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Европско Опаженије Северна Македонија
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ASSESSMENT REPORTS ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION TRENDS AND BARRIERS

Comparative analysis across Bosnia and Herzegovina,
Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Croatia and
France

Regional Ownership of Our Tomorrow: Citizens and Civil Society
Growing EU Values in the Western Balkans
ROOT WB · Work Package 2 (WP2), Deliverable 2.1 (D2.1)

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1. About the Project

ROOT WB Project

Regional Ownership of Our Tomorrow:
Citizens and Civil Society Growing EU
Values in the Western Balkans.

Funded by EU CERV Programme
Lead Partner: LDA Mostar.
Duration: 1st January 2026 to 31st
December 2027.

Partners in 7 countries: Montenegro,
Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, North
Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, France.

Produced by (Contributors): CEDEM, LDA
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Work Package 2

Baseline Mapping and Needs
Assessment is Work Package 2,
led by CEDEM.

It provides the evidence base for
all project activities.

Three methods: desk research in
7 countries, 24 Key Informant
Interviews, and an online survey
of 291 CSOs.

2. Methodology

Desk Research

Systematic review of legal frameworks, EU progress reports, CSO assessments, national strategies, and academic sources across all 7 partner countries

Common template applied for comparability

Key Informant Interviews

24 interviews across 7 countries with CSO representatives, institutional actors, and independent experts

Common guidelines

Qualitative findings integrated into country contexts

Online Survey

Online survey of 291 CSOs across all 7 countries

English questionnaire (249 responses) + French equivalent (42 responses)

31 questions covering capacity, funding, participation, and barriers

3. Civic Space: Three Trajectories

6 partner countries face civic space under pressure — but in structurally different ways:

- **Active repression** (Serbia): surveillance, raids, suspended cooperation, regulatory exclusion from consultations
- **Politically contested** (Montenegro, BiH, N. Macedonia): formal civic space made costly through delegitimisation, paralysed councils, selective application
- **Structurally constrained** (Albania, Croatia): no political hostility, but strategic vacuum, underfunding, and mechanisms without outcomes

*Croatia included as EU member state comparative reference

4. The Implementation Gap

Formal frameworks exist everywhere

In every WB country, these mechanisms are non-functional, bypassed, or applied selectively.

Councils paralysed for years. Consultations at late stages. No binding feedback obligations.

Serbia formally exempted EU accession documents from public consultation (March 2026).

The implementation gap is not a technical failure — it is a political choice.

Implementation is missing everywhere

Countries have formal consultation mechanisms: e-Uprava (Montenegro), ENER (North Macedonia), e-Consultation (Croatia), Council of Ministers portals (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

All have cooperation councils, civil society strategies, and legal frameworks broadly aligned with EU standards.

France has a dedicated institutional architecture — the High Council for Associative Life (HCVA) and the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) — and participates in the Open Government Partnership.

66.6%

of CSOs report **unstable funding**.

73.5% cite lack of funding as their top barrier.

66.7% depend on international donors — rising to **93.2% in Serbia**.

The 2025 USAID funding freeze affected 35 organisations in North Macedonia alone, withdrawing USD 37 million in planned support. Financial fragility is the sector's defining structural condition.

The Participation Gap That Feeds Itself

91.8% of CSOs participate in at least one formal process.

Yet participation effectiveness is rated only **2.80/5**

53.6% say their participation led to only partial policy change.

The problem is not disengagement — it is that participation does not reliably produce outcomes. Citizens who learn this stop participating. The gap feeds itself.

Five Findings That Define This Assessment

Serbia is qualitatively different

86.4% restrictive environment

93.2% donor dependency

2.17/5 participation effectiveness

1.59/5 institutional openness

Formal cooperation suspended. This is not the worst point on a spectrum — it is a different category.

Albania is the only positive outlier

56.1% report an improving trajectory — the only country with a positive majority.

Albania's absolute civic space conditions remain among the weakest in the sample: enabling legislation is underdeveloped, domestic funding insufficient, and civil society geographically concentrated in Tirana.

What has changed is the direction, not the destination. The absence of political hostility, combined with institutional developments under EU accession, has produced measurable progress from a low baseline.

Croatia warns WB partners

46.8% describe the environment as restrictive — higher than Montenegro or North Macedonia.

EU membership does not automatically produce an enabling civic space. The accession window must be actively used.

The Middle Band in Focus

Bosnia and Herzegovina

"Foreign agents" law adopted in Republika Srpska, annulled by the Constitutional Court — civic space threatened and defended through constitutional mechanisms

79.5% report unstable funding — second highest in sample

Civil society strategy adopted at state level (2025–2029) — but implemented by only one canton out of fourteen

Montenegro

"Foreign agents" initiative rejected after coordinated pushback by 8 CSOs including CEDEM

81.4% of CSOs depend on international donors — second highest in sample

Cooperation Council paralysed for nearly 4 years (2021–2025) — triggered by a single administrative decision transferring competence between ministries, requiring no legislative process and no parliamentary oversight. The main formal dialogue mechanism between government and civil society was effectively shut down without anyone being accountable for closing it.

Formal civic space exists — but is made costly through accumulated institutional pressure, paralysed dialogue mechanisms and fragmented implementation. Not repression. Not freedom.

France: Civic Space Shrinks From Within

No authoritarian pressure. No foreign agents law. No suspended cooperation.

Yet **68.3%** of French CSOs say the environment is worse than three years ago.

The mechanism is different: **a regulatory contract** with vague compliance criteria, **budget cuts** to associative funding, and a landmark deliberative democracy experiment whose **recommendations were quietly shelved**.

Civic space does not only narrow through repression. It narrows through neglect, underfunding, and participation mechanisms that collect input without acting on it.

Survey: Key Numbers at a Glance

	Indicator	Result	Highest in sample	Lowest in sample
Funding instability	66.6%	Report unstable or very unstable funding	Serbia 81.8%	Albania 53.7%
Top support need	67.4%	Cite fundraising as #1 need — double any other	Universal	Universal
Donor dependency	66.7%	Rely on international donors (93.2% in Serbia)	Serbia 93.2%	France 22.0%
Participation effect	2.80/5	Mean effectiveness score — below midpoint	Serbia 2.17	N. Macedonia 3.29
Tangible change	35.1%	Say participation led to full policy change	Universal	Universal
Environment worse	53.6%	Describe environment as worse than 3 years ago	Serbia 86.4%	Albania 14.6%

5. Recommendations: Three Levels of Action

IMMEDIATELY ACTIONABLE

Introduce binding feedback obligations in existing public consultation systems

Conduct proportionality impact assessments before adoption of any legislation affecting civil society

Restructure the funding architecture

STRUCTURALLY NECESSARY

Anchor cooperation mechanisms with civil society in statute rather than government decisions

Require all ministries to prepare and publish annual consultation plans

Adopt dedicated anti-SLAPP legal frameworks

LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

Invest in youth participation infrastructure

Integrate digital security and media literacy as prerequisites, not add-ons

Rebuild civic trust through locally embedded, visibly beneficial action.

Thank You

Questions and Discussion

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