RESILIENT NEIGHBORS

ADDRESSING THE COMMON CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY IN WB AND EAP COUNTRIES FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

FORUM
2000

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, democracy frequently remains confined to procedures rather than substance. Despite their differing prospects for EU integration, these states often provide citizens with limited electoral choice, weak institutional accountability, and civic spaces where media and civil society operate under persistent pressure. As long as systems of managed democracy and hybrid authoritarianism prevail, democratic resilience will remain fragile and vulnerable to backsliding.

Despite increasing constraints on civic space in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, civic action remains vibrant and resilient. Localized instances of mobilization and resistance demonstrate a continuous public demand for accountable governance, the rule of law, and substantial reforms. This civic vitality underscores the pressing need for the EU to collaborate with both international and local partners to strengthen democratic unity and invest in enduring strategies that facilitate lasting democratic change in these regions. Beyond financial and technical assistance, strong political backing and a clear, consistent EU policy strategy are equally vital to reassure democracy defenders and inspire citizens to sustain their engagement in pro-democracy activities.

Cases of civic demonstrations in Serbia, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine illustrate that although popular uprisings can disrupt the system, transforming that energy into enduring reform is the most challenging struggle. Mobilization reflects public desire; yet, without structural support, it may diminish before meaningful change can take root.

With at least $400 million in annual U.S. democracy funding abruptly pulled from the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, civil society organizations are struggling to stay afloat—many have cut programs or shuttered entirely. Civil society's overreliance on donor funding has at times weakened its genuine connection to local communities. Recalibration demands a return to civic ground—rebuilding local trust and restoring citizens as the nucleus of democratic reform.

Democratic consolidation demands more than formal frameworks of institutions, laws, or procedures—it requires a vibrant civil society as an active architect in a continuous dialogue-based process. Without this foundational engagement, EU enlargement carries the risk of unintentionally legitimizing entrenched authoritarianism. This dilemma is evident on the EU's eastern flank, where some states remain mired in outright repression, whereas others pursue fragile reforms that are highly susceptible to internal and external disruption.

Unlocking civic resilience requires thinking beyond traditional allies. Collaborative efforts with the private sector, through initiatives that create shared value and local investments, can strengthen civil society, reduce reliance on donors, and create new opportunities for impact.

Reviving democracy requires the creation of safe and inclusive spaces, especially in rural and diverse areas, where citizens can openly articulate their concerns and participate in shaping community-level solutions. Combating hate, polarization, and propaganda depends not only on institutional responses but also on locally trusted actors, culturally adapted methods, and sustained, community-based dialogue efforts.

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, with support from the International Visegrad Fund, a consortium of nine civil society organizations was established to identify some of the most pressing common challenges to democracy in the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) regions.

The recent reorganization of the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) into the Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) marks a pivotal shift in the EU's institutional architecture. This move, announced in early 2025, appears to directly address the proposals put forward by our consortium in 2023, which advocated for a more unified and streamlined approach to the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) regions. The establishment of DG ENEST not only validates the need for integrated policy responses but also creates an unprecedented opportunity to address the shared democratic challenges facing these regions more effectively.

This position paper is conceived as a timely contribution to the European Commission's renewed efforts. In the discussion paper "Identifying the Common Challenges to Democracy in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership Countries" (2023), we mapped the shared challenges to democracy, such as weakened rule of law, corruption, media repression, shrinking civic space, and the rise of populism and nationalism, which threaten not only regional stability but also the broader democratic integrity of the EU itself.

Building on that analysis, this position paper examines the dynamics of civic mobilization and resistance, the persistent barriers to democratic integrity in electoral processes, and the operational sustainability of civil society organizations under increasing pressure. The document is illustrated throughout with recent case studies and examples to ground its findings in current realities.

Ultimately, the paper aims to serve as both a reference and a tool for action, outlining how the EU, together with local and international partners, can renew its commitment to democratic solidarity and support sustainable democratic futures in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. By aligning our analysis and recommendations with the EU's institutional transformation, we hope to contribute constructively to the ongoing policy debate and the practical strengthening of democracy in these critical regions.

BEYOND MINIMUM CONDITIONS: DEMOCRATIC INTEGRITY AND ELECTIONS

The quality of democracy in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries remains defined by a "minimum threshold" approach. Elections are held regularly, and formal procedures are followed, but they lack the substance of free, fair, and inclusive democratic competition. Most regimes in the regions have mastered the art of procedural compliance while hollowing out democratic norms and practices. The electoral process is often reduced to a tightly controlled ritual, where opposition parties are marginalized, and voters are denied meaningful choices. This phenomenon has given rise to what some have termed "managed democracy" or "hybrid authoritarianism." While this 'minimum threshold' holds true for many hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans and parts of the Eastern Partnership, others — notably Belarus and Azerbaijan — fall short even of these basic procedural standards, as their elections lack competitiveness and opposition is systematically suppressed.

In the Western Balkans, political power is frequently concentrated in dominant party structures. Patronage networks, vote-buying, and the misuse of state resources during election campaigns are persistent. Electoral commissions are often staffed by party loyalists, and rural and economically marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Media ownership is concentrated among business elites with ties to ruling parties, skewing the information space and distorting public debate. Countries like Serbia exemplify this pattern, including the misuse of public resources and reports of vote-buying, as seen in recent local elections. Critical journalism is met with harassment, and civil society organizations are increasingly treated as enemies of the state.

In the Eastern Partnership, however, the situation varies widely. While countries like Moldova and Ukraine have shown moments of democratic resilience, they remain vulnerable to political polarization, foreign interference, and institutional instability. Georgia has seen both progress and regression, with backsliding intensifying after the adoption of "foreign agent" legislation that directly mirrors Moscow's model. In Belarus and Azerbaijan, elections are neither free nor fair. Political opposition is systematically suppressed, and independent voices are eliminated through legal, administrative, or violent means. These countries serve as cautionary tales of democratic decay.

A key instrument of repression is the politically motivated use of the judiciary. In Belarus and Azerbaijan, opposition leaders, journalists, and activists are frequently imprisoned on fabricated charges, effectively eliminating organized dissent. Georgia has also witnessed the detention of at least seven opposition leaders ahead of the October 2025 municipal elections, a move widely criticized as an attempt to silence challengers. In Serbia, politically motivated arrests have targeted protest organizers and investigative journalists, further shrinking space for independent political activity. The absence of credible, independent election observation in Georgia's upcoming local elections underscores the scale of democratic regression.

In both WB and EaP countries, the capture of media outlets by political and economic elites undermines electoral integrity and democratic accountability. Public broadcasters often act as state propaganda tools, while independent media face smear campaigns, financial pressure, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and in some cases physical threats. Journalists investigating corruption, electoral fraud, or security issues are particularly targeted. The 2023—2024 harassment of investigative journalists in Serbia, Armenia, and Georgia illustrates how media repression coincides with democratic regression.

Media freedom and freedom of association, essential for any electoral process to be democratic, are under sustained attack in both regions. Investigative journalism is criminalized, civil society is subjected to politically motivated audits, and online spaces are monitored and repressed. In 2023, more than 20 Serbian media outlets and CSOs were targeted with anti-money laundering investigations that appeared politically motivated. In 2024, Montenegro's strongest ruling party expressed the need to introduce a "Law on Foreign Agents," which

would significantly affect the civil society sector. In Azerbaijan, CSOs are either co-opted or forced into exile, while Belarus has shut down more than 1,000 independent organizations since July 2021.

These trends indicate a dangerous erosion of public trust. As democratic institutions fail to deliver and citizens perceive electoral outcomes as predetermined by elites, apathy grows among the populace. Yet paradoxically, this disillusionment also gives rise to mass civic mobilization, as witnessed in Ukraine's Euromaidan, Georgia's protests against the "foreign agent" law, and the Serbia Against Violence movement. These expressions of civic resistance highlight the potential of civil society to uphold democratic norms when institutions falter.

True democratic consolidation requires more than holding elections. It requires institutions rooted in accountability, transparency, citizen participation, and the active involvement of CSOs in political and democratic life in many countries. Until civil society is fully integrated into the democratic process—not merely tolerated but actively included in shaping and monitoring reform—the path to substantive democracy in WB and EaP countries will remain blocked. The international community, and particularly the EU, must recognize that without genuine progress on democratic integrity, the promise of enlargement and integration risks legitimizing systems of entrenched authoritarian control.

In Azerbaijan and Belarus, opposition is effectively eliminated. In Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, reforms are more advanced but vulnerable to internal and external destabilization. Ukraine's wartime context means elections cannot currently be held, but efforts to prepare the electoral environment must begin now, in parallel with broader recovery planning.

CIVIC MOBILIZATION, SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE, AND RESISTANCE

Social movements, as loosely organized yet enduring phenomena, have consistently demonstrated their role in promoting social goals and resisting structural injustice. Genuine democracy is impossible without social mobilization and civic engagement. Over the past decade, social movements in WB and EaP countries have primarily emerged as spontaneous expressions of civic will, often initiated outside formal political structures. Movements like the Bosnian plenums (2014), Serbia's Ne da(vi)mo Beograd (2014), the Colorful Revolution in North Macedonia (2016), Albanian students' protests (2019), and Montenegro's "Odupri se" anti-corruption mobilization (2019) have shaped the public space and challenged entrenched elites.

Despite short-term gains, these protests have not always resulted in systemic reform. Political elites maintain control over institutions and use strategic inaction to deflect demands. Civic space continues to shrink across the region, with governments increasingly relying on stigmatization, "foreign agent" legislation, the criminalization of dissent, and media capture. A key question remains: what is the endpoint for protest movements, and how can these expressions of democratic desire be translated into institutional change?

The recent experiences of Serbia, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, despite their distinct political contexts and histories, serve as good case studies to identify one

common pattern: large-scale, spontaneous protests have become a primary tool for citizens to express discontent with government overreach, corruption, and democratic backsliding. Some of them are met "with strikingly similar manipulative narratives from their governments." The common response pattern is to use "the same playbook (and narratives from Russia's playbook) to discredit protesters, delegitimize criticism, and consolidate their power."

In Serbia, the tragic collapse of public infrastructure in late 2024 ignited a wave of protests that quickly transcended its initial cause, uniting students, teachers, artists, and farmers in a mass movement against democratic regression. Similarly, Georgia's recent mobilizations were sparked by delays in EU accession and the adoption of restrictive legislation, drawing together a broad cross-section of society in a clear demonstration of pro-European sentiment and grassroots resilience.

Montenegro's Resist—97,000 protests in 2019, provoked by allegations of illicit campaign financing, also brought together citizens, NGOs, academics, trade unions, and medical workers under the Agreement for the Future, an ideologically transcending platform demanding transparency, political reform, and free elections. While the movement expanded civic mobilization and raised public awareness, entrenched elite resistance, opposition fragmentation, and the absence of institutional accountability blunted its impact, allowing setbacks such as declining media freedom, a resurgence of nationalism, and delays in EU integration.

Ukraine's experience, meanwhile, stands out in terms of how civil society has evolved from protest movements into an active partnership in governance and reform, particularly since the Euromaidan. Moldovan civic actors operate in a similarly difficult environment marked by acute geopolitical pressures and internal polarization, with mobilization efforts increasingly focused on demands for transparency, anti-corruption, and European integration.

What unites these cases is the resilience and adaptability of their civic movements, often characterized by creative forms of protest and the ability to mobilize diverse segments of society. In each instance, civil society organizations and informal networks have played a crucial role in sustaining momentum, even as governments have responded with a mix of repression, denial, and legislative restrictions. Yet, a persistent challenge across all four countries is the difficulty of translating the energy of protest into lasting institutional change. While mobilizations have achieved notable concessions—such as resignations, policy adjustments, or increased public scrutiny—political elites have largely retained control, and systemic reforms have remained

elusive. This speaks to a broader lesson: while civic mobilization is essential for signaling public demand for accountability, it alone is rarely sufficient to overcome entrenched power structures.

At the same time, important differences shape the trajectory and impact of civic mobilization in each country. Serbia's recent protests exemplify the sophisticated tactics employed by hybrid regimes, where symbolic victories coexist with the government's continued use of crowd-control technologies and narrative control. Georgia's mobilizations, though massive and persistent, have faced an uncompromising state response, with authorities willing to use force and maintain repressive laws despite both domestic and international condemnation. Ukraine presents a contrasting model, where civil society has successfully transitioned from street protests to a more institutionalized role, directly influencing policy and reform even under the extreme pressures of war.

Moldova, meanwhile, highlights the importance of diaspora engagement and the complexities introduced by external actors, as seen in the decisive role of votes from abroad in recent elections and referendums. Similar patterns can be observed in other countries. The Bosnian diaspora has been instrumental in advocacy efforts at international forums and often contributes significantly to local initiatives through remittances, donations, and political engagement, including electoral participation. In Serbia, diaspora activism has played a growing role in amplifying domestic protest movements through media and solidarity campaigns, particularly on social platforms. The Ukrainian diaspora has been vital in sustaining humanitarian assistance, lobbying for international support, and strengthening the global narrative of resistance. In Armenia, diaspora organizations have historically provided both financial and political backing for democratic reforms, although recent geopolitical tensions have complicated these dynamics.

In both Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the multiethnic composition of these states, civil society initiatives are often driven by national and/or nationalist issues, which further complicates civic activism. The most notable examples of the "suppression" of civic activism were the prevention of the spillover of student unrest from Serbia into Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In both cases, following two tragedies (27 deaths caused by floods in Bosnia and 23 people killed in two mass shootings in Montenegro), local authorities employed techniques of nationally "coloring" the protesters. This was particularly evident in Montenegro, where the government attempted to criminalize student protests in January and February 2025.

Comparing these cases reveals that the drivers of civic mobilization—frustration with corruption, democratic erosion, and unfulfilled European aspirations—are remarkably similar, yet the outcomes are shaped by the specific political environment, the openness of institutions, and the ability of civil society to sustain engagement beyond moments of crisis. The experience of Ukraine suggests that deeper partnerships between civil society and the state can yield more substantive reforms. At the same time, Moldova's example underscores the potential impact of diaspora engagement and cross-border solidarity. Conversely, the experiences of Serbia and Georgia serve as a reminder of the ongoing risks posed by authoritarian pushback and the need for sustained international support.

Ultimately, these cases demonstrate that while civic mobilization remains a powerful force for democratic change, its effectiveness depends on the capacity to build enduring institutions, foster inclusive participation, and secure meaningful support from both domestic and international partners.

HOW TO REGAIN CIVIL SOCIETY MOMENTUM

The operational sustainability of civil society in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries is under severe strain. The recent withdrawal of substantial U.S. democracy funding has left a vacuum that threatens to dismantle vital civic initiatives. Many CSOs across the region depend heavily on international support to survive in repressive environments. The people working in these organizations, including journalists, face enormous pressure from power structures, and the loss of funding will only worsen their situation, dealing a severe blow to civil society's ability to remain active, develop, and—above all—protect and promote fundamental human rights. The sudden defunding has already triggered downsizing, program suspensions, and in some cases, organizational closures.

However, the problem is not merely financial. Over-reliance on external donors has, in some cases, distorted civil society agendas and weakened their links to local constituencies. Many organizations have grown more accustomed to writing proposals than building grassroots movements. Civil society must recalibrate its focus, shifting toward community-level engagement, trust-building, and participatory approaches that ensure citizens see themselves not just as beneficiaries but as co-owners of the democratic project.

This transition requires a new approach to partnerships and leadership. Youth engagement is a particularly urgent axis of renewal. Youth organizations and young people often feel marginalized, with participation being symbolic, even though they demand greater transparency, accountability, and continuity in policymaking. Their active inclusion as genuine partners is therefore essential. Students and young professionals have consistently spearheaded mobilizations across Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, yet they remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces within established CSOs. Civil society must foster intergenerational collaboration, digital fluency, and civic education efforts that move beyond urban centers. This is not only a matter of inclusion, but also one of strategic renewal.

Additionally, closer cooperation with the private sector offers underexplored potential. While the business community is not traditionally aligned with civic advocacy, new models of social investment, corporate responsibility, and shared value creation can make civic efforts more resilient. This could include joint initiatives on media literacy, youth employment, and community organizing. It can also reduce financial dependency on volatile international grants.

In addition to private sector cooperation, diaspora networks represent an underutilized resource for civil society renewal. Structured diaspora engagement, through philanthropic funding, advocacy partnerships, and knowledge transfer, can significantly reinforce local civic actors, particularly in contexts of donor withdrawal or repression. Building sustainable bridges with diaspora-led organizations and communities abroad may also enhance visibility, legitimacy, and transnational solidarity.

However, in some contexts, access to civil society is severely constrained, if not outright criminalized. In Georgia, the Foreign Agents Registration Act has stigmatized external cooperation, while the freezing of bank accounts of seven leading NGOs in August 2025 disrupted their ability to conclude ongoing projects. In Azerbaijan and Belarus, meaningful engagement with independent civic actors is nearly impossible, as most are banned, forced into exile, or face constant repression. These realities demand that EU and international partners adopt flexible, discreet, and locally adapted approaches to maintain meaningful connections with democracy defenders.

Moreover, civil society must invest in alternative narratives and counteract elite-dominated discourse.

This means creating safe and inclusive dialogue spaces—especially in ethnically diverse or rural regions—where citizens can articulate grievances without fear and co-develop inclusive democratic practices rooted in their specific social and cultural contexts. Combating hate speech, political polarization, and top-down propaganda will depend on local credibility and cultural fluency. Recovering momentum requires not just resources, but courage, creativity, and connection.

Particular attention must be given to empowering marginalized communities, including women, ethnic minorities, Roma, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ groups, whose voices are often excluded from mainstream civic initiatives. Civic spaces must not only be open but also actively inclusive. Programs should prioritize participatory models that integrate the lived experiences of these communities into policy advocacy, particularly on issues such as access to services, gender-based violence, and minority rights.

Independent media are essential allies in rebuilding civic trust and countering authoritarian narratives. Supporting local and community-based outlets, including those in minority languages or underserved areas, can help reach citizens beyond urban elites. Moreover, equipping journalists and media workers with legal, psychological, and digital security tools is vital to ensuring they can operate safely and effectively. Stronger synergies between CSOs and independent media can amplify civic voices, expose abuses, and foster a fact-based public discourse that strengthens democratic resilience and counters the spread of disinformation and foreign malign influence.

CONCLUSION

The European Union is at a critical moment and must enhance its internal unity by actively involving and integrating all its geographic components. The countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership serve as both challenges and opportunities for the EU. These regions require a strategic shift in the EU's methods of engagement, transitioning from a primarily top-down approach to one that encompasses horizontal and grassroots levels of dialogue, involvement, and support. This means prioritizing civil society and actors deeply connected to the community. Equally important is the EU's political voice: consistent and visible support for democracy defenders can counter public apathy, strengthen citizens' confidence in democratic futures, and signal that local struggles are backed by Europe's collective commitment.

The higher the level of destabilization in these areas, the greater the threat to the EU's stability and security. When European cohesion weakens, the EU's ability to address global crises declines, undermining its global credibility and influence. Thus, engaging strategically and structurally is crucial not only for creating an inclusive perspective on Europe's future but also for promoting inter- and cross-societal conversations. This necessitates the significant involvement of civil society organizations in policymaking processes and a civil society that is on the front lines of democratic development. Supporting these organizations ensures that discussions about Europe's direction are grounded in democratic principles, communal realities, and diverse viewpoints, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and resilience of integration. At the same time, civil society should remain connected to citizens and communities, preserving its role as a link between institutions and the public, thereby ensuring grassroots participation, democratic responsibility, and confidence in governance.

Civic resilience is the last line of defense against authoritarian backsliding. While formal institutions falter or are co-opted, civil society actors—from watchdogs to reformers, students to journalists—continue to hold the line. Yet they cannot do it alone.

Without meaningful support from international partners—especially the EU—and a renewed local commitment to solidarity, pluralism, and democratic accountability, the risk of democratic failure will grow. The time to act is now: to empower civil society, ensure real reform, and sustain hope for a democratic future in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS
TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

~ **Fill the funding gap left by the U.S. withdrawal by increasing support for civil society and media through the MFF 2028—2034, substantially increasing financing to the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), and exploring the creation of a Democratic Resilience Fund for the WB and EaP.** The EU must respond strategically to the vacuum created by the sharp reduction in U.S. democracy funding by stepping in as a principal and long-term supporter of civic resilience. This effort should not only aim at increasing the volume of funding but also improving its structure. Expanding the EED and launching a Democratic Resilience Fund would ensure that resources reach the most courageous and committed civic actors quickly and effectively. However, the EU must also resist the tendency to reward professionalized organizations with strong grant-writing capacities but limited grassroots presence. Instead, it should prioritize funding for organizations deeply embedded in local realities, even if they lack administrative polish. Ultimately, building sustainable democratic infrastructure requires trusting those who are doing the real work on the ground—often in the most politically sensitive and underfunded environments.

~ **Create fast-track microgrant schemes and simplify administrative procedures to better reach grassroots groups.** The EU ought to establish a specific microgrant program tailored for grassroots organizations, youth-led projects, and informal civic participants. These organizations often align well with community needs, yet face significant challenges in securing EU funding due to administrative and eligibility requirements. More agile schemes, reduced bureaucracy, and improved access, especially in a politically sensitive context, are crucial to civic resilience and foster grassroots democratic engagement, while building trust with communities struggling under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes.

~ **Provide core operational funding—not just project-based support—to watchdog organizations and independent media.** Implementing multi-year grants provides financial stability, enabling these organizations to plan long-term, retain staff, and respond flexibly to democratic backsliding or media capture. Additionally, the application and reporting process can be simplified for trusted or experienced watchdogs and outlets, especially those operating in sensitive political environments. This support should also include emergency assistance for journalists facing threats or lawsuits (SLAPPs), protection for media outlets in politically repressive contexts, and targeted grants for countering disinformation campaigns. The EU should also consider establishing regional hubs for media freedom and safety, linked to EU delegations and in cooperation with local watchdogs and journalist associations. All this should also contribute to address Russia's malign influence by investing in counter-disinformation initiatives, supporting independent media that challenge Kremlin narratives, and assisting civil society groups targeted by restrictive 'foreign agent' legislation modeled on Russia's example.

~ **Strengthen conditionality in Chapters 23 and 10 of the EU accession process, particularly on media freedom and judicial independence.** In this regard, the EU can implement early warning systems via tools capable of detecting and addressing backsliding prior to significant violations, with the ability to quickly pause negotiations or halt fund disbursements upon identifying regressions. Tie portions of pre-accession funding (IPA III) to specific standards in media freedom (e.g., journalist safety, transparency in ownership) and judicial reform (e.g., appointments based on merit, reducing politicization). Recognize frontrunners with expedited technical assistance or political acknowledgment when they achieve or exceed standards in these domains.

~ **Avoid legitimizing faux reforms through diplomatic praise; use public diplomacy to support genuine reformers.** Eschew prioritizing stabilitocracy over genuine and tangible reforms. Politicians can misuse diplomatic praise to amplify power and mask stagnation. Commendations during visits or official statements should be based on independent assessments, rather than solely on government reports. When necessary, establish clear red lines and communicate consequences for continued faux reforms.

~ **Reconnect with local constituencies and rebuild grassroots legitimacy.** To restore grassroots legitimacy, civil society in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries must enhance regional cooperation through inclusive umbrella networks that encompass all candidate countries. Collaborating and pooling resources with independent media, grassroots organizations, influencers, youth, activists, and other key stakeholders can help safeguard civic space and reestablish connections with local communities under strain. Civil society should also expand its presence in rural and underserved areas to ensure broader representation and outreach.

~ **Diversify funding sources and enhance cooperation with the private sector.** The private sector should partner with schools, youth organizations, local businesses, and cultural institutions to deepen roots in communities and diversify legitimacy. The EU should fund innovation labs where CSOs and private sector actors co-develop sustainable models such as social enterprises, local service delivery, or educational and digital initiatives. EU Delegations should be encouraged to include private sector actors in structured civil society dialogues to foster long-term cooperation and trust.

~ **Strengthen transnational collaboration and peer learning across the WB and EaP.** Identify and connect civil society organizations, media, activists, think tanks, and local institutions across the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) to strengthen cooperation. Stronger networks can foster knowledge sharing, address challenges, and help countries align reforms with EU standards, making EU integration processes smoother and more credible. Facilitate shared learning through platforms, regional forums, or exchange programs where groups facing similar challenges (e.g., shrinking civic space, disinformation, corruption) can exchange experiences, strategies, and tools to become more effective.

~ **Emphasize youth participation, digital engagement, inclusive dialogue, and representation of marginalized voices.** To ensure significant youth involvement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership nations, youth participation must be institutionalized and adequately funded. This involves creating lasting youth councils and parliaments at all levels to integrate youth perspectives into policymaking, moving beyond mere symbolic consultation. Microgrants focused on specific needs and innovation labs should support initiatives led by youth, especially in underprivileged regions. Simultaneously, investing in secure digital platforms, as well as educational and tourism initiatives, can enhance international collaboration, bridging, understanding, and resilience. Enhancing mobility and exchange programs that transcend borders, while linking young people to the EU Youth Dialogue, also through WB and EaP fellowships, further integrates them into regional and European decision-making processes.

~ **Strengthen transnational collaboration and peer learning across the WB and EaP.** Establish channels for structured diaspora engagement, including regional diaspora forums, co-financed civic initiatives, and mentorship schemes, linking active diaspora members with grassroots actors. Encourage EU Delegations to facilitate connections between local CSOs and diaspora networks across Europe.

~ **Ensure that civil society efforts reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.** This includes developing targeted initiatives for women, LGBTQ+ people, Roma, and people with disabilities, who often face intersectional forms of exclusion. Support mechanisms such as safe spaces, legal aid, or leadership training for underrepresented groups can significantly enhance their agency and civic engagement.

~ **Advocate for stronger EU conditionality and funding for democracy support.** Forming transnational alliances to present evidence-based assessments, highlight gaps in governance and reforms, and jointly lobby EU institutions for accountability mechanisms tied to democratic benchmarks.

~ **Support civil society twinning schemes and joint projects.** These joint initiatives enable knowledge transfer, capacity building, mutual learning, solidarity actions, and strategic communication through collaborative, cross-border projects.

~ **Offer core and emergency funding to independent media and human rights organizations.** Establishing dedicated EU funding streams that provide flexible, multi-year operational support and rapid-response grants will allow independent media and human rights organizations in the Western Balkans and EaP countries to maintain continuity, respond to crises, and operate autonomously, eschewing political interference.

~ **Counter Euroskepticism and disinformation through communication campaigns based on shared democratic values**. Collaborate with reliable civil society members, independent journalists, youth leaders, and digital influencers to create localized communication campaigns that emphasize concrete EU advantages, advocate for common democratic values, and improve digital literacy. These initiatives should utilize social media, narrative techniques, and community-focused engagement in both English and local languages.

PARTNERS OF THE PROJECT

Visegrad Fund

This paper represents the outcome of a joint effort by participating organizations and contributing authors. It reflects their collective work and summarizes the main conclusions reached through the process.

FORUM
2000

Follow us on
Facebook | X | Youtube | LinkedIn
#Forum2000

www.forum2000.cz