



Mapping the role of civil society across the western Balkans


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Abstract: The six Western Balkan countries are experiencing simultaneous democratization and EU integration processes. The EU has been leveraging the possibility of EU membership and EU conditionality for the implementation of a range of policies and promotion of democratic reforms. In the context of EU conditionality, along the other issues there is an emphasis on the ‘weak civil society’ across the Western Balkan countries. This study examines the situation of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as agents of change in region. Through a comparative approach, it aims to map the role of civil society across the WB countries to understand the main issues and challenges in state-civil society relationship for WB countries in promoting democratic governance, reconciliation, and EU accession.

Keywords: civil society, civil society organizations, western Balkans, EU integration

Introduction

The six Western Balkan countries are experiencing democratization and EU integration processes. Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) acquired the EU candidate status and Kosovo remains a potential candidate country. The perception of stagnating democratization in the region persists despite the reformation and transformation efforts. Acquiring EU membership comprises an important objective of post-socialist governments’ foreign policies and EU used membership as a foreign policy instrument (Mihajlovic & Engeli, 2019; Perkovic, 2014). The EU has been leveraging the possibility of EU membership and EU conditionality for the implementation of a range of policies and promotion of democratic reforms. While the EU membership prospective has had a role on democratization in the Western Balkans, the political elites’ seeming conformity with EU regulations, and some legacies left by the communist past has made reform implementation in some areas of policy shallow (Perkovic, 2014). The main obstacles to transformation include the lack of democratic culture, the

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complexity of the democratic process, inadequate institutions, and a weak civil society (Perkovic, 2014).

Within the EU integration framework, civil society actors are considered as agents that can encourage domestic change by supporting and promoting EU driven reforms. According to Kostovicova (2013), democratization, Europeanization and reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans require strengthening “weak civil society” as emphasized in the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Egan, Nugent and Paterson (2018) define civil society as local watchdogs of reform adoption and implementation and claim that high expectations on them have been associated with an increase in EU political and financial support to civil society in EU candidate countries. Also, they operate as intermediaries between political actors negotiating accession and the public by spreading information and rising awareness across the society on EU membership benefits and obligations. Considering the conflictual past of the region, civil society actors in the WB countries have been strong advocates of reconciliation (Kostovicova, 2013). This article, through a comparative approach, aims to map the role of civil society across the WB countries to understand the main challenges in state-civil society relationship for WB countries within the framework of the EU integration process.

1. Civil society and EU integration process

Traces to the roots of the notion of “civil society” go back to Tocqueville and Rousseau (Diamond, 1994) as “the people” were understood to be a force of collective good, with the ability to create and develop democratic will, against elites. Originating in early modern West European thinking, the idea of civil society was reformulated during the 1980s in Eastern Europe and Latin America and has since spread around the world (Glasius et al., 2004). Hence, democratic change can often be credited to mass mobilization, examples of South Korea, Chile or Poland proving this point. Importantly, the state-civil society relationship is not always a zero-sum game, and other factors might contribute to the ups and lows of such relationship (Diamond, 1994).

Altmann (2015) refers civil society as the segment that expresses its problems, interests, and views outside of the political system and party structure. Diamond (1994, p. 221) defines civil society as “the realm of organised social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules”. Such society is different from the generalized version of society, as citizens behave collaboratively in a public setting to convey their passions, interests, and ideas, share data, accomplish shared objectives, place demands on the state, and make state representatives answerable. Chambers and Kopstein (2006, p.364) state that civil society can be understood in six relations: “civil society apart from the state, against the state, in support of the state, in dialogue of the state, in partnership with the state, and beyond the state”,

while highlighting that the six relationships are not mutually exclusive. On the other side, Glasius et al. (2004) highlights that civil society can be interpreted in two realms: the one with political ground, and the one with a depoliticized ground, where one can include non-governmental and non-profit organizations.

Substantially, civil society against the state underlines that civil society is an agent that can oppose state institutions, however, sociologically and judicially, such opposition did not exist, or existed in small fraction, under totalitarian regimes with a depoliticized citizenry (Chamber & Kopstein, 2006). In 1989, a form of these groups in Poland, Hungary and East Germany gained ground and started negotiations that would soon help in the collapse of communist regimes. Hence, the organization of civil society has been particularly important for political movements in the third wave of democracy (Diamond, 1994), being considered a stimulus for democratization, be it through negotiations or not.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are established by individuals or non-governmental groups and institutions with the aim of addressing short-term or long-term issues that are not adequately addressed by the governmental institutions. They include labor unions, employers' associations, human rights organizations, and other social groupings (We Balkans, n.d.). The dialogue between CSOs and the state is indeed a critical one: the state is ought to answer and justify its actions when faced with civil society, making the latter central to the public sphere (Habermas, n.d., as cited in Chamber & Kopstein, 2006). Civil society offers a possibility for groups of the society, marginalized or not, to bring their concerns and needs to the agenda of policymakers, further strengthening the relationship among state institutions and non-state actors. A resilient civil society contributes to democratic processes through citizen mobilization, advocacy for policy reforms, ensuring government accountability, promoting social bonding, and contributing to peace building (Rodrigues, 2015). It is important to note, nonetheless, the implicit belief that the social and political spheres are inextricably linked supports the views of many neoliberal policy advocates, who see their interventions as more social than political—that is, as interventions that uphold the social institutions of a particular nation (Seckinelgin, 2002 as cited in Glasius et al., 2004). Additionally, there is a worldwide political framework that is affecting national political debates.

CSOs act as a crucial tenet of democracy, bridging the division between citizens and state, encouraging citizen engagement and offering different approaches and perspectives. The political system comprises a determining factor regarding the inclusion of non-state actors. They are more welcomed in democratic systems where there is the ability to vote for a variety of political parties and to influence party programs (Altmann, 2015). In authoritarian systems, the will of the leader or a group dominates and there is no space for discussion or debate that can jeopardize their interests. As previously mentioned, (Diamond, 2004; Chamber & Kopstein, 2006), while civil society has been attributed to facilitate the overthrow of communism, particularly in Eastern Europe, scholars have also questioned its real revolutionary

power. Today, in these post-communist states, civil society is characterized by organizational weaknesses and a lack of trust (Chamber & Kopstein, 2006).

Regarding the scope and significance of a civil society, a society's heterogeneity—that is, its diversity in terms of racial and religious backgrounds, regional customs, and, above all, economic and ecological interests, divisions, and concerns—becomes even more significant. Essentially, interpretations of CSOs' scope are also dependable on cultural implications and the political configurations of the state they get developed – the more democratic, the easier it is for CSOs to rise (Glasius et al., 2004). This explains why a wide range of civil society actors like charity, religious, cultural, business, environmental organizations and many others can be found in today's heterogeneous democracies (Altmann, 2015). The civil society organizations work to promote sane and democratic social interaction either in conjunction with or independently from the state. Also, they function as both partners of the government, but also as watchdogs of their activity to hold them accountable (We Balkans, n.d). As advocates and service providers, CSOs assist in bringing citizens' problems to government attention, addressing difficulties in society, and increasing awareness of their rights (Altmann, 2015; We Balkans, n.d). A state constantly requires maintenance, upgrades, and repairs in addition to adaptations to shifting different circumstances. Civil society has a vital role to play in the state, by fixing the shortcomings and gaps that politics either causes or ignores (Altmann, 2015). These could be systemic and immediately apparent, such as “lack of transparency, inefficient bureaucracy, insufficient freedom of expression and restrictions to media freedoms, or obvious deficiencies in priority-setting with regard to developing a socially harmonious and prospering society” (Altmann, 2015, para. 2). Usually, CSOs are analysed based on several factors, two of them being legal frameworks to participate in decision making and organizational capacity.

The EU enlargement process expands the range of opportunities for domestic actors, including CSOs, to update their mobilization strategies that would lead to more empowerment (Egan et al., 2018). The approach of the European Commission towards civil society as transformative actors is emphasized under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) in 2007 (Kostovicova, 2013). “The Civil Society Facility (CSF), which was established in 2008 under the IPA, further streamlined funding for the development of civil society by concentrating on three key areas: capacity building, direct engagement of civil society with EU institutions through “People 2 People” programmes, and creation of civil society networks” (Kostovicova, 2013, p. 103). Informal networks and non-hierarchical institutional learning are two more ways that external governance shows itself (Scott & Liikanen, 2010). The evolving domestic agendas of CSOs show a gradual assimilation of EU norms and an integration of social aims established by CSOs located in the EU. “European” civil society goals and ideals are transferred through pragmatic techniques that depoliticize cross-border cooperation between civil society actors and contextual adaption processes. Issues like social welfare, environmental

awareness, transparent governance, gender equality, and minority rights are presented and interpreted locally through such unofficial means (Scott & Liikanen, 2010). Civil society organizations offer plenty of opportunities for strengthening the EU's influence and advancing its soft power agenda for regional cooperation. The fact that CSOs represent segments of the population that look for different ways to participate in social and political activities that promote democratic change is one explanation for this. CSOs are constantly at the vanguard when it comes to advocating for policies that are left out by governments' plans, by bringing the spotlight towards this ignored issues, and emphasizing the need for immediate attention and action. They can promote innovative policy forms or methods by offering fresh ideas and views, which in may in turn contribute towards more holistic and diverse policy-making. They can often serve as "laboratories for new ideas" as mentioned previously above, because they also have the capacities and freedoms to explore with new approaches to political and social concerns, without the restraints that frequently limit the activity of governmental institutions and organizations (Edwards, 2009).

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have an important role in fostering cross-border collaboration and interactions, that are crucial factors for regional stability and integration in the European Union (EU) This duty of CSOs is especially important given the EU's complicated multinational structure and continued expansion of operations. CSOs frequently establish transnational networks that facilitate the exchange of ideas, best practices, and cultural awareness across national boundaries (Polleta, 1999).

The growing activism of CSOs in the Western Balkans is undermined by governmental systems that serve the interests of certain groups rather than the common people's aspirations (Altmann, 2015; Mihajlovic & Engeli, 2019). Numerous pieces of evidence indicate that official politics in the Western Balkans continue to downplay and even negatively perceive the role of civil society (Altmann, 2015; Mihajlovic & Engeli, 2019). This impression undermines CSOs' opportunity to successfully participate in policymaking and democratic governance. CSOs work in difficult political environments in certain candidate nations, where the government may impose restrictions on their operations or consider them with disdain (Salamoon & Sokolowski, 2016). Another issue is that many citizens in the respective candidate countries are unaware of CSOs' roles and responsibilities. Inadequate public interaction or education regarding the work that CSOs undertake, how they contribute to society as a whole and how they differ from for-profit organizations or governmental groups may be the cause of this lack of understanding. People might be less inclined to support or participate in the activities of CSOs given that they are not aware of their beneficial effects. CSOs can face unfavourable preconceptions that portray them as politically or self-driven groups, rather than real community activists. These perceptions can be reinforced by political discourse, depictions in the media, or disinformation propaganda and efforts that paint CSOs

as foreign agents or groups that harm national interests (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016). Such impressions might contribute to mistrust and skepticism among the public and hamper collaboration between CSOs and the general population. This in turn may reduce their efficacy and capacity to shape policies. (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016).

Despite the help CSOs can give in strengthening democratic principles and continuing EU integration, they are not able to meet expectations. The civil society organization sector lacks cohesive alliances, its funding sources are unstable, and its donors frequently reassess their priorities (Petric, 2019, as cited in Mihajlovic & Engeli, 2019). There is a necessity for the financing resources to be diversified. As it is shown that organizations may become more susceptible to changes in political agendas or financial circumstances if they depend too heavily on a single source of funding, be it government grants, individual gifts, or foreign assistance. This is especially pertinent to CSOs operating in the Western Balkans in light of the erratic financing sources. (Salamon & Toepler, 2015).

There is a vast amount of power in the hands of political parties, they make decisions, and public institutions just confirm them formally, therefore making parties and public institutions undistinguishable from one another (Perkovic, 2014). Even while civil society has had the opportunity to advocate and suggest policies to the government during discussions for EU membership, especially on human rights issues—which make up a significant portion of Chapter 23 in the EU Acquis—there is not enough consideration of their contribution. The amount of power concentrated in the hands of political parties to a degree that it has overwhelming influence in the decision-making processes is referred to as “state capture”. This phenomenon is more than just party domination; it includes an intricate and extensive network of ties or connections between political parties, business elites, and government institutions. Thus, consequentially making this environment difficult for CSOs to operate and influence policy making processes, as they frequently do not have the informal connections as well as resources to compete with the already entrenched interest of the former (Bieber, 2020).

The approach that EU has used to enhance the role of CSOs in the region has also been met with backlash. CSOs are challenged in many dimensions while contributing to the adjustment of social, political and economic progresses. “Civil society organizations in the region can make reconciliation difficult to achieve due to their weak capacity, ethnic fragmentation, lack of financial autonomy, and the impact of an illiberal political environment on them” (Mastrococco, 2020 as mentioned in Buciqi 2024, p.19). The lack of media freedom also influences the process, as it stagnates investigative journalism. Funding for development appears to be an issue, as it is usually transmitted through public institutions and international agencies (Perkovic, 2014). Lastly, such issues result in limited space and capture of the CSOs by the political elite. This article offers a comparison of the state of the CSOs in the Western Balkans to map their role within the framework of the EU

integration process. Further comparison can reveal deficiencies in EU's approach, as well as states' exposure and inclusion of CSOs. Beside an overview of the state of CSO in each country of the region, it highlights the main issues and challenges they are facing.

2. CSOs in the Western Balkans

Serbia currently has opened 22 out of 35 chapters of the *acquis* and has provisionally closed only 2. The anti-war movements of the 1990s gave rise to Serbian CSOs. While civil society did not have the possibility to exist in the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, scattered gatherings that discussed societal gatherings did exist, with a highly conditional freedom (Spasic, 2003). However, the Yugoslav state managed to merge the borders between the "state" and "society", consequently impeding the development of self-governing groups. Civil society emerged in the 1990s in the face of conflicting circumstances. Genuine NGOs were able to arise as a result of the political pluralization that followed 1989, but the Milosevic regime remained antagonistic. The hostility showed up as media slander, police raids, detentions, and legal repression. The election fraud-related winter protests of 1996–1997 marked a pivotal moment in history as they resulted in the recognition of democratic local governments (Spasic, 2003). The demonstrations sparked a renewed interest in civic engagement, particularly in cities, and between 1997 and 2000, the non-profit sector grew significantly, became more professional, and even assumed functions that were traditionally handled by the government. The CSOs in Serbia offer an encouraging example of the growth in capacity and capability of local CSOs, collaborating in creating new formats to enable lines of communications with the government (Egan et al., 2018). Nevertheless, CSOs are vulnerable and face many challenges in Serbia. The unstable political environment and emerging authoritarian tendencies have raised concerns for the security of civil society sector (Juzova, Burazer & Roginer, 2022). EU and USAID comprise the most important financial supporters for CSOs in Serbia, followed by domestic sponsors. As such, financial independence remains a challenge for Serbian CSOs (Mastrorocco, 2020).

Montenegro has currently opened 33 out of 35 chapters and has closed 3 provisionally. Montenegro supports, promotes and encourages the contribution of CSOs (European Commission, 2022). Considering the size of the nation, Montenegro's civil society is relatively well-developed, in part because of the originally abundant support from foreign donors (Egan et al, 2018). Organisations work in the areas of human rights, governmental administration, and anti-corruption initiatives. Experienced activists have established most of the CSOs in Montenegro in early 2000s. The EU financial support, access to domestic actors, and their inclusion in EU negotiation working groups showed promising future for CSOs (Egan et al., 2018). Also, the Law of Public Administration highlights the CSOs involvement in EU negotiation structures as a sign of state's will for citizens

engagement (European Commission, 2022). The EU has positively evaluated the involvement of CSOs and their representatives in the accession negotiation process (Egan et al., 2022).

North Macedonia is a candidate country, currently going through the screening process. Before the dissolution of the Yugoslav state, civil society was viewed as a parallel realm that represented citizens' autonomy in contrast to the government, therefore opposing the force of the state (Kacarska, 2008 as cited in Sharlamanov & Petreska, 2020). Building a civil society in North Macedonia during the transition period was subordinate to the process of creating a nation-state, which was obtaining independence at the time and needed to address the difficulties it presented (Sharlamanov & Petreska, 2020). Thus, research conducted during the early years of North Macedonia's independence leads to the conclusion that democracy, particularly in the civil society, has not been cemented because of the unresolved state question in the nation. Nonetheless, the development of civil society was seen as a necessary component of democratization in the early 1990s. Following the emergence of environmental groups, humanitarian and social-issue organisations formed in reaction to the economic and refugee crises. Human rights activism began to gain ground during the mid-1990s, especially during the Kosovo crisis. In 2010, a study revealed that they had been involved in several local and international networks and felt they had a substantial influence on public policies (Sharlamanov & Petreska, 2020). Over time, these organisations started networking and exchanging information. CSOs in North Macedonia have been working in an environment enabling their participation in decision making (European Commission, 2022). CSOs have so far been consulted regarding national plans for the adoption of the *acquis* (Nikolovski, 2020). It has been discussed in the North Macedonian government that Montenegro shall be taken as an example when it comes to the acceptance and involvement of civil society in the negotiations process, when the chapters are opened (Nikolovski, 2020). However, there is still a lack of clear conception on how the procedure will work, and who will count as a CSO.

Like North Macedonia, Albania is currently waiting for its screening process and in the first steps of the accession negotiations. There has been a limited improvement in the civil society sector. The cooperation among CSOs and the government is not institutionalized, marking a lack of participation of CSOs in the decision-making processes (European Commission, 2022). Also, the environment on which CSOs operate is not adequate for CSOs to be created, they are completely based on external financial support, which makes their resources be limited in to interact and communication with the public (Bino et al., 2021).

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) became officially candidate country in December 2022. During the pre-conflict era in 1992, there was the existence of a civil society, however its activity was very limited due to it being heavily influenced by the political apparatus of the Yugoslav state. During the war period of 1992-1995, the social structures crumbled, in this period various community organizations

formed throughout the crisis, with an emphasis on providing humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding activities. The post-war period was followed by contributions made by international organizations and other NGOs in restructuring and establishing a civil society in the country, many actions were undertaken to develop the democratic institutions of the country as well as increasing the civil participation in their community (Milan, 2017). The early 2000s and 2010 period saw an increase of NGOs, with issues focused on many issues, such as human rights, women rights and issues concerning the development of the overall community. And in this period, there was a significant increase of civic engagement. CSOs were started to gain attention from the general public and were more influential in the political processes. There was a consistent increase of these groups advocating for transparency as well as promoting accountability and democratic governance. However current political climate and the influence of political parties as well as fundings are still a problem that consists with these groups and makes it thus difficult for them to have an impact in the policies (Milan, 2017). CSOs in BiH hold a sheer number, but what is concerning is the inverse proportion they have with the quality and impact. This can be partly explained with the fact that the agenda of these CSOs, primarily created after the Dayton Agreement, has been set by international donors. CSOs in BiH are several steps behind regarding efficiency, results and involvement (European Commission, 2022). The adoption of a framework, both legal and financial is missing, while consultations have not been proven to occur yet. The pandemic hit the financial assistance of these CSOs extensively, as the recovery package did not include any assistance for them, showing negligence from the government (European Commission, 2022).

Formally submitting its application for membership in December 2022, Kosovo is now a potential candidate of the EU. Due to the regional unrest in the 1990s, Kosovar civil society arose and was closely related to the movement for national self-determination, offering alternatives to the state structure of Serbia. On the other hand, the Serbian minority in Kosovo continued to adhere to Belgrade's instructions, which encouraged the development of alternative sociocultural and institutional structures, the duality of which exists till today (Ferati-Sachsenmaier 2019, as cited in Mastrorocco, 2020; Strazzari & Selenica, 2013). On their own, CSOs in Kosovo try to enhance democracy and pluralism in the young country and contribute to the design of EU related reforms (European Commission, 2022), showing an overall welcoming of CSOs into the political sphere.

3. Challenges in State-CSO relations in Western Balkans

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Serbia have been striving to raise awareness and spread information on political issues despite political attacks and anti-campaigns on their activity (European Commission, 2022). In 2022, CSOs faced pressure on various issues including rule of law, environmental concerns, or

opposition to war criminals' glorification. In case of unregistered protests, the organizers were held responsible for attacks and lacked police protection (European Commission, 2022). The negligence has also been observed when parliament has adopted laws without involving opposition even though CSOs have continued their response (Juzova et al., 2022). A general observation is the absence of internal debate in Serbia, mainly due to the reluctance of political elites to engage in debates on sensitive issues including past's tensions and wars preventing public consciousness development (Mastorocco, 2020). An example is Serbian government acknowledgement of the Srebrenica massacre without an internal debate. More improvement and implementation are needed regarding state- CSO relations (European Commission, 2022). Additionally, despite the establishment of e-consultation platform, effective consultation is not ensured yet. Serbia's CSO sustainability score is medium with 4.3, in a scale from 1 to 7 (USAID, 2023).

In Montenegro, the relationship between the state and civil society is typically characterized as strained, and there is generally little political will (Egan et al., 2022). Trust in CSOs is 46.7%, which is higher than trust in the nation's major institutions. (Drakić, I., & Kajganović, 2012). Additionally, attacks have not stopped coming from media organizations and sources that publicly back the government. Consequently, one can say that having a prepared structure on the legal front, Montenegro still requires improvement in this regard. Additionally, the government is not as enthusiastic about the general developing of Montenegro's CSOs. According to the European Commission (2022), evaluation procedures used by CSOs are typically outdated, unimproved, and undeveloped. It is necessary to hold more meetings and appoint new members to the Council for Cooperation of State Bodies and Non-Governmental Organizations before it can start working effectively. In 2023, Montenegro receives a medium score of 4, out of 7, on the USAID CSO sustainability index.

The North Macedonian identity is contested, both internally and externally (Kartsonaki & Wolff, 2023). This polarization, which is also present in the political sphere, has caused for polarization even in CSOs. Often, they are perceived to be aligning with different identities, let it be Albanian or North Macedonian, often they become structures used by the main political parties. There is, however, a standard which presumes that political CSOs have more funding and mobilization when compared with social ones (Hadjievska, 2023). Lobbyism for women's rights, for example, are often ignored by the media (Kostovicova, 2013). The efforts done until now to include CSOs in the decision-making process still need improvement. An effective monitoring framework also needs to be put into place (European Commission, 2022). Financially wise, the sector is again heavily dependent on external donors. On the USAID CSO sustainability score, North Macedonia scores relatively low to medium, 3.7, in a scale from 1 to 7 (2023).

The legal and policy frameworks for facilitating cooperation between public institutions and civil society in Albania are largely in place, but there are still

problems, including a lack of mechanisms for providing feedback and monitoring compliance with the law. The relationship the government induces with CSOs is superficial at best, with very little real impact (Bino et al., 2021). The institutions and procedures for working with CSOs are typically poorly integrated, unsustainable and vaguely defined, showing negligence of the system to sustain them. Interestingly, CSOs and the government do find common grounds. According to Bino et al., (2021), the trustworthiness of CSOs in Albania has started to shrink as a result of their logic and professional working culture being very similar. This also reduces the transparency of said CSOs. Several of them study transparency and informality in the country, but little of them have worked to show that they themselves are transparent. Smear campaigns and negative images are also persisting regarding CSOs, which further delegitimize their power (Sadiku, 2010). Political polarization also negatively affects, further strengthening the already existing stigma. On the USAID CSO sustainability score, Albania scores relatively low to medium, 3.7, in a scale from 1 to 7 (2023).

The European Commission reports on Kosovo that in general, civil society organizations, including those that support civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, are allowed to freely exercise their rights to association, assembly, and critical expression, without pressure by the political actors (2022). Consultation efforts, both in local and central level have increased. What seems to be fundamentally missing is a strong legislative framework for the further operation of CSOs in Kosovo (European Commission, 2022). The implementation of the strategy of civil society has been met with limited work and risk assessment is missing. Moreover, Strazzari & Selenica (2013) point out how the vibrant work of CSOs in Kosovo, might only be so due to the lack of in-depth analysis by the international community. They claim how, CSOs in Kosovo, being created with the help of internationals and continue to operate in a post conflict society, are deemed as highly productive only to ensure that civil society is the right answer to further democratization (Strazzari & Selenica, 2013). However, what is important to note here is how the Kosovo identity plays into the field. Stakeholders and politicians have often used CSOs when they fit their political interests of further strengthening the idea of the Albanian identity prevailing in Kosovo and victimization (Ferati-Sachsenmaier, 2019, as cited in Mastrococco, 2020). On the USAID CSO sustainability score, Kosovo scores relatively low to medium, 3.6, in a scale from 1 to 7 (2023).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a stagnation by both parties, the government and the CSOs to engage in effective consultations. The international actors have done little to integrate the CSOs into the government structure, but also the government itself has not institutionalized the participation of CSOs in the policy making process (Sarajlic & Marko, 2011). At the same time, political parties might instrumentalize CSOs and use them in their own interests (Sarajlic & Marko, 2011). It is important to note that the ethnic identity of citizens in BiH heavily shapes the

political and social sphere where it is situated. There is a lack of consensus of what a Bosnian is and misperceptions of the actual formations of the state (Kartsonaki & Wolff, 2023). The turmoil which comes as a consequence of the complex political structure adds to the confusion and lack of non-alignment of the CSOs (Sarajlic & Marko, 2011). Moreover, because of where an organization was registered, it is immediately associated with a specific ethnic group (Mastorocco, 2020). As a result, the chances of including other ethnic groups are limited, as is the capacity of local civil society players to spark a wider discussion at the national level. Ethno-conservative movements are also not missing. Therefore, CSOs in BiH have almost very limited ground and intervention in the state to work on. On the USAID CSO sustainability score, BiH scores relatively low to medium, 3.8, in a scale from 1 to 7 (2023).

The analysis reveals that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans face varying experiences due to political environments, government support, legal frameworks, and public perceptions. They have common challenges such as political pressure, limited government support, and operational difficulties, as well as unique challenges and opportunities, influenced by political environments, legal frameworks, and societal factors. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina face significant challenges related to political pressure and complexity, while Montenegro and North Macedonia struggle with government support and donor dependency. Albania has legal frameworks but lacks effective implementation, and Kosovo enjoys operational freedom but needs stronger legislative support.

Each country's unique context shapes the effectiveness and sustainability of its civil society sector. In Serbia, CSOs face significant political pressure and safety issues due to the government's restrictive stance and attacks. Kosovo offers more freedom in this regard, providing a relatively open environment for CSOs without substantial political interference but lacks a vigorous legislative framework, limiting their potential for growth and effectiveness in the long term. In Montenegro, despite high public trust in CSOs, the government shows little enthusiasm for their development. This mismatch between public perception and government action results in a challenging environment for CSOs. North Macedonia faces similar issues and its dependency on external donors not only affects the sustainability of CSOs but also makes them vulnerable to external influences, complicating their ability to engage effectively with the government. Albania has a more structured legal framework but struggles with implementation and real impact due to inadequate feedback mechanisms and compliance monitoring. Kosovo has operational freedom but lacks a comprehensive legislative framework, creating uncertainty and limiting the sector's development. Both, Montenegro and Kosovo, have room for improvement in consultation mechanisms, though Kosovo has seen some positive developments. Bosnia and Herzegovina's CSO landscape is complicated by ethnic and political factors, impacting their effectiveness.

The study shows the lack of appropriate space for CSOs across all the Western Balkan countries. A lack of involvement in the policy process, lack of funding, alongside smear campaigns are issues pertaining in the region. Comparably, Montenegro exhibits greater development and success in the field of CSOs, which may be partly attributed to the EU's substantial assistance as well as their willingness to accept it. However, Montenegro, have also been held accountable for only adjusting to EU conditionality in order to gain entry, rather than having a greater desire for democratic goals. As a result, their political will to further involve CSOs is lacking. Despite Serbia's continuous attacks and hostile environment towards CSOs, their legal framework is in place. Compared to the European Commission report, the USAID scores mark Serbia even higher than Montenegro. North Macedonia also shows efforts in trying to include CSOs in the decision-making process, but its contested identity inside of the state makes it difficult for overall stability. This issue also pertains in BiH, where the turmoil is yet very impactful. Lastly, Kosovo shows enthusiasm for CSOs, however legally it is behind, as well as identity-wise, the polarization of CSOs exists. Albania on the other side, shows efforts but not adequate willingness and progress. So far, all countries need extensive work into strengthening their CSOs, states need to be more adaptable to them, and EU shall strengthen its monitoring bodies. In summary, the effectiveness and sustainability of CSOs in these countries are shaped by a combination of political constraints, government support, legal implementation, and public perception. Each country's unique context influences how these factors interplay to affect the operational freedom and impact of CSOs. Overall, while each country's unique context presents distinct challenges and opportunities for CSOs, common themes include the need for improved government engagement, better legal frameworks, and effective consultation processes.

Conclusions

This study offers a comparative mapping of the situation and role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) across the WB countries to understand the main issues and challenges they are facing in promoting democratic governance, reconciliation, and EU accession. Drawing on existing literature, the analysis shows that the WB countries have different levels of state-CSO relations and CSO development. With EU support, some countries, like Montenegro, have advanced in including CSOs into decision-making processes, despite limited governmental enthusiasm, while others, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, lag because of institutional weaknesses and political unrest. Attacks on CSOs present difficulties for Serbia in the context of political polarization, while identity politics and legislative gaps affect Kosovo and North Macedonia. In Albania, CSOs face challenges in inadequate funding and superficial government cooperation. Overall, the study calls for strengthened institutional structures, inclusion, funding, and legal protections for CSO empowerment as well

as more EU investment on the sector. It contributes to a better understanding of the region's democratic journey and prospects for European integration by highlighting the complexities of CSO dynamics in the WB.

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