

# Bosnia-Herzegovina and Beyond: The Role of Civil Society in Supporting Democratization and Euro-Atlantic Integration in South East Europe

## Policy Recommendations <sup>1</sup> Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe

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### Situation Analysis

South East Europe has a huge variety of Civil Society Organizations (CSO): thousands of associations of citizens exist in the region, the majority without following explicit aims in the field of democratization or human rights. Generally, CSOs which are advocating a more democratic society, respect of human rights and individual freedom are generally more trusted by the citizens than the existing political parties. However, these CSOs are confronted with various barriers: these may be difficulties within their own organization structure, pressure from political authorities in their home countries as well as unfavourable arrangements with the international donors. Interest in cooperating with regional CSOs has decreased with international donors over the past years, which is partly due to a shift of interest to other regions and partly due to their discontent with the outcome of projects.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the social protests that occurred in Spring of 2014 did not lead to the expected political outcome, putting an end to BiH's longstanding political agony. Nor did they result in substantial social and economic reforms for the benefit of all citizens. Despite enthusiastic beginnings, the social protests later resulted in chaotic "plenums of the citizens" and in some violent attacks against public buildings. One main reason for these negative developments was the lack of leadership and strategic political thinking among the grassroots organizations that initiated the social

protests. The majority of the so-called "Elite CSOs" – less integrated in the local communities than grassroots organizations, but closer connected with donors and with a better access to media – did not join the social protests, additionally weakening the overall initiative.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates "the hen or egg problem" regarding the establishment of a vital civil society sector. CSOs are generally regarded as being important for counterbalancing negative trends in the political field. Without the existence of functional state institutions, it is difficult for a civil society sector in general and pro-active CSOs to develop.



International donors occasionally have policy agendas that differ from the interests of "project receivers" in South East European communities. This has led to the

perception that donor-funded CSOs primarily work for the interest of foreign countries and organizations and not first and foremost for the benefit of their citizens. This impression has been reinforced through the lack of coordination on strategic priorities amongst international donors when cooperating with CSOs in South East Europe.

The EU membership negotiation processes have clearly helped representatives of CSOs – in particular in Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia – to display themselves as experts on subject matter issues for their countries. This positive side effect of the European integration process could also be achieved in the other Western Balkan countries if membership negotiations with the EU open in the foreseeable future. In principle, NATO integration processes could positively influence the situation of CSOs in South East Europe in the same manner.

However, as demonstrated in the Croat case, mostly NATO-affiliated NGOs were involved in the government's membership activities. The remaining CSOs, with more critical stances vis-à-vis NATO, felt excluded from this process. This lack of balance and public information about NATO have resulted in a distrustful attitude of parts of the population vis-à-vis the Croat membership in the alliance.

## Summary of Recommendations

### Regarding the Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina

- **For the Civil Society Organizations in BiH:**

Enhance your role through improving coordination with other CSOs and stay focussed on vital reform issues for BiH, which are crucial for its citizens.

Grass-root level activists need the support of politically experienced NGO representatives (the so called “Elite CSOs”) in order to spread their messages at its best within the public. Don't totally avoid the contact with high level political actors and try to identify partners among them for substantial reforms.

Through creating a register of CSOs which are operative in BiH, it could become easier for international stakeholders and local political authorities to identify reliable partners.

- **For the Political Authorities in BiH:**

Use the support of the EU for creating and strengthening mechanisms for information exchange and dialogue at the municipal as well as national levels in

order to systematically improve the participation of the NGO sector in the construction of political and social processes in BiH. This could ensure that they effectively participate in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of specific policies and programmes at various levels.

Don't discriminate against critical CSOs; provide equal treatment. Improve the legislation and institutional mechanisms in order to enable CSOs to increase their skills through participation in public policy and decision-making processes.

- **For the European Union, the US and other International Donors:**

The donor community should equally foster grass root CSOs and NGOs that are promoting democratic standards. Enable and support the leading figures of civil society to transform into a well-organized lobby for democratization and human rights.

Try to achieve a better coordination between yourself, in particular with regard to US- and EU-sponsored projects directed at BiH. International organizations should not be the main applicants for donor support. To ensure local ownership, small and medium CSOs should be taken on board as partners.



### Regarding the Overall CSO Development in the Region

- **For the CSOs:**

Beyond their role as a “watchdog” of the political authorities, CSOs in South East European countries in transition can give valuable input to the national legislation and governmental regulation reform. This requires, however, that CSOs develop a comprehensive expertise and clear political vision, and furthermore need to be willing to participate proactively in political processes.

Grass-root movements should contact already established “Elite CSOs” and aim at cooperating

with them when communicating issues to the wider public. In concrete, NGOs located in capitals should engage in forming coalitions and partnerships with grass-root organisations when applying for funds and executing projects. This recommendation is based on the presumption that grass-root organisations are more acquainted with the needs and problems of ordinary citizens on the municipal level while “Elite CSOs” have more experience in communicating broader political messages. In an optimal situation, this would lead to a better inclusion of the local community in activities which are of public interest and would ensure that policies reach individual citizens.

Establish regional networks of CSOs which are working in the same field of expertise (e.g. EU and NATO integration) in order to benefit from the experiences of neighbouring countries.

Regional CSOs should significantly improve their internal governance structures and in particular to enhance transparency and accountability.

Further improve the way you communicate with the public and ordinary citizens, by delivering simple and concrete messages about how your work benefits them and by avoiding the use of “project jargon”.

The civil society should insist on a transparent and inclusive process that is institutionalized and recognizes the important role of CSOs in preparing positions, monitoring the process and informing the public. Some generally positive examples are the participation of Montenegrin CSOs in negotiation working groups and in the National Convent on EU membership as well as in the EU negotiations platform in Serbia.

- **For the Political Authorities in the Region:**

Despite the critical positions very often expressed by CSOs, recognize their important social engagement and accept them as partners in reforming your countries.

Establish strategic partnerships with CSOs aiming at producing concrete results that may be crucial for the democratic and social consolidation of your country.

Provide equal treatment to CSOs with similar expertise and profile in regard to access to relevant information. Don't create clientelistic relationships by favouring certain CSOs.

Timely engage CSOs in the preparation of EU and NATO accession negotiations. The value of this approach for other Western Balkan countries is proven both from the example of membership negotiation processes of EU countries as well as from the recent example of Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia.

Include CSOs in the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation of state public policies and programmes. This is very important with regards to EU and NATO integration processes, to which CSOs can contribute significantly through their expertise on the integration topic and their capacity for social mobilization. With this, a higher level of transparency and citizen inclusion in processes of significant social interest should be ensured.

Communicate continuously the meaning of EU and NATO integration to the public and the citizens. The Croatian integration process showed some missed opportunities to intensify the overall social dialogue.



- **For the EU, the US and other Donors:**

Achieving high democratic standards should remain an important principle of the EU's integration agenda in South East Europe and should not be sacrificed for the sake of smooth negotiations with autocratic politicians. The EU should make it clear that an important part of conditionality is fair and impartial treatment of CSOs by respective governments of candidate and potential candidate countries.

Foster the active involvement of CSOs in the dialogue with the public administration by bringing CSOs to the table as equal partners and thus providing legitimacy to their voices.

Encourage programmes that offer exchange of expertise in relevant topic areas, additionally helping to build up capacity of recognized CSOs. Make their active involvement in the EU and NATO accession processes and corresponding reforms more effective.

Closely monitor the work of CSOs, their contributions and statements, and give advice on how to enhance their effectiveness.

While implementing a project in cooperation with a CSO, take into consideration the subsequent requirements: Always try to establish a shared and common understanding of the situation on the ground;

define a shared and common objective; produce a joint plan with clearly identified areas of risk; agree on joint measures of effectiveness and benchmarks; implement with the recipient community firmly in the lead; carefully and jointly monitor the pace and sequence of implementation; and finally, jointly evaluate at key decision points.

Be more self-transparent in the funding process and insist on higher levels of transparency within the CSOs in spending funds, in order to ensure that means donated are properly spent on activities that they were allocated for.



Use public tenders for project funding. This could ensure a transparent and fair allocation of financial resources. Additionally, precise rules on the reporting of funding distribution need to be established to prevent a misuse of donor aid. Providing transparency inside the CSOs should become an important criterion for funding projects.

International donors active in the region should better coordinate their activities on the ground in order to avoid an overlapping of initiatives and ensure the continuity of some essential reform processes.

Projects of CSOs that are based on regional cooperation should be given special support by donors. Avoid projects which follow a short term perspective, because they most probably will not produce substantial results.

A decision of the presidential administration and Senate of the United States is necessary for resolving the backlog in ambassadorial appointments in order to assure the predictable presence of a top-level diplomatic partner for CSOs in countries within the region.

## Regarding the Media

International stakeholders should pay more attention to the increasing pressure media face in South East Europe. They should also use their influence on regional political authorities to stop the discrimination and violence against media and journalists.

In particular the OSCE, EU and bilateral donors should re-double their efforts to stimulate and support robust and independent media in the region.

Referring to the crucial role that media can play in processes of democratic transition and institutional advancement, their responsibility for contributing to a mature civil society is enormous. Therefore media – amongst other tasks – should report comprehensively about the goals and activities of CSOs.

Furthermore, media (public services but not limited to them), should provide representation of CSOs through inclusion of their representatives in governing or advisory structures such as boards, councils etc. whenever possible. That would enhance the possibility of broadcasting, on a regular basis, topics which are in the public interest.

Political authorities could support these undertakings through including CSOs in the policy process related to media regulation.

<sup>1</sup> These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 29<sup>th</sup> RSSEE workshop on „Bosnia and Herzegovina and Beyond: The Role of Civil Society in Supporting Democratization and Euro-Atlantic Integration in South East Europe” convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe” from 25-27 September 2014 in Sarajevo/Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković; valuable support came from Ernst M. Felberbauer and Edith Stifter (all Austrian National Defence Academy).