

Fostering sustainable civil society cooperation for better governance in South East Europe: What's Next?

SELDI non-paper, December 2021

1. Current state of civil society cooperation for good governance. Key challenges and opportunities

Civil society organisations in South East Europe faces a number of challenges in tackling good governance deficits related to overwhelming reliance on external donors, shrinking national civil space and foreign malign influence in media and civil society, lack of open access to public information and registers, and overly formalistic inclusion in the process of strategic decisions-making. This has prevented CSOs and CSO networks in the region from achieving their optimal analysis, advocacy, and watchdog potential, and has subsequently limited their impact in advocating for good governance and rule of law reforms. CSOs have often resorted to presenting policy recommendations in the form of open letters or press-conferences, which have been routinely disregarded. Hence, CSOs need to find new, innovative ways of joining forces and expertise, which could increase the civil society's policy impact and push forward reforms not only at national, but also at regional level. In addition, they need to find new ways of engaging with traditional donors from the EU and the West, and seek ways for local level engagement, to avoid reform fatigue and a shrinking donor space for good governance. This also calls for more political engagements, which naturally threatens CSO independence.

A key common conclusion drawn from implementing EU co-financed projects for supporting CSOs network creation in SEE is that international pressure and funding needs to be complemented by indigenous, dynamic platforms of CSOs who have proven to be capable of continuously monitoring internal developments, raising awareness on issues of concern, learning from regional peers and setting up coalitions comprising governmental, non-governmental, private sector and international partners to act on specific issues.¹

The current non-paper aims to promote the principles of operation of such good governance and anti-corruption platforms, using as a stepping-stone the previous efforts and outputs of the [Southeast Europe Legal Development Initiative \(SELDI\)](#). It aims to initiate a discussion among CSOs and CSO networks working in the areas of good governance and the rule of law, willing to cooperate in new initiatives and projects. It hopes to galvanize support for the further democratization following the US-led Summit for Democracy and the new EU commitments for the region.

¹ SELDI, (2013), [SELDI Strategy and Action Agenda for Good Governance and Anticorruption in Southeast Europe](#).



2. How CSOs and CSO networks could cooperate more efficiently?

Good governance is not a technical exercise, but requires a national climate of trust, civic and political responsibility – precisely the issues where CSOs have the most to contribute. Hence, there is the need to increase the capabilities of the CSOs to serve as watchdogs and to jointly engage government in anti-corruption reforms. This includes the ability to collect and collate primary information on the operation of government institutions, enhance CSOs skills in aggregating and empirically measuring the actual corruption situation, and through data analysis, engage in institutional evaluation and the formulation of policy reports.²

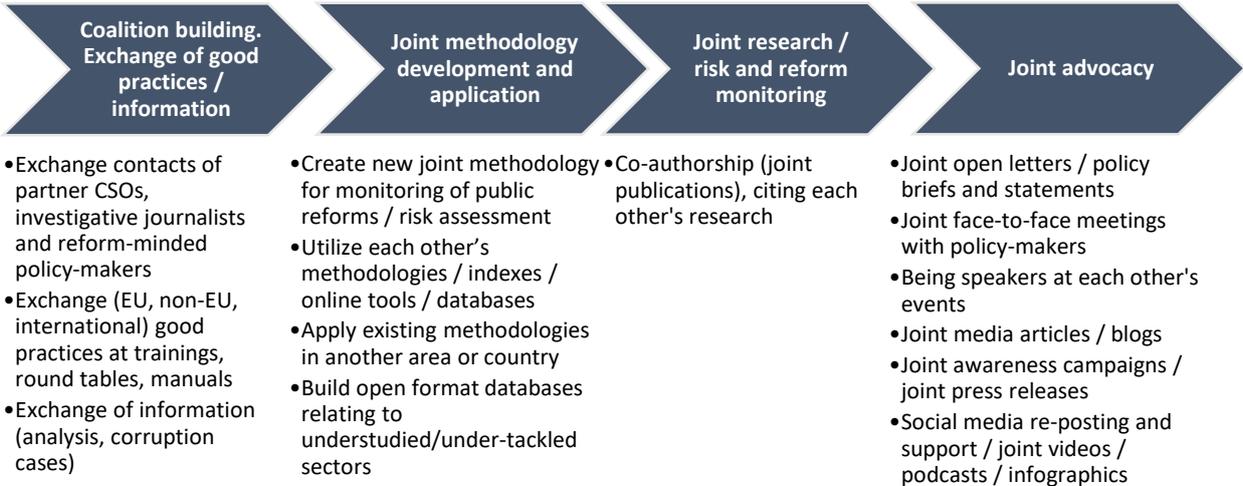
But how to achieve synergies in the multiple and diverse CSOs efforts? A first step could be to identify common traditional and newly emerging topics and areas of interest and potential future CSO partners that are willing to share their expertise. Several examples of topics of interest are provided in the figure below.

Figure 1. Possible common topics and areas of interest



The next, more complex step would be for CSOs to pool their resources together, and develop a joint **holistic approach for cooperation at all stages** of the research, analytical and advocacy process, based on a set of diverse methodologies focusing on cross-cutting topics.

Figure 2. Possible synergies by type of activity



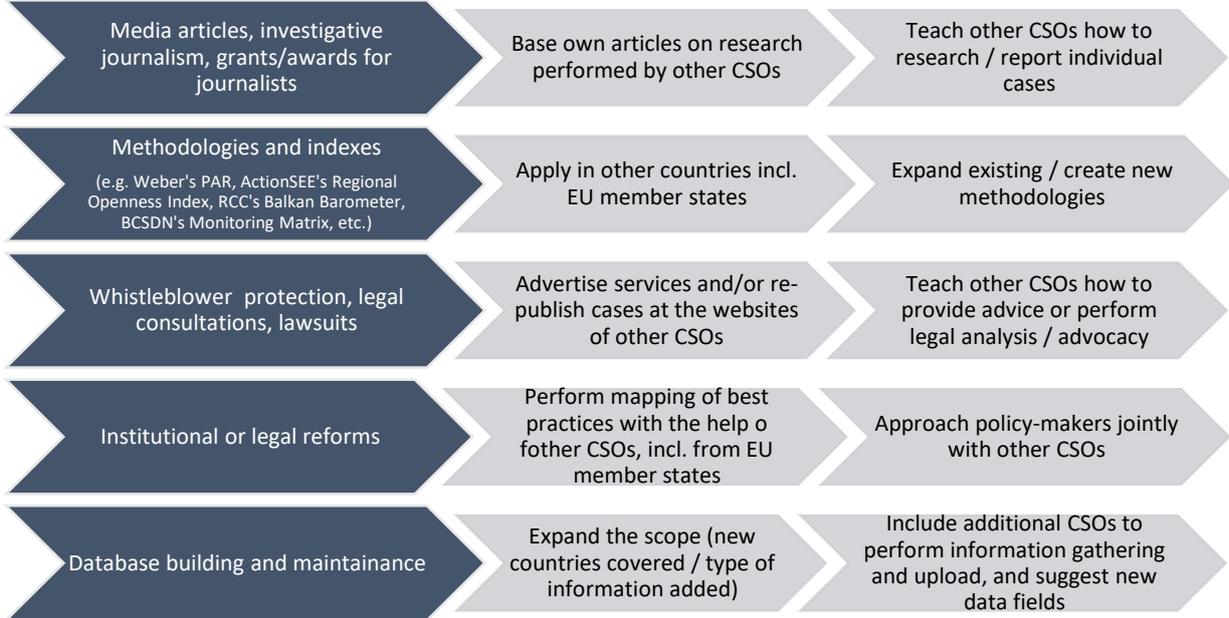
For example, in the framework of a new initiative or a joint project, CSOs currently focused primarily on sending open letters to policy-makers or writing media / investigative articles, could upgrade their case-by-case approach by starting to utilize big data risk assessment methodologies and including

² SELDI, (2016). *Civil Society Strategy and Joint Strategic Programme for Good Governance and Anti-Corruption in SEE 2020*.

issues at mezzo- and macro-level in their analysis. They could also develop capacities in corruption proofing of legal documents, monitoring of institutional reforms, and evaluating the activities of government programmes and policies. And vice-versa – CSOs focusing primarily on institutional and legal reforms could launch collaboration with investigative CSOs and media, and establish capacities in reporting on single cases of corruption or misconduct, thus expanding their media outreach. CSOs working solely on national issues could expand their research to neighboring countries and tap into the existing knowledge and best practices from EU and international partners, including UNODC, UNCAC, GRECO, OECD, the World Bank, U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the Regional Anticorruption Initiative (RAI), etc.

Thus, the way forward could be seen in the launch of new or the expansion of the existing multi-country coalitions, extending the geographical scope towards new countries or NUTS-2 regions, and involving additional CSOs in the implementation of innovative research methodologies or policy participation mechanisms.

Figure 3. Possible synergies based on scope expansion



3. Identifying efficient CSO-state cooperation mechanisms

CSOs are engaged in a delicate balancing act – to reconcile cooperation with government while performing their independent watchdog function. In most cases, whenever CSOs get involved in the advancement of anticorruption legislation it is mostly the result of their own initiative and advocacy, rather than any demand from government. Mechanisms for engaging civil society – even where they exist – often remain a formality or seek to co-opt national CSOs in portraying a more positive image abroad. More often than not, CSOs inputs get rejected by policy makers without satisfactory explanation, while those that do get accepted are predominantly of technical nature.³

At the same time, reducing corruption requires relevant institution-building measures and creating the social preconditions for establishing the rule of law. In that context, CSOs in the region can contribute by triangulating their efforts through finding a **common platform with reformist minded local politicians and state institutions** and regional, European and international stakeholders to work on

³ SELDI, (2020), *Western Balkans 2020: State-Capture Risks and Policy Reforms*.

anti-corruption monitoring, prevention, and prosecution. Some examples of CSO-state cooperation mechanisms that could be jointly utilized, are presented at the figure below.

Figure 4. CSO-state cooperation mechanisms that could be jointly utilized



4. Next steps

During the suggested **brainstorming workshop**, the participants will identify opportunities for joint future activities, projects and initiatives, including the internal transfer of expertise and knowledge on improving governance in SEE. They will discuss and select the most appropriate joint research topics, agree on new methodology development, identify possibility for application of existing research methodologies by other CSOs or in other countries, and interested CSOs or networks will sign a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation with the SELDI anti-corruption initiative. The main types of sources providing financial assistance for joint projects and initiatives are presented at the figure below.

Figure 5. Possible sources for seeking financial assistance for joint projects



Annex. SELDI's Memorandum of Understanding template

With a view to a shared vision, values and principles on democracy, good governance, openness and welfare of the peoples of Southeastern Europe,

and

Aiming to establish productive cooperation and good relations between our two networks,

.....

and

Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI),

We agree:

- To contribute to supporting the EU integration process through anchoring democratic values and structures, the rule of law, human rights, and social inclusion in SEE
- To work jointly on strengthening the capacity of the public authorities and CSOs in Southeast Europe to collaborate, monitor and impact good governance and anti-corruption through public-private partnership
- To advocate and facilitate the design of new strategic policy agenda for good governance in critical sectors
- To achieve an impact on the rule of law and compliance by introducing good governance principles in the region
- To share information on regional developments
- To work together on the realization of mutually interesting and beneficial initiatives in the region
- To undertake activities that will further enhance cooperation and exchange between our respective networks

Signed in 3 original copies.