



# Civil Society Forum

of the Western Balkans Summit Series



## Policy Recommendations

Based on the work of ten working groups during the  
Civil Society & Think Tank Forum I 2021



## Civil Society & Think Tank Forum Berlin, 2021



Western  
Balkans  
Summit  
**Berlin**  
2021

Supported by:



Federal Foreign Office

**Table of Contents**

The Future of the EU in the Western Balkans.....3

The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Democracy.....4

Countering Disinformation and Strengthening Media Independence.....5

Addressing Legacies of the Past and Regional Confidence Building.....6

Acceptance and Rights of Minorities in the Western Balkans.....7

Green Agenda: Energy Transition.....9

Green Agenda: Air Pollution.....11

Green Agenda: Biodiversity and Nature Conservation.....13

Enhancing Integrity Compliance in Infrastructure Projects.....14

Digitalization in Public Services: Enhancing Transparency, Securing Data Protection.....15

## The Future of the EU in the Western Balkans

### (1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- demand their meaningful inclusion in the accession negotiation talks and full transparency of the process.
- closely monitor the reform processes in their respective countries and proactively communicate findings with relevant national and EU institutions on a regular basis.
- establish a dialogue and collaboration with peer organizations from the region to support regional integration and address common challenges in the EU integration process.
- establish direct links with CSOs and think tanks from the EU Member States through building networks and ad-hoc collaborations.
- enhance and promote their activities promoting economic development and preventing the emergence of structures that entrench state capture.

### (2) Western Balkans governments should

- implement the reforms needed for the fulfilment of the EU accession criteria.
- commit to inviting the civil society to participate in the accession / negotiation processes and ensure maximum transparency of these processes.
- refrain from using negative and destructive political rhetoric towards the EU and the integration process – at least as long as the formal and written national strategic objective is achieving EU membership. Political discourse towards the EU needs to be in line with those objectives. In countries with positive discourse, communication needs to be improved and more substantive, focusing also on the social dimension of the process.
- give national parliaments a greater role in the accession and negotiation procedures and invite them to regularly discuss and monitor the implementation of recommendations from EU progress reports.
- be more proactive in creating and pushing for joint initiatives related to the advancement of the EU accession process, thus amplifying the voice of the region towards the EU, in recognition of the common interest of integrating the region fully into the Union.

### (3) The EU and its Member States should

- be coherent and consistent in its enlargement-related communications at all levels – from the technical to the highest political – avoiding glorification of national political elites when it is not merited and when there are clear rule of law, human rights and/or democracy problems on the ground.
- reform its funding schemes to the region by making them work more from the bottom-up, without too much dependence on the governments, which in the long run would help to avoid inadvertently entrenching state capture.
- reframe outstanding issues, currently dubbed as “bilateral” issues blocking the enlargement process for certain WB countries, as issues affecting the entire foreign and enlargement policies of the Union. Consequently, they should no longer be treated or tolerated as bilateral issues.
- modify the measurements of achieved levels of progress and preparedness in its annual reports by creating a more coherent, detailed, and quantifiable methodology that would be applied in the same way to all candidates and potential candidates from the Western Balkans.

- tap the full potential of differentiated integration in further developing and rethinking its approach to enlargement, introducing an option of phased membership, accompanied by strict post-accession conditionality and monitoring. The *finalité* of such an integration process – which could be offered to WB countries rather than imposed on them – would remain full EU membership.
- tackle the issue of the long-present executive bias in the EU accession process by strengthening the role of civil society, national parliaments – and even judiciaries.
- find ways to ensure a sustainable European perspective for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, as the revised enlargement methodology does not apply to these two countries. The EU’s approach to BiH and Kosovo should follow the spirit of the new negotiation methodology applying to the other four countries of the region.
- maximize the transparency of the enlargement processes and procedures, consequently also helping the transparency of accession processes of Western Balkans countries and the civil society’s efforts to monitor them effectively.
- ensure that the application of its conditionality is adapted to the specificities of the state of democracy and rule of law of individual candidate countries and that it effectively supports institution-building. It should periodically assess the effectiveness of its conditionality to prevent unintended consequences, such as over-insulation of institutions and lack of effective accountability mechanisms. In cases where strict application of the conditionality would create such counter-effects and prevent the “uncapturing” of already captured institutions, its application should be reconsidered and adapted accordingly.
- develop an all-encompassing approach towards better integrating the Western Balkans into its policies aimed at strengthening Europe’s strategic autonomy.
- involve the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe, through both the representative and the citizen parts.

### **The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Democracy**

#### **(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should**

- find ways and contribute to democratization by advocating in favor of its constituents – the citizens. They need to reinforce these bonds and acquire new avenues of drawing legitimacy and stimulate demand among citizens for better governance.
- build local resilience and demand for good governance and democratic transition. The goal is to nurture resilient communities. Stronger communities – local, professional, or thematic – engage citizens in meaningful ways. This safeguards against the growing effects of civic disengagement, which is the modality how political life becomes the exclusive space for corrupt or extremist actors, who, through clientelism and nationalism, seemingly act in popular interests.
- recognize that the strength of the civil society is in its networked capital. Such networks of organizations of different approaches in activism – grassroots, capacity builders, watchdogs, and think tanks – work collectively on issues that have tangible importance to the everyday life of the citizens. Networks built to advocate and win battles on issues like the environment and social justice, in courtrooms and public fora, bring back the trust of people in the democratic system and engage them to be active citizens.

- change the narratives they use to approach citizens and have a more direct relationship with them. CSOs need to build solid information platforms and communication paradigms, where they can overcome media barriers and disinformation, and directly engage citizens and build their demand for the important issues. Without citizens, we cannot put sustainable pressure against the political establishments, who are frequently closing the space for civic initiatives, by tokenizing their input, or acting hostile to activists and change makers.
- work on planting the seeds for the next generation of activists. They often operate outside of established civil society and engage citizens in novel ways. However, they need knowledge on how to grow and advocate for policies they see as important.

(2) The EU and its Member States should

- approach their facility to the Western Balkans by focusing on bolstering democratic values and environment for the work of civil society.
- adjust the assistance to the civil society and invest in organizations instead of projects. This means focusing on institutional rather than project granting. The EU assistance is currently the most administrative burdensome aid scheme and favors short term interventions and organizations with established capacities, and not grassroots and rising initiatives. CSOs need flexible support to adapt to the continuously changing political space, and not spend time to complete projects which in the meantime might be less important than ongoing issues.
- be guided by values whilst engaging the region and should defend civil society frequently and preventively. Sidelining civil society or garnering hostility towards it are clear signs of democratic deficiency and the EU must resolutely act in defense of these values.

### **Countering Disinformation and Strengthening Media Independence**

(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- strengthen the cooperation between media in the region, as well as cooperation between media and civil society.
- work on increasing media literacy and implement fact-checking projects.
- support training initiatives for the improvement of professional journalistic standards and promote credible media that uphold ethical standards.
- contribute to media self-regulation and promote solidarity among journalists through journalists' associations.
- establish a joint platform of journalist associations, media outlets, and those who provide legal and professional support to journalists and editors.

(2) Western Balkans governments should

- improve the legal framework to increase transparency of media ownership and financing, as well as to prevent monopolization and conflict of interest.
- limit the role of the state in the media sphere, focusing on supporting media's reporting in the public interest and establishing conditions for a fair media market.
- improve the rule of law and implementation of legal provisions regarding media.
- increase the capacities and independence of public broadcasters by increasing their funding and establishing new funding mechanisms, independent from state budgets.

- strengthen mechanisms protecting editorial independence of public broadcasters.
- improve the legal framework to increase independence of media regulatory bodies and increase their financial and operational capacities.
- refrain from attacking journalists and labelling them as political opponents.
- deal with attacks on journalists by institutions as a matter of priority and prior cases of murders of journalists should be resolved as soon as possible.
- support media literacy, including through school curricula.
- refrain from overregulation of digital media and curtailing freedom of expression online.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- be more vocal about the importance of media freedom in the Western Balkans and should not refrain from naming and shaming of governments.
- design new instruments to monitor and assess media freedom, such as special reports on media freedom, like the ones for Chapters 23 and 24.
- commission senior expert groups on media freedom like the so-called “Priebe Report” in North Macedonia and insists on meaningful improvements, in cases of serious problems with media freedom and political crises.
- help independent media to create sustainable business models, but also directly finance them during the transition period.
- especially focus on supporting investigative journalists, young journalists, women journalists, and local and minority media.
- support media literacy programs.
- support links between media and civil society, as well as regional media cooperation and regional media in order to fight disinformation.
- support media self-regulation mechanisms.

### **Addressing Legacies of the Past and Regional Confidence Building**

(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- work hard to develop new approaches in order to contribute to reconciliation processes and sustainable peace in this region, since regional confidence building is a slow, intense and long-term process. One way to achieve this is through multidisciplinary cooperation between different types of NGOs, which nurture human rights in the area and understand how important it is to raise human rights standards, and grassroots initiatives from local areas, which have direct experience in field work.
- extend strong cooperation between CSOs and Think Tanks by adding new types of partners, such as academic institutions. Having in mind that the role and expertise of CSOs in this area is strictly focused on truth-seeking processes, the availability of facts and data is a necessary condition for strong and relevant advocacy.
- should, on a regional level together with representatives of academic institutions, further promote a victim-oriented approach as well as positive stories of helping and rescuing people ‘from the other side’ during the war period, in order to get out of competitive victimhood.

(2) Western Balkans governments should

- perceive reconciliation and development of sustainable peace as an issue of importance both on the national level and on the level of the whole region. Therefore, all the countries belonging to the region, including Croatia, Slovenia and Albania, should strongly support close cooperation between state institutions and CSOs, in order to create multilateral public policies and reconciliation agendas which will comprehensively represent a recognition of the importance and a strong commitment to fostering social development through values of peace and responsible dealing with the past.
- strongly support critical journalism and protect freedom of speech in providing the public with uncensored information about the atrocities and human rights violations that occurred during the recent conflicts in the region and unaddressed human rights violations from preceding regimes. Independent media are a crucial partner in responsibly dealing with the past; one way to contribute to not just mutual education but also to multicultural cooperation could be regional exchanges of journalists.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- provide targeted grants for cross-border and regional programs, including, Croatia, Slovenia and Albania to support joint reconciliation and peace-building activities. Grants should support a culture of accountability and social cohesion.
- impose “zero tolerance” for hate speech and attacks on peace activists and the media. This should include withholding financial, political and operational support to candidate states by European institutions and member states.
- encompass transitional and restorative justice mechanisms in the EU policy of conditionality towards candidate states.
- include non-judicial dimensions of Transitional Justice, such as reparations, truth-seeking, and memorialization during the monitoring period, in conjunction with criminal justice measures. It is crucial that this process is followed by a concrete, sincere, active, and effective push by national institutions to truly recognize and develop public policies that are oriented toward building peace.

### **Acceptance and Rights of Minorities in the Western Balkans**

(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- mobilize and engage minorities to participate in times of elections.
- work on holding accountable institutions, which are responsible for implementation of the Poznan Declaration and the EU Strategic Framework.
- ensure internet access to all of the Roma settlements in the Western Balkans through the digital agenda funds.
- educate the Roma community about e-services since governments are working on a common project for the provision of online services.
- support the mentorship of Roma students by Roma graduates in order to overcome the COVID-19 crisis.

(2) Western Balkans governments should:

- safeguard freedom of political expression in the Western Balkans, especially for minorities due to their isolation and the existing tokenism.
- tailor employment measures and vocational trainings for minorities in accordance with the market demands in order to maximize the potential of the work force.
- support the Roma's informal grey economy to transit towards a green economy, together with economic actors.
- make it an objective of the digital agenda to involve Roma children in digital education and ensure their access to digital, online continuous education.
- monitor and sanction discrimination by the health institutions and staff towards the Roma patients when they go for check-ups or other health services.
- take a targeted field approach towards minorities for immunization in order to tackle the COVID-19 crisis.
- establish instruments to allow vulnerable groups to access EU funds and ensure that minorities participate in the planning process.
- collect data for the purposes of the Poznan Declaration as well as the number of Roma vaccinated against COVID-19.
- use the potential and the capacities and expertise from the business sector and the CSOs.
- utilize the opportunities to take advantage of the Western Balkans Investment Framework in order to improve the situation of Roma, especially through the construction of social housing.
- guarantee the organization of an unbiased census and the participation of Roma throughout this process.
- ensure civil registration for minorities by 2024, in accordance with the UNHCR pledges and the Poznan Declaration.
- safeguard the infrastructure in the Roma settlements such as access to electricity and water supply.
- engage minorities in the reforestation process in order to mitigate climate change consequences and the negative impact on the environment.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- invest efforts in political assistance in the Western Balkans, especially to minority participation in decision making positions and processes, as allies to the minorities.
- monitor the implementation of the national laws in the Western Balkans, especially the laws covering the promotion the rights of the minorities.
- continue to monitor antigypsyism and make sure that no one is left behind, despite some progress resulting from EU efforts.
- initiate the operationalization of the Poznan Declaration and monitor the progress towards meeting the objectives.
- include Roma to participate in the accession and negotiation process when Western Balkans countries open the accession negotiations.



(4) Recommendations for other actors:

- Political parties should ensure that mainstream political parties enable space for minorities to participate in elections as their candidates and in their structures and decision-making processes.

**Green Agenda: Energy Transition**

(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- continue to point out non-transparent work and corrupt actions in the field of energy to achieve the accountability of public authorities and the rule of law.
- intensify activities on the promotion of energy transition as an opportunity for a healthier and better life of citizens and not just an obligation to be fulfilled.
- raise awareness of manufacturers for the trade barriers they will face regarding carbon content, in order to intensify activities that bring the green deal and decarbonization concept closer to local communities and citizens.
- cooperate with the private sector to increase advocacy for appropriate policies.
- invest additional efforts to educate the population in energy efficiency, promote electricity production for own consumption, and develop prosumer and citizen's energy.
- further develop partnerships through a common agenda for the region and by further implementing and reforming the Western Balkan 6 Initiative, also known as the Berlin Process. The European Green Deal is a natural platform with clear proposals that could support the regional agenda. The Energy Community Secretariat could be the bridge between Brussels and regional CSOs.
- transform or reinvent profiles and roles with a greater understanding and adequate knowledge for various aspects (political – local, national, regional, EU, global – economic and social innovations in social business development and social entrepreneurship); raise capacities and capabilities for a multi-sectoral approach in addressing social inequalities and marginalization; raise awareness and promote sustainable development through green transformation.
- create multi-sectoral alliances for advancing advocacy impact; to promote green/energy transformation as an opportunity for sustainable green development of local communities, countries, and regions.
- educate and involve media in the process of energy transition in the Western Balkans countries.
- expand the utilization of legal tools and instruments to expose responsible political and economic actors to their legal and social responsibility through the Energy Community, Aarhus Convention, or the United Nations, etc.

(2) Western Balkans governments should

- include energy transition in the permanent and priority agenda of political activities, given that the transition will have a significant impact on the transformation of society and social relations in the coming period.
- use the National Energy and Climate Plans (NECP) update process to set a clear coal phase-out date and make a plan for phasing out all fossil fuels, as well as ensuring a just transition of coal mining regions.

- remove legal barriers for the sustainable development of renewable energy, e.g., for prosumers, solar power, etc., and make sure appropriate incentives are put in place.
- set up national programs for energy efficiency, regular reporting for decarbonization and greening, and support for local enterprises.
- make energy efficiency the first fuel, in particular by reducing distribution losses, properly insulating houses, and replacing electrical resistance heaters with efficient heat pumps.
- work on energy transition towards renewables, focus on upscaling solar and wind, avoid stranded assets in new fossil gas projects.
- pro-actively open a public debate about energy transition, not just one-off events, but consistently, and listen to a range of voices including householders, small businesses, and local authorities.
- refrain from avoiding or delaying the transition, but rather seize the opportunity and find ways to make it work for their country's households and small businesses.
- set targets for renewable energy sources (RES) and energy efficiency (EE) until 2030 and pledge for net-zero economies by 2050/2060.
- create policies and funds to protect workers, not jobs.
- include all social actors in defining goals, priorities, and planned activities of the energy transition.
- urgently change their attitude towards citizens, businesses, and investors to enable them to invest, as much and efficiently as possible, in RES, self-consumption, and energy efficiency, creating a system that encourages investment in the energy transition and decarbonization on equal terms for all. It should be taken into account that energy produced in the domestic field with local resources should primarily be intended for domestic consumption and in the function of decarbonization and replacement of fossil fuels with renewable sources.
- combine and streamline regional financial mechanisms alongside the Green Agenda framework; combine hard and soft measures to encourage scaled up engagement for greater impact and elevating the speed of change.
- set up regional monitoring and advocacy mechanisms for accountable Green Agenda implementation.
- improve cooperation with countries already going through the coal phase-out like Greece.
- set up a one-stop-shop for RES deployment, support investors with de-risking measures.
- speed-up the regional power market integration.
- abolish regulatory and administrative barriers for RES development.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- intensify efforts to combat issues of corruption, clientelism, and lack of transparency, and more closely integrate these efforts with the activities surrounding the Green Agenda. The EU should attach conditionality to the funds and conduct more field inspections.
- present itself as a credible partner by supporting the region with effective and robust financing structures that can offset funding for fossil fuels in the region (such as from China).

- strictly monitor the use of EU taxpayer funds: avoid usage that displaces private investments or slows down lignite phase out in the Balkans.
- make compliance with EU laws and policies a basic condition for all international donor assistance, whether for donor-funded development of strategic documents or the development of specific documents.
- ensure that the development of the Green Agenda action plans is done in an inclusive and transparent way with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, and that the Instrument for Pre-Accession Funds (IPA) III has clear and transparent conditions set for its usage that ensure it can only contribute to ‘no-regrets’ investments.
- concentrate assistance more on building domestic planning, management skills, and understanding of EU legislation.
- amend the Energy Community Treaty. All countries are in breach in terms of Large Combustion Plants Directive/Industrial Emissions Directive (LCPD/IED) related obligations. Amendment is to be conditioned by ambitious NECP that facilitates at least 55% reduction in CO2 emissions by 2030.
- concentrate on more progressive local authorities where national authorities do not show sufficient will to advance the energy transition. This might include opening the EBRD’s Green Cities program up to smaller towns and cities than is currently the case.
- apply less carrot, more stick, more conditionality.

### **Green Agenda: Air Pollution**

#### (1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- understand that air quality is not just a technical issue. It is an important cross-cutting issue that touches deeply into health, environment, social justice and goes to the core state function of being able to protect its citizens. Strong coalitions beyond expert CSOs are needed.
- increase public awareness for issues relating to air quality. National and regional information campaigns and media support are crucial to this end. Journalists have to get relevant knowledge and an understanding that enables them to transport the information; networks between experts and journalists have to be established as regular working relationships. Public broadcasting services need to take up their role in informing and educating about air quality. This is needed to reach increased accountability of institutions and engagement of citizens.
- recover their monitoring role, which is neglected by many governments in the region.

#### (2) Western Balkans governments should

- start fulfilling national and international obligations, as for example the implementation of the EU directive on Large Combustion Plants, with which five of the six member countries of the Energy Community are non-complying.
- enable effective, substantial, and structural participation of civil society and the expert community, which expresses the views of citizens.
- align to air quality standards that fully reflect World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and latest science. This would allow national standards to follow international regulations and guidelines.

- establish monitoring mechanisms for public policy documents and legal instruments tackling air pollution, including precise indicators. Having in mind health and life expectancy data, one of the indicators will need to provide precise measurements of the health effects (established by the WHO).
- stop subsidizing coal-fired power plants. Instead, these recourses can be used for the development of sustainable renewable energy sources.
- increase the capacities of institutions that are in charge of environment, air pollution and greenhouse gases inventory. Being fully aware that the administrative capacity in a number of the WB countries is low and that the needed knowledge is lacking, the expert community and civil society can provide know-how and counselling, if finally recognized as an ally.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- apply strict conditionality to hold Western Balkans governments accountable on their depollution pledges. Further, they should support a just transition with technical and financial support and know-how transfer. Furthermore, climate and environmental issues as reflected in chapter 27 of the accession process should be considered a horizontal issue for the accession process at large.
- include the WB into all future climate activities and plans. For example, the Conference on the Future of Europe looks at climate change and the environment but excludes the region where the biggest polluters of the continent are located.
- apply a *zero-pollution* conditionality for all Green Agenda implementation measures and financing mechanisms. The EU could explore establishing a 30% spending target for tackling climate change within the EU's Pre-accession financial instrument (IPA), in line with the target set in the EU's global financing instrument for external action (the NDICI) of the 2021-2027 Multi Financial Framework.
- create a concrete implementation action plan for the Green Agenda. In support of reaching its targets, the EU should focus its funding only on renewables (wind, solar) and not on transitioning fossil fuels (gas). This is important not only from a climate preservation perspective, but also as a geo-political consideration.
- the EU should focus on and increase its support for the expert community and civil society in order to reach the wider citizenry and bridge the gap between national institutions and the wider public, as they are the real driver of change to reach the agreed goals of the Green Agenda (including depollution), rather than the EU partner governments in the region.
- strengthen existing compliance mechanisms within the Energy Community to enable stricter sanctions when agreed targets are not met. Five of the six countries are non-complying with the EU directive on Large Combustion Plants. Instruments like the NERP do not even include important air pollution sources from power plants used for district heating. They focus only on electricity generation and distribution and are not complete. Having in mind the air quality catastrophe across the region, instruments of the Energy community should include all relevant polluters.

(4) The Regional Cooperation Council should

- inform about its role, if it will be the main regional implementing body, and establish mechanisms and instruments to structurally involve the expert community and CSOs.

**Green Agenda: Biodiversity and Nature Conservation**

## (1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- take part in the development of the Action Plan and roadmaps for the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (WB), coordinated by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), in order to
  - strengthen the BioNET network and other relevant networks (SEENET, Coalitions 27, etc.);
  - be involved in the development of the Regional Biodiversity Strategy;
  - establish an expert and CSO network for monitoring biodiversity;
  - publish a regional shadow report on the implementation of biodiversity policies and the general progress, with coordination of the BioNET network members.
- encourage and support small local environmental CSOs to take part in the processes linked to the Green Agenda for the WB.
- increase the role and visibility of CSOs in research activities as well as in the protection and management of species and habitats on the national and regional levels.
- strengthen the capacities of CSOs for identification of Natura 2000 sites and their involvement in the proclamation and the governance of national protected areas.
- keep its watch-dog role as in all other policymaking and negotiations processes.

## (2) Western Balkans governments should

- ensure that the selection professional staff in the protected areas and in the scientific and governmental institutions is merit-based and adequately qualified, receiving regular training.
- appoint relevant and qualified focal points for nature-related conventions.
- make presence of the Biodiversity Task Force obligatory in the promotion and implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.
- support the BioNET network and its members financially and structurally.
- introduce a legal obligation that cases related to the environment and the nature are prioritized in the judicial systems.
- coordinate and finance regional biodiversity policies and activities.
- increase the inter-sectoral cooperation by organizing roundtables on sustainable farming and biodiversity in the areas important to biodiversity.
- introduce the financial scheme “Green direct payments”, which supports farmers who adopt and maintain environment and climate-friendly farming.
- set up standards for companies and farmers by building a “Friendly Food System” with a focus on biodiversity.
- set a moratorium on hydro power plants across the Western Balkans.
- increase the quality and standard for the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and secure the obligatory involvement of relevant CSOs in its development and in the monitoring of the environmental management.

- increase the percentage of protected areas by 30%, in accordance with the new UN post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and EU Biodiversity Strategy until 2030, with an obligatory adjustment of the national biodiversity strategies.
- improve governance of the protected areas and natural landscapes.
- ensure full transposition of the Habitat and Bird Directives into the national legislation.
- develop management plans for large carnivores and key migratory species on the regional level.
- improve sectoral cooperation and mainstreaming biodiversity in the sectoral policies for energy, agriculture, water management, forestry, spatial and urban planning, and the construction sectors.
- recognize and value the contribution of civil society organizations in the nature conservation sector and to enhance opportunities for them to participate in decision-making, planning, implementation, monitoring, and reporting processes.
- mainstream biodiversity into annual national budgets, with clear funding for the protected areas, biodiversity protection, and mechanisms to ensure responsible spending.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- recognize and support the work of national conservation CSOs and regional networks.
- sanction WB governments when not responding or not giving adequate answers to e.g., the Bern Convention and other conventions.
- strengthen the European Commission's monitoring of nature protection in WB countries and provide more effective support to WB governments, in order to achieve EU standards in biodiversity conservation and public participation in decision-making without further delays.
- create mechanisms for EU investments in the Western Balkans, in order to secure that they will boost biodiversity and nature conservation, not threaten them.

### **Enhancing Integrity Compliance in Infrastructure Projects**

(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- bring together a critical mass of Think Tanks / specialized NGOs focused on good governance and Integrity Compliance (IC) in Large Capital Investment projects (LCIP).
- include governance and IC as a key component to be monitored, in all their initiatives where public administration bodies are involved.

(2) Western Balkans governments should

- complete the adoption of Integrity Compliance plans as per their national strategies, EU obligations, and international best practices.
- enhance transparency by granting Think Tanks and specialized CSOs to have observer status at National Investment Committees.
- have obligatory consultations procedures on laws impacting LCIP.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- mainstream integrity compliance into the European External Investment Plan (EIP) and 10 Flagship Projects, as per the Chair Conclusions of the Sofia Summit 2020.
- make good governance and integrity compliance part of conditionality for the EU support of infrastructure projects.
- include representatives from Think Tanks and specialized CSOs (or from a specially formed CSO Infrastructure Observers Network) as observers during Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) meetings.
- provide long term EU support to LCIP Think Tanks and specialized CSOs, a part of the WBIF functioning budget.

(4) Recommendations for other actors:

- International Financial Institutions (IFI) should provide accessible, adapted, and updated information for CSOs on the infrastructure that they finance.
- IFI and Development Agencies should pledge to the sustainability and long-term viability of their LCIP local partners in WB6 and provide long-term support with expertise and financial resources to Think Tanks and CSOs involved in monitoring IC in infrastructure projects.

### **Digitalization in Public Services: Enhancing Transparency, Securing Data Protection**

(1) CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should

- advocate and monitor the adoption of legal frameworks in the field of digitalization and data protection in line with EU standards. They should also be watchdogs to oversee the implementation of adopted legislation.
- alert the public in cases of severe violations of digital rights, including major data breaches and cyber security incidents.
- raise their internal capacities in order to understand and deal with the issues related to the digitalization in public services.
- strive to work together on a regional level as the issues in all WB6 countries are rather similar.
- raise awareness on the importance of digital literacy of citizens and public servants.
- utilize open data increasingly in their work and promote successful use cases in their communities.
- offer their expertise to the government for designing the e-services, as well as transfer the needs of their communities to the authorities who develop e-services.

(2) Western Balkans governments should

- adopt a comprehensive legal framework in the field of digitalization and data protection in line with EU standards, as well as common standards for developing e-services and guidelines for their optimization and implementation.
- include CSOs in public debates and policy dialogues in processes of adopting new legal frameworks in this field.

- increase the digital competencies of the public administration as well as develop systematic programs and campaigns for increasing the level of digital literacy of the general public.
- find innovative solutions to keep high quality IT professionals and build external partnerships with the private sector.
- motivate public institutions to continuously publish and update data in open formats.
- develop e-services in a user centered manner, bearing in mind the needs and expectations of the citizens, as well as their level of digital literacy.
- include the private sector, CSOs, academia and other stakeholders in the process of designing e-services.
- promote the benefits of using e-services and build strong support for the citizens, thus encouraging their use.
- be guided by the principles of data protection by design and default when designing e-services. Comprehensive risk analysis and impact assessment procedures should be undertaken at various stages of design and development of e-services, and certainly before they are put in use.
- acknowledge the importance of accountability in cases of data protection violations and incidents and adequately sanction the responsible parties.

(3) The EU and its Member States should

- set golden standards for tackling emerging issues in the use of advanced technology and provide support for drawing up laws and their implementation.
- insist on the same level of accountability in cases of data protection violations and incidents from the WB countries, as for the member states.
- support and motivate regional cooperation in the digital sphere in the WB on multiple levels, including cooperation among governments and CSOs.
- transfer knowledge and best practices for successful implementation of e-services to the WB countries.

---

The views and opinions stated in this document are the product of the Civil Society & Think Tank Forum's working groups and do not necessarily reflect those of its organizers, Aspen Institute Germany and Southeast Europe Association, or its supporters, the German Federal Foreign Office.