeed a way to increase the outreach and effectiveness of the EU funds, however it should be more carefully designed to better serve this purpose. Rather than replicating EU requirements at a lower level and requesting subgranting to be implemented by all (e.g. think tanks requested to provide sub-granting), it will be more effective if subgranting is implemented by local CSOs that have the relevant experience and technical capacity for sub-granting.