POLICY BRIEF

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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

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Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans

Kristina Amerhauser | Walter Kemp

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristina Amerhauser is an analyst at the GI-TOC conducting research on the Western Balkans and working on the SEE-Obs. She has a master's degree in advanced international studies from the Vienna School of International Studies.

Walter Kemp is a Senior Fellow at the GI-TOC and directs the SEE-Obs. He is also Special Adviser to the Cooperative Security Initiative. Previously, he held a number of senior positions in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, was vice president of the International Peace Institute and spokesman and speechwriter at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. He has written extensively on conflict prevention, the relationship between crime and conflict, and European security issues.

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland

www.globalinitiative.net

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SUMMARY

As the space for civil society appears to be shrinking in the Western Balkans, with organizations being under pressure from governments and increasingly concerned about their security, this report looks at organized crime and corruption in the region from a civil society perspective. It aims to give an overview of how civil society organizations in the Western Balkans deal with issues related to organized crime and corruption and highlights their main activities and concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Less than 1% of the more than 100 000 civil society organizations (CSOs) registered in the Western Balkans Six (WB6) countries[1] deal directly with organized crime or corruption. This is surprising, considering the serious and widespread impact of these threats on the region. However, this report shows that some CSOs do address the vulnerability associated with organized crime and corruption by working on issues related to drug use, youth development, post-prison reintegration, media freedom, environmental matters and marginalized groups.

Many of these CSOs face similar challenges, including pressure from governments, difficulties in raising funds to sustain their activities, and concerns about security. Indeed, the space for civil society appears to be shrinking in the region. This is troubling, because CSOs in the Western Balkans have a key role in raising awareness of and addressing organized crime and corruption, and strengthening local resilience to these challenges.

This report looks at CSOs in the WB6 countries whose work relates to organized crime and corruption. It highlights some of their main challenges, outlines their perceptions of organized crime in their communities and identifies good practices. We also explore how these organizations' resilience can be strengthened and how CSOs themselves can contribute to strengthening resilience in their communities and across the region. The report further includes an overview map showing where CSOs dealing with themes related to organized crime and corruption are active.

▲ **Despite security challenges, some civil society organizations in the Western Balkans work to counter organized crime and corruption. Above, Albanian NGO Together for Life's campaign against organized crime.** © *Together for Life*

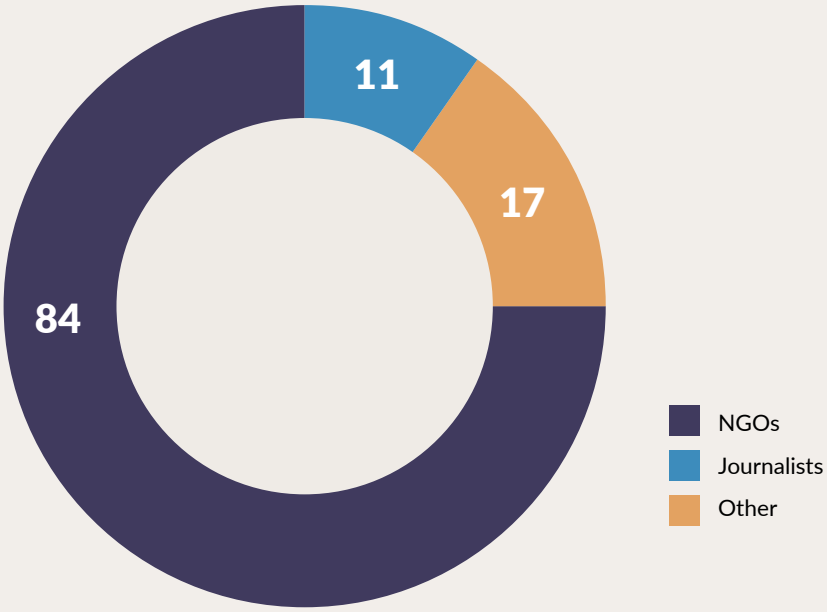

FIGURE 1 Distribution of the interviews conducted for this research.

Methodology

To do this, the report builds on research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) into illicit economies in Western Balkan countries at the local and regional level. To more effectively support efforts to build resilience, this report maps civil society's engagement in addressing organized crime and corruption in the region. Data was gathered by five researchers with extensive knowledge of organized crime in the Western Balkans. They conducted more than 110 interviews with civil society representatives (mostly in-person interviews), including with people working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media organizations and also community members, concerned citizens and representatives of local authorities. The distribution of respondents is shown in Figure 1.

The qualitative information gathered was complemented by a review of the relevant national legislation, governmental information and international reports pertaining to civil society in each of the six countries. The collected data was subsequently tested during six national resilience dialogues (community events) in November 2020 and attended by more than 100 participants from across the region. During these meetings, participants not only discussed local trends and current issues regarding organized crime and corruption but also identified common areas of work and assessed the needs for strengthening the resilience of CSOs active in the Western Balkans.

Regular engagement with the 16 beneficiaries of the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund in the region provided special insight into the work of CSOs working against organized crime and corruption and the challenges they face. The beneficiaries contributed to drafting the recommendations in this report, which were discussed and finalized during the cross-regional resilience dialogue in mid-December 2020.

Resilience framework

Since 2016, the GI-TOC has been documenting community-level responses to organized crime through a resilience framework. In this preliminary research, resilience was modelled as a multidimensional operational concept to understand the complex relationship between organized crime and development. The research analyzed the interrelated community capacities for collective actions that curtail the influence of organized crime and weak governance.[2] The GI-TOC's approach to resilience follows three steps,[3] which apply to the current research as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 Approach to resilience as applied to the current research.

The Resilience Fund was officially launched in April 2019 and offers grants to finance, nurture and assist local initiatives in their responses to organized crime. The Fund identifies and empowers key civil society actors and builds their operational capacity, with the aim of creating resilience networks in communities affected by organized crime and violence. Since its inception, the Fund has supported over 70 projects run by more than 60 organizations in 31 countries, with 16 of these organizations based in WB6 countries. More than €1.5 million has been allocated in grants since the inception of the Resilience Fund.[4]

Although the report focuses on the activities of CSOs across the region, it is important to keep in mind that civil society is not a homogenous group with a single view on organized crime or on what the key countermeasures should be. The term 'civil society' is understood in this context to refer to individuals and organizations who take collective action in the public interest, outside of state institutions. It includes citizen groups, unions, academics, journalists and others who have an essential role in the running of society.[5]

The legal frameworks in the Western Balkans include various terminologies to describe CSOs, including references to associations, foundations and NGOs; for the purpose of this report, the terms 'CSO' and 'NGO' are therefore used interchangeably.

Our hope is that this report can showcase the work of the courageous and committed civil society activists and that, through highlighting the challenges they face, it will generate further discussion and support for their important work as well as strengthening civil society networks in the Western Balkan region.

Campaign developed by a civil society in Serbia to raise awareness on the issue of loan sharking. © *Protecta*

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In areas where criminal governance is rife, it is common that state actors responsible for governance and security (whether at local or national level) are unable to fulfil their responsibilities, to the extent that they are sometimes even described as 'captured'.[6] In the Western Balkans, the ecosystem of crime has been described as a 'joint-venture relationship between state structures and criminal groups', where organized crime and corruption are closely linked.[7]

In this context, civil society and non-state actors have become critical protagonists in the fight against organized crime and corruption, and have formed an integral part of the response for many years. However, only a few CSOs in the Western Balkan region deal with corruption and even fewer focus exclusively on organized crime. Most organizations' work deals with human rights, democratization, the rule of law and integration into the European Union (EU), culture and the arts, youth development and education, protecting the environment and economic reform; indeed, only one organization has been identified across the whole of the WB6 region as focusing solely on organized crime and corruption.[8]

The Western Balkans is a difficult environment for CSOs to work in, especially considering that the space for civil society and independent media in the region is shrinking. CSOs are subject to smear campaigns, pressure and even intimidation from a number of actors. For example, in July 2020, the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering of the Serbian ministry of finance published a list of media employees and CSOs whose bank records it wanted to review for money laundering or connections to terrorist financing.[9] In Montenegro, the parliament adopted a new media law, which obliges journalists to reveal their sources at the

prosecution's request.[10] In North Macedonia, pressure on civil society continues to be strong, despite the government officially having abandoned the previous 'de-Sorosization campaign', which claimed that CSOs were attempting to topple the government.[11] Across the region, including in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there have been several reports of verbal and even physical attacks on journalists, which have increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.[12]

These trends were also highlighted by the 2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, which showed that CSO sustainability scores continue to fall across the region.[13] Although CSOs in Montenegro are enthusiastic about the imminent change of government, they are also realistic about how it is unlikely to bring many new opportunities to civil society, whose work often appears to be isolated from the government and its institutions.

The legal and financial frameworks to set up and start an NGO in the Western Balkans appear to be quite accessible.[14] In recent years, many countries have passed new regulations that make their legal frameworks compliant with the necessary standards for EU accession. However, some reforms suggested by the international community, such as the new anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism legislations in Albania,[15] appear also to have been (mis)used to increase control of the state over civil society.

In the Western Balkans, many laws that should create space for CSOs have been insufficiently implemented. The COVID-19 pandemic has also created additional challenges, which further limited organizations' room for manoeuvre. Bureaucratic barriers and financial hurdles therefore make it difficult to run and maintain an NGO. For example, in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where registration of an NGO and any administrative changes are done in court, the required time has doubled since the beginning of the COVID-19 response, practically blocking new organizations from being established.[16] In Serbia, bureaucratic requirements such as having to submit identity documents of all founders of a CSO to change its bank account number (regardless of when the organization was established or who runs it at the moment) complicate day-to-day operations.[17]

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Registered CSOs[18]	>11 000	>25 300	>9 400	>5 700	>16 900	>34 300
CSOs working on organized crime and corruption	49	36	24	27	35	34

FIGURE 3 Overview of civil society organizations registered in the Western Balkans Six countries in 2019–2020.

As shown in Figure 3, a large number of CSOs are registered in each country. However, many close after a short time yet never deregister.[19] In fact, a closer examination showed that a significant number are actually inactive, having not reported any activities or engagement with their communities in recent years. For example, only 10% of all CSOs registered in Albania are also mentioned on the website of the Agency for the Support of Civil Society.[20] The considerable discrepancy between registered and active CSOs seems to be the result of the instability of CSO funding and other engagements of staff, which cause many CSOs to cease operations.

Figure 3 also shows how few organizations in the Western Balkans focus on strengthening community resilience against organized crime and corruption. CSOs working against crime and corruption include youth centres and youth-based organizations, NGOs working with women or minority and other vulnerable groups (e.g. ex-offenders or substance abusers), investigative journalists, and academic 'think tanks'.[21] Trying to understand and characterize how these organizations deal with the issue is complicated, because the situations, responses and results are of a wide range, reflecting the diverse nature of organized crime in different communities.

FIGURE 4 Civil society organizations in the Western Balkans focused on strengthening resilience against organized crime and corruption.

CSOs strengthen resilience through an array of activities, ranging from prevention activities in youth centres to the support of vulnerable groups to policy formulation and research activities. Most organizations have a diverse portfolio of activities, of which strengthening the community's resilience against organized crime and corruption is only one. Owing to the weakness or absence of internal checks and balances in some of the state structures in the Western Balkans, a considerable number of CSOs also perform an oversight role (e.g. monitoring the public procurement process), which is a task that usually should be carried out by independent public bodies. As can be seen in Figure 4, most of these organizations are based in capital cities or main urban centres; however, these centres are not always the hotspots of organized crime.

The overwhelming majority of organizations and civil society representatives interviewed for this report cited financial sustainability as the main challenge in their work. Although CSOs across the region receive funding from public, private and international stakeholders, the international community (including embassies, development agencies and international organizations) continues to be, by far, the most important donor.[22] In Albania, for example, the EU alone provided 51% of the total budget of CSOs in 2019.[23]

Civil society activities in the Western Balkan region are strongly donor dependent. Representatives have commented that grants are often short term, focus on bigger cities and that there is little support for activities against organized crime.[24] This leaves CSOs little room to diversify or to specialize in issues they think are relevant to the community.[25] It also makes CSOs reactive rather than proactive, which means that it is hard to attract or build expertise on specific subjects as staff are usually expected to work on a finite project and then switch to a different topic for the next project. Short-term support also exposes organizations in smaller communities.[26] They may receive funding from an outside donor for a one-off project on organized crime or corruption, but in the process jeopardize future relations and funding with local government partners. Frustration was also expressed about the focus on donor priorities rather than the real needs of the community, as well as about an overemphasis on training and experiences from elsewhere rather than addressing real local problems. As one respondent in Mitrovica, Kosovo, noted: 'We don't need lessons, we need positive experiences – and then people will learn the "lesson"'.[27] Too often the result of external support is short-term, donor-driven projects rather than long-term, strategic programmatic work.

Many organizations lack expertise in writing project proposals, talking to donors or applying for support.[28] Yet these organizations are closest to the action and are major stakeholders in improving stability and integrity in their communities. An activist from Shtip in North Macedonia explained: 'CSOs exist for the citizens and not for the donors. We might not know how to write projects that look good in the language that the donor community prefers, but we are the ones that work on the ground and access those in need to help them in a manner that is understandable for our beneficiaries.'[29] An example of donor dependence is seen in Serbia, where many local organizations had shut down after the year 2000 as international donors started to withdraw. However, by 2015 the international community realized that the democratization process was not going as expected and started reinvesting in CSOs. Precious time, expertise and networks have been lost: a rebuilding process is under way, but is hampered by the reality that many local activists who were engaged 20 years ago have moved on to work on other topics.[30]

Short-term grants and donor dependency also provide little space to develop the core skills of staff. Most employees are hired for project-specific purposes and some interviewees even mentioned that donors do not fund salaries at all but rather expect people to work on an honorarium basis.[31] A number of CSO representatives mentioned that they hold several different jobs at a time to compensate for low or irregular income.[32] This undermines the efforts and ambition of many young people in the CSO sector, who are motivated and have good connections.[33] The situation drives experts to the bigger cities or to look for work in the public sector or intergovernmental organizations, which offer more stability. Furthermore, it was noted that there is little room for professional development, so that even when salaries are competitive (as, for example, in Kosovo[34]), the civil society sector is not a popular career choice.

Who works for CSOs?

National registries and databases are often outdated and do not provide accurate information on staff profiles. Many CSOs in the region also work with a large number of volunteers, who are not registered. Limited official data is available on gender distribution in the CSO sector. However, using the gender balance of interviewees and participants at the national resilience dialogue as an indication, it is estimated that the ratio of women to men in the CSO sector in the Western Balkans is approximately 55:45. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more men than women are investigative journalists. A study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015 also provided insight into the age profile of staff, highlighting that there is an even distribution among all age groups. The average level of education, both among staff and volunteers, seems to be rising.[35]

As previously mentioned, CSOs across the region receive their funding predominantly from international donors. This can either be a liability because the organization is somehow seen as disloyal and working with 'foreign agents' or help to strengthen them because the organization has the backing of an influential external partner with whom the country wants to have good relations. In fact, most interviewees considered working with international donors to give them more freedom to act and express their views than if they were dependent on funding from their national government.[36] Other CSO representatives also explained that they do not apply for government funding because they do not want to be perceived as being associated with state institutions. It is striking that there is little cooperation between the private sector and NGOs; many NGOs are suspicious of the origin of private-sector money and often prefer not to accept it.[37]

International funding for CSOs can either be a liability because the organization is seen as disloyal or help strenghten them due to the backing of external partners.

Disbursement of government funding is often opaque and conditional. For example, in early 2020 the municipality centre in the canton of Sarajevo cancelled the allocation of government funds to CSOs at the last minute owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.[38]

Despite the uncertain financial support to NGOs, the share of public funding to civil society has increased in recent years. For example, in Kosovo funding went up by 15% from 2015 to 2017[39] and a similar phenomenon has been observed in Serbia, where the government has been officially distributing more support to the civil society sector.[40] However, this trend should be seen in context: the money often flows to organizations close to the ruling political party, while independent, community-based initiatives have little chance of receiving support as tenders are not published, may be short-lived or written in a way that excludes most CSOs from the start. Across the region, CSOs close to or founded by members of local government have received funds to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.[41]

What are GONGOs?

In the Western Balkans, CSOs are often seen as watchdogs, in opposition to the government and strongly engaged in monitoring its institutions. In situations where the opposition is weak, implicated in organized crime or corruption or boycotts parliament, or where the government is seen as corrupt or colluding with criminal groups, CSOs are sometimes perceived as anti-governmental rather than non-governmental. This puts CSOs in an awkward – and sometimes dangerous – position and can also undermine their apolitical role.

This has led to the rise of a parallel civil society. So-called GONGOs are government-organized non-governmental organizations set up by the government or close allies and aimed at furthering their political interests. In this way, people loyal to those in power are rewarded and an image of good cooperation between CSOs and state institutions is portrayed internationally. The situation also creates the impression that there is support for the ruling party among CSOs,[42] while slush funds are in fact being established with public money.

It is reported that in some Western Balkan countries, a large share of government funds intended for civil society is actually distributed to GONGOs. This is not only a dishonest use of public money but also discredits CSOs in general, as it creates the impression among the public that NGOs are just pawns of certain parties or interest groups. CSO representatives interviewed for this report voiced concern about the growing importance of GONGOs in the WB6 region. However, they disagree on how to deal with the problem and are reluctant to openly challenge them, as they are afraid of being seen as 'just fighting over money'.[43]

Some degree of cooperation exists between civil society and the local and central government structures in all WB6 countries, and most CSOs see cooperation with state institutions as necessary to advance their initiatives. However, there is a fundamental lack of trust on both sides. Some CSOs regard the government as the problem, whereas CSOs are seen by some as traitors to the government and society.[44] This makes it difficult for CSOs to be the bridge they aspire to be between the public and the government.

As a result, dialogue between CSOs and the government is often facilitated by international bodies or donors who 'seek and insist on cooperation between civil society and state institutions'.[45] However, many of these encounters are mere window dressing, designed to demonstrate (not least to international partners) that governments interact with civil society;[46] there is seldom substantive follow-up.

Many CSOs said that they feel trapped in a dual relationship with their government, both from a financial and a moral perspective: on the one hand they work as opposition to the government or are the government's watchdog, but on the other they recognize that it is necessary to work with the government to affect change and advance common goals.

At lower levels, a key challenge is the high turnover of local government representatives and CSO staff, with many decision-makers appearing to be indifferent, or even antagonistic, to collaboration with CSOs. In some cases, positions have become entrenched to the point that one or both sides regard the other as 'the enemy', which is unfortunate given that fighting organized crime should be a shared goal. Such a relationship complicates operations for smaller organizations if they depend on grants that are in the hands of corrupt officials or structures that expect loyalty.[47] Interviewees noted that it is easier to build relationships and cooperate with lower-level employees of state institutions than with high-level officials involved in politics.[48] Furthermore, it was observed that service-providing NGOs have a better relationship with the government than watchdog CSOs, and youth centres reported the best relationship with various institutions. It is also interesting to notice that when public pressure on government policies increases, governments tend to reach out and improve their cooperation with CSOs.[49]

Journalists in the Western Balkans work in an increasingly dangerous environment. Above, a protest for the release from prison of investigative journalist Tomislav Kezarovski in Skopje, North Macedonia. *© Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images*

Freedom of media expression

Investigative journalists and independent media organizations are an essential part of civil society and play a key role in bringing organized crime to light and raising awareness among the public. Yet objective reporting is difficult, as media outlets are often linked to political parties and journalists sometimes practise self-censorship because of the significant security risks for themselves and their families. 'In a country where journalists are killed, it is difficult to talk about media freedom,' said a journalist from Montenegro.[50] A journalist from Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was reluctant to meet the GI-TOC team in person, as he receives threats daily.[51]

Although there have been only a few cases of CSOs directly being threatened by organized crime,[52] the situation is different for many journalists. For example, in November 2020, unknown perpetrators defaced the entrance to the building where Dinko Gruhonjić, the editor-in-chief of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, and his family live, spraying graffiti of hatred and national intolerance.[53] Another incident in 2020 involved Ana Lalić of the news portal Nova.rs (also in Vojvodina, Serbia) temporarily being detained for investigating the conditions at a hospital in Novi Sad during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.[54]

Governments throughout the region restrict media and the freedom of expression. There are various examples, such as the anti-defamation legal package in Albania, which, if passed by parliament, will regulate online media.[55] In Serbia, the government has tightened control over the distribution of information since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic[56] and journalists have been the target of verbal attacks by officials and pro-government media.[57] More than 120 attacks on journalists have been recorded from five of the six Western Balkan countries since the beginning of 2020.[58] In North Macedonia, the government created a register of online media to select which media outlets would receive permits to work during the curfews imposed as part of the COVID-19 response and be granted access to press conferences.[59] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the prosecution office announced that an investigation was being launched into the motives of journalists publishing negative information about their work.[60] Governments also restrict access to information for journalists by declaring it confidential.

Nevertheless, a small number of commercial media outlets continue to cover organized crime and corruption in the region. There are also several media organizations that not only do important investigative reporting but also support and train young journalists. Notable examples of cross-regional initiatives are the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network[61] and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).[62] KRIK, based in Belgrade and a member of the OCCRP, is one of the few CSOs from the region that focuses entirely on organized crime and corruption.

Although a lack of cooperation among CSOs hampers their collective efforts, the COVID-19 crisis has increased collaboration among different initiatives. Above, the Pomozimo Djeci youth centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
© Pomozimo Djeci

Unfortunately, there has been little cooperation among CSOs, or between NGOs, the media and academia. For example, few CSOs follow up on stories revealed by investigative journalists or follow a case in court after it appeared in the media.[63] Despite their knowledge of the local context and the community, CSOs are usually not consulted during academic field research activities and networks between academia and NGOs are rare.

A lack of solidarity among CSOs and even competition over limited resources were noted, with a clear disconnect highlighted between CSOs in major urban areas and those in smaller towns. When cooperation does exist, it often serves other purposes: CSO representatives from Serbia, for example, explained that they sometimes prefer not to work with community-based organizations yet 'do so to gain a competitive edge or score better in grant applications'.[64]

Donors have recently provided funds to international organizations (through their local chapters) to administer projects that were previously covered by CSOs based in the region. International donors also tend to support bigger and more established CSOs. These are then able to attract the most attention and more experienced people, which puts them in a better position to obtain future contracts. This creates a 'success to the successful' archetype, which deepens inequality in the sector. Furthermore, donors have asked capital-based organizations to form networks and even become mini-donors to local, smaller CSOs. Although this has been an important lifeline for many such smaller organizations, it has also widened the divide between small and big organizations, as the relationship is no longer a partnership but rather resembles that of donor and recipient. In contrast, large organizations have been burdened with increased administration.[65]

Despite these concerns, cooperation and solidarity do exist in times of crisis. 'Essentially we [civil society] function best when we are under pressure. Then I understand how much knowledge and strength exist in the civil sector. It is a pity that there is not more synergy, honesty and better connections between us,' explained a CSO representative from Montenegro.[66] CSO representatives from North Macedonia also reported a good working relationship among CSOs and with government institutions during the migrant crisis of 2015.[67]

It seems that lately, as the space for civil society is shrinking across the region and attacks on critical voices and CSOs increase, civil society and the media are once again moving closer together.

▲ Smuggling in illicit goods remains a serious concern across the region. *© Elvis Barukcic/AFP via Getty Images*

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LOCAL ORGANIZED CRIME TRENDS FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

Before taking a closer look at the role of civil society in strengthening resilience to organized crime, it is worth considering how organized crime manifests in communities and how communities perceive the problem. In this way, we can form a better understanding of why and how resilience can be strengthened.

Although organized crime is a significant problem in the Western Balkans, interviews conducted during this research revealed that CSOs working in the region have limited expertise in analysing and addressing the problem. Strikingly, several interlocutors dealing with issues related to illicit economies did not understand the meaning of the term 'organized crime' or argued that it is not present in their communities. Only during further discussion and with the aid of examples did they recognize the extent and impact of the problem on society. In contrast, others did show an in-depth knowledge of the problem in their local context but little understanding of how it relates to a broader ecosystem of crime in the country or the region, or how the problem could be addressed.

Many CSOs interviewed for this project are situated in so-called hotspots of organized crime – locations that are either at strategic geographical positions for trafficking such as crossroads, borders or capital cities, or in areas of socio-economic vulnerability that make them attractive to criminal groups.[68] Observations by some CSO representatives demonstrate the geography of crime in the region. For example, interviewees based in Saranda in southern Albania mentioned human smuggling

activities as one of their main concerns; another from Vlora, Albania, mentioned the illicit cultivation of cannabis; and CSO representatives from Struga in North Macedonia, the Karaceva area in Kosovo and Sapna in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlighted smuggling in their border regions.

Many CSOs are situated in hotspots of organized crime.

Hotspots are often places where drugs pass through, are repackaged or even produced. Illicit drug trafficking (cannabis, cocaine, heroin and synthetic drugs) remains one of the most lucrative criminal activities in the region and a pull factor for those who are frustrated by the economic outlook in the formal economy.

However, it appears that the Western Balkans is no longer 'just a transit region' but that local drug consumption is increasing. As one CSO representative from Struga, North Macedonia, explained: 'Until a few years ago, this region [the south-west of the country] was only a transit area, but today drugs are widespread and easily accessible to everyone. Drug addiction, especially among the youth, has increased but the authorities prefer to turn a blind eye.'[69] The GI-TOC research team heard similar comments in other towns and cities in the region from Novi Sad in Serbia, to Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kamza in Albania.

Research on organized crime in the Western Balkans tends to focus on the macro level of criminal markets and groups and the political economy of organized crime. However, the CSO representatives interviewed for this report had more local concerns, namely environmental crime, extortion and loan sharking, labour exploitation, hooliganism, money laundering in the construction industry and, above all, corruption. They were particularly concerned about the impact of these crimes on the safety of their communities and their work. One interviewee noted that 'getting mixed up with those issues in a country where there is no system to protect you as a citizen can be life-threatening'.[70] Interviewees from smaller communities raised concern about the increase in open violence, killings on the street and kidnapping. They spoke about a climate of fear, many murders remaining unresolved and how 'sometimes police are even scared to name the criminals killed in gang fights'.[71]

The overview in the following sections highlights the main issues related to organized crime that concern the CSOs that participated in the discussions and which were interviewed for this report.

Environmental crime

Environmental crime, including illegal logging, poaching and corruption related to natural resources, appears to be of particular concern in many communities. Environmental CSOs in Albania have reported a peak in wildlife crime such as poaching in recent years owing to the practice becoming more profitable (e.g. because of high prices for Balkan lynx).[72] Approval of a government moratorium against poaching in Albania in 2014 did not stop the problem, but instead led to the withdrawal of police who were previously monitoring the situation.[73] In North Macedonia, civil society report widespread illegal logging activities, which range from local criminal groups doing petty damage to syndicates working in close cooperation with the police and local politicians.[74] One CSO representative explained that the proceeds from logging are used, in part, to finance election campaigns.[75]

Human trafficking is particularly common in border areas, especially of sex workers. Here, a demonstration to end violence against sex workers in Skopje, North Macedonia. *© Robert Atanasovski/ AFP via Getty Images*

Labour exploitation, including sex work

Labour exploitation appears to be common in a number of large factories in North Macedonia and Albania (particularly in the clothing industry), with workers being forced to repay half of their salary to the company, leaving them with less than €150 per month.[76] Several CSOs in the region also work with female victims of human trafficking (especially sex workers). This type of crime is particularly common in border areas. Children forced to beg were also reported to be sexually exploited if they do not collect enough money.[77] Reports from Montenegro suggest that more women have been forced into prostitution since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.[78] Similarly, in May 2020, 16 people were arrested in Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, for prostitution of local women (and from the neighbouring countries) and drug and firearms trafficking.[79]

Extortion and loan sharking

Many businesses and organizations across communities continue to face extortion and loan sharking, problems that became well known in the aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the fall of communism in Albania. In Shkoder, Albania, small businesses are expected to pay approximately 3 000 Albanian lek (€25) per month for 'protection'.[80] In North Macedonia, interviewees reported that 'local sheriffs' extort money from 'every business that does not have political protection'[81] and in Bosnia and Herzegovina a well-known criminal gang active in Mostar and Trebinje is known for its racketeering activities.[82] A recent study in Nis, Serbia, showed that approximately 6% of respondents have had personal experience with loan sharking and 41% have heard about it from friends or relatives.[83] Many of those who recounted their experiences also shared that they had experienced physical violence or received verbal threats. They did not seek help from the relevant authorities, but asked local CSOs for help instead.[84]

Hooliganism and youth gangs in the region pose a risk to public safety, with members of hooligan groups sometimes connected to organized crime.
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Hooliganism and youth gangs

Local gangs linked to organized crime control different parts of a city in many communities. For example, in Laus, a neighbourhood close to Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina, villagers have to pay 'taxes' to cross into the adjacent neighbourhood.[85] Criminal groups are also often linked to football hooligans, politicians and controversial businessmen. Between January and September 2020, more than 10 hooligan incidents were recorded in Mostar, which led to considerable material damage and left several citizens injured.[86] Residents explained that when local football clubs (from the different sides of Mostar) play against each other, they best stay at home so as to not get caught up in the melee.[87] These incidents are often accompanied by the distribution of nationalist and right-wing propaganda, which is seldom prosecuted.

Many groups recruit their members among the youth, especially those who travel from rural areas to high schools in the city. Members of hooligan groups are sometimes also connected to organized crime and new recruits are initially introduced to dealing cannabis, pickpocketing and small robberies, and then later become involved in racketeering, loan sharking and dealing drugs.[88]

In Serbia, most people convicted of violent behaviour at sporting events or public gatherings are recidivists previously convicted for assault, theft, murder, animal abuse or illicit manufacturing, possession or trafficking of weapons or drugs.[89] There are also indications of youths attempting to start new criminal groups to control local drug trafficking activities or joining hooligan groups based in Belgrade or local 'ultras'.[90]

Money laundering and the urban mafia

Investment in construction and real estate has a long history of absorbing illegal monies in the Western Balkans, given that the industry is both economically important and poorly regulated.[91] Big apartment complexes are built on plots of land where small family houses stood for decades, sometimes by workers without legal work permits or at a very low price.[92]

Communities expressed frustration not only because of the practice but also because the property boom seldom results in affordable housing for local people or generates growth of the formal economy.

In fact, economic development in the Western Balkans has stagnated in recent years, with high

unemployment rates seen especially among the youth. Average wages continue to be low, yet real estate prices are spiking.[93] At the end of 2019, the average price of a residential apartment in Tirana, Albania, reached approximately €1 000 per square metre.[94] Property prices in Ohrid, North Macedonia, have also steadily risen over the past years and recently even surpassed prices in the capital, Skopje.[95] In addition, a recent study from Serbia showed that more than 84% of all real estate was sold for cash between January and May 2020.[96]

Corruption

The ecosystem of crime thrives where there is a close connection between business, crime and the government. Most of the CSO representatives interviewed during this research identified widespread corruption in their communities, the malfunctioning of institutions and the apathy of the public administration at all levels as significant concerns. This fog of impunity is often linked to other illicit activities, such as money laundering in construction or the misuse of natural resources. According to the Open Society Foundations, the Western Balkans spend an average of €7 billion annually on public procurement, of which €2 billion (approximately 30%) disappear because of corruption.[97] Political parties, local police and prosecutors are reported to often be selective in their approach against criminal groups.

Several CSOs in the region are engaged in monitoring municipalities' public procurement processes. Interviewees across communities in North Macedonia mentioned that it is an open secret that one apartment in a newly built complex should be allocated to the main advisor of the mayor in order to obtain a construction permit.[98] In Kosovo, several examples of construction being carried out without permits were described, including in the municipalities of Peja and Istog; several of these are currently being investigated in court because of alleged connections between businesses and public officials.[99] Transparency Serbia, which is closely monitoring the procurement of medical products and health equipment related to the COVID-19 crisis, has raised concerns about the concealment of contracts in Serbia.[100] Since the beginning of the COVID-19 response and the state of emergency in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than 410 public procurement contracts were issued or negotiated without proper notice.[101]

There is a pervasive feeling that corruption is part of the system. 'It's just the way things are,' explained a CSO representative from Bosnia and Herzegovina.[102] 'Corruption appears so entrenched in the system that even if one were to stand up to high-level corruption or organized crime, those at the top will always be protected by the system,'[103] said another from Kosovo.

Even CSOs are sometimes linked to corrupt practices. For example, the so-called International Association, a humanitarian NGO in North Macedonia, has recently been under investigation for fraud.[104] There are also several ongoing investigations against tax evasions of directors of CSOs across the region, for example in Montenegro[105] and also in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[106] Corruption cases involving CSOs damage the integrity of the entire sector and the public's trust in CSOs.[107]

It is impossible to assess the full impact of the ecosystem of crime in this report, but the examples highlighted here show that the effects are tangible at all levels. Poor economic development, money laundering, corruption, the widespread informal economy and now also the COVID-19 pandemic have increased inequality, pushing more people to emigrate or become involved in criminal activities. 'One of the biggest problems with our society is that it is so easy to find a way to become part of crime and/or corruption. You see the cake and you want a piece of it.'[108]

STRENGTHENING RESILIENT ACTORS

▲ Understanding how organized crime is part of the local culture and how it affects the community's lives is vital.
© Vlora Youth Center

The long-term and structural damage caused by organized crime and criminal governance in the Western Balkans requires a holistic response, including by civil society. Civil society actors become especially important when state responses are ineffective, or they even enable and exacerbate the problem. In such challenging environments, CSOs have an important role in strengthening resilience in their communities and need to stand together.[109]

The community-resilience approach involves understanding how different forms of organized crime are part of the local culture and how they affect local lives. It is also pivotal to identify the vulnerabilities and risks faced by communities, to highlight the factors that make communities withstand the adversities, and strengthen key actors and structures.[110] Community resilience can be a transformative process of strengthening the capacity of people and communities to effectively prevent, respond to and recover from the shocks and stressors of pervasive criminal governance.[111]

Strong civic responses to organized crime and corruption have historically not been common in the Western Balkans. Although most civil society actors in the region are passionate about their communities and committed to contributing to their development, many lack the capacity, knowledge and experience to counter organized crime in a coherent manner and within criminalized systems. CSOs often feel alone in facing the threat posed by organized crime. Community-based organizations, especially in smaller towns and villages where there are few resilience actors, feel exposed and are often reluctant to raise their concerns. Many of them are not part of national, regional or international networks and are vulnerable to the pressures of local governments or criminal groups. Security risks are high, while attention from donors is low. In addition, many feel a sense of helplessness, perceiving the challenge to be too

great. In interviews, we heard sentiments such as 'it is like fighting against windmills'[112] or a sense of fatalism 'that nothing can be done to change the status quo, that it is part of the system'.[113] Another respondent said: 'If you want to change something, don't waste your time with civil society, go into politics.'[114]

It is difficult, and sometimes not advisable, for local CSOs to confront the challenge of organized crime head-on. After all, that is the job of the police. However, as organized crime thrives where there is vulnerability, CSOs can help to counteract vulnerability by strengthening local resilience. This includes working with youth groups, addressing issues of drug use, post-prison reintegration, anti-corruption efforts, addressing environmental crime, working with marginalized groups, and responding to violence against women. These issues not only are important in themselves but can also help to reduce vulnerability to organized crime.

Building a constituency, creating community resilience and making a difference take time. For example, the first CSO in Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was founded nearly 20 years ago, with the aim of working with the increasing number of Roma settling in the area. Today there are 13 active organizations, with a growing volunteer basis, raising awareness of community problems, and their work has started yielding results.[115]

The power of social media

Social media has become a powerful tool for engaging with the youth. Some young people in the Western Balkans find flashy celebrity lifestyles seen in social media posts attractive. For example, a rapper whose lyrics refer to cannabis trafficking and glorify a life of crime has 1.6 million followers on Instagram. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, profiles of several well-known criminals or people close to criminal groups attract more than 500 000 followers.[116] 'Being a criminal is becoming in,' commented an activist from Prijedor in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[117]

CSOs across the region have recognized the power of social media. Many of them use Facebook as their primary tool of communication in their communities and Instagram is also being increasingly used, although the number of followers is small. In Serbia, however, even when numbers are added up across all CSOs working against organized crime and corruption, they have only around 500 000 followers – more than a million less than the rap artist. In Montenegro, CSOs have less than 100 000 followers. In Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a journalist who has a good relationship with the community reaches 55 000 followers through social media.[118]

Young people are attracted to the criminal culture through social media. *© Snowyns/Dreamstime.com*

Community resilience strengthens the capacity of communities to effectively prevent, respond to and recover from a pervasive criminal governance.

Each community has a different approach to countering the type of organized crime and corruption that affects them. But in each case, successful activities are those that are creatively tailored to the local community and involve the community at all levels of the process. They focus not only on what the community is against (such as organized crime, corruption and political clientelism) but also on what the community stands for (including matters such as integrity, transparency, accountability and good governance). Their activities may include cultural events, debate clubs and open discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, as well as environmental projects that specifically focus on the sustainability of the community and its environment. Certain entry points have proven to be successful across all WB6 countries:

- **Youth organizations:** Youth centres and their staff are generally well respected in societies and are often also supported by local government structures. These organizations can positively affect young people's lives, as they offer a space to spend the time and get children off the streets. This makes it more difficult for gangs to recruit new members and also provides alternative narratives for those already engaged in organized crime or who grew up in a criminal environment.[119] Sport and recreation also empower young people and put them in contact with positive role models.

  Many interviewees also highlighted the importance of working with young people on challenging and changing narratives from the past and raising awareness of organized crime and interethnic relations. Other organizations focus on working with juvenile drug users and former convicts, who are at risk of being recruited by criminal organizations.[120] In some countries so-called youth weeks are organized, during which community values are promoted through open discussions and debates, outdoor events and sustainability activities (e.g. the cleaning of public spaces).[121]

- **Social enterprises:** The concept of social enterprises is fairly new in the Western Balkans. It usually consists of two elements: a commercial element, such as a coffee shop, hostel or other revenue-generating business, and a social element that focuses on the well-being of the community. Such enterprises create an important link between the private and civil society sectors, provide staff and volunteers with work experience and create opportunities to make the enterprise financially more sustainable. However, the national legal framework can complicate the set-up and operation of a social enterprise as such ventures need to pay additional taxes compared with normal businesses.[122]

  In Serbia, a social enterprise in Novi Sad receives funds from its transportation and moving company,[123] and in Albania some CSOs receive funds from cafes, kindergartens or payment from other services. There, community-level engagement is linked to community-level support. The C.A.U.S.E project in Albania deserves special mention: it is run on properties confiscated from organized crime and therefore helps to show the benefits of the legal economy, while, at the same time, standing up to organized crime.[124]

- **Service providers:** Many CSOs in the region provide important services, both to victims of organized crime (e.g. various forms of hotlines and shelters) and also to former perpetrators (e.g. in the form of post-penal assistance). Reintegration,

Networks between CSOs help to build solidarity and improve the knowledge base, and so increase the impact of civil society.

including of those who served time abroad, continues to be challenging owing to the difficulty of managing expectations among people who were attracted to a get-rich-quick lifestyle, stigmatization and limited opportunities in the formal economy.

Walk-in centres for drug users can help to limit harm and provide important support services. For example, in Serbia and Montenegro, a network of offices supports users with a wide-array of services, ranging from the distribution of syringes to psychological support and free consultations with doctors. Educational programmes and awareness campaigns are also offered through this network.[125]

- **Local media and research organizations:** Local media organizations form an integral part of a community's response against organized crime and corruption as they increase access to information on this topic. CSOs dealing with organized crime often depend on information from open sources, but to hinder these sources, the government goes after the media. Many media organizations not only increase awareness of organized crime and corruption but also provide platforms for community debate and train young journalists in new investigative methods, including for financial investigations or following court procedures.[126]

Representatives of CSOs consulted for this report reflected critically on how to improve resilience across the Western Balkans and activities that could contribute to their community work. As a first step, they noted the importance of establishing a national (or even a regional) database to identify existing and potential donors and local counterparts working on similar issues. They also stressed the importance of building stronger and more sustainable networks among civil society actors both nationally and regionally, as well as of strategic partnerships with other sectors.

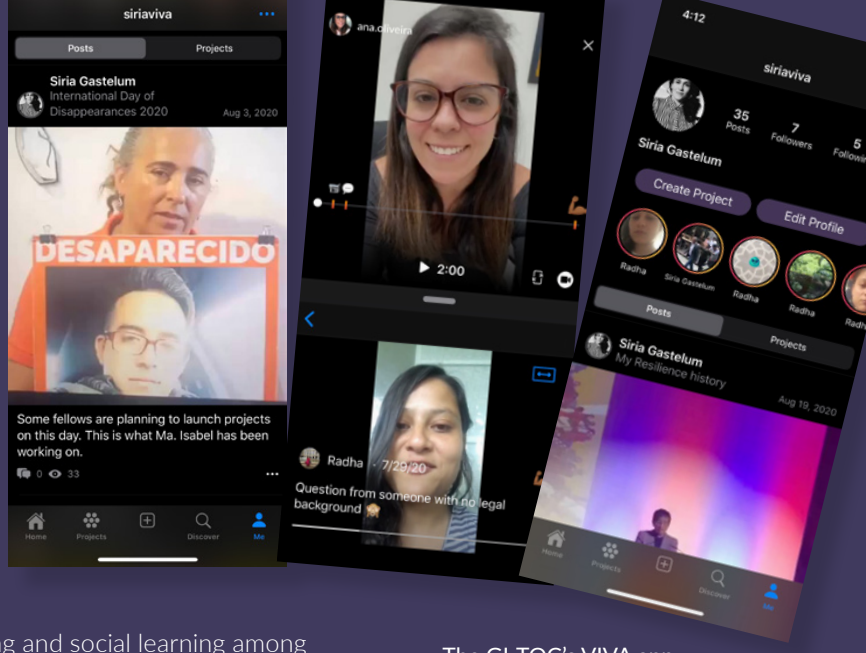
Respondents noted that there is considerable scope for engaging more closely with the private sector in the Western Balkans, which is often harmed by crime and corruption (e.g. through extortion or money laundering) yet does not have a tradition of working with CSOs. Such partnerships would not only help to diversify the income of CSOs but would also enable partners to share experiences and work together to deal with a common threat.

The importance of civil society networks is not so much to reach a consensus but to have a platform where ideas and experiences relating to common goals can be shared.[127] A greater feeling of solidarity and security can also be born from a network of like-minded organizations. Furthermore, if civil society is to increase its impact, its efforts must be scaled up. At the moment, only a few CSO networks address the problem of organized crime and corruption and those that exist are often project dependent. As a result, when a project ends, so does the network. Networks between CSOs – whether at a local or central level – help to build solidarity and improve the knowledge base, and so increase the impact of civil society. In this context, both the Preugovor Coalition (focusing on chapters 23 and 24 of EU accession)[128] and the Coalition for Oversight of Public Finances (which focuses on procurement)[129] in Serbia should be mentioned. Networks between all parts of civil society (i.e. NGOs, media, academia, religious institutions and unions) should be encouraged at both a national and a regional level. In moving forward, it will be key that local resilience actors also connect with their global partners.

Building a global network of resilient actors

In 2020, the GI-TOC piloted VIVA, a secure social media platform that connects community resilience initiatives from around the world. It is a video-based application where community projects can upload stories from the ground, thereby documenting the impact of organized crime in affected communities, but, more importantly, also their responses to it. The app enables capacity building and social learning among resilience actors, who can also coordinate activities together.

With the goal of connecting local CSOs with partners outside the region, the GI-TOC is currently working on expanding VIVA's functionality to allow its users to connect to global networks and policymakers as well as to the GI-TOC's global network of more than 500 experts dedicated to seeking new and innovative strategies and responses to organized crime.



The GI-TOC's VIVA app seeks to connect community resilience initiatives from around the world.

Networking also strengthens civil society's position with the government. All civil society representatives interviewed agreed that there must be room for cooperation with both local and national governments and that CSOs need to be involved at all stages of addressing organized crime and corruption, namely prevention, detection and sanctioning. Creating better networks with law enforcement was also noted as being of particular importance. However, interviewees also stressed that such partnerships need to grow organically and should not be imposed by external (international) actors.

Building networks, increasing knowledge-sharing activities across CSOs, creating solidarity among strategic actors and building a large constituency are key requirements for building resilience against organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans. However, participants also stressed that changing the culture of impunity is an essential step and to show people, especially young people, that becoming involved in crime has dire consequences. Low penalties for criminal acts not only serve as scant deterrent to repeat the crimes but also discourage activists to stand up for the fight against organized crime and corruption.

The importance of youth education was also highlighted during discussions. In many schools in the Western Balkans, curricula do not include discussions on organized crime and corruption or even ethics. It is important to teach children from a young age what crime is and why it is harmful to society. One of the participants noted: 'They think painting school walls with graffiti is a crime, but believe that planting cannabis is okay.'[130] Teachers, parents and community leaders can help young people to develop self-confidence and self-respect to strengthen their own resilience against illicit activities.

▲ More coordinated action by civil society is needed to promote sustainable development and good governance in the Western Balkans. Above, protestors in Serbia. © *Milos Miskov/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

The GI-TOC's experience of engaging with community actors all over the world has shown that individuals and community groups are able to build their individual and collective capacity to respond to and recover from organized crime. This report shows that courageous and committed CSOs across the Western Balkans are doing the same, but would benefit from further support to help strengthen communities' resilience.

In many parts of the region, there is a systemic lack of coordination and solidarity among CSOs and no means of disseminating and sharing successes and good practices. Knowledge on local trends and key issues of organized crime and corruption is limited and often biased. In addition, civil society sometimes lacks awareness about the links between organized crime and the core issues of social protection and development, which creates a structural barrier to building resilience against organized crime.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated government responses, such as restrictions on social gatherings and imposing curfews, have significantly hampered community engagement by civil society at a time when it is badly needed, particularly to support the most vulnerable. Many CSO representatives, including some who contributed to this study, have fallen ill and could not carry out their work. Others switched to using online platforms, but got little response from their constituency. Several victim protection organizations could not handle the spike in consultations submitted via email or telephone. The full extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social development and economic outlook is still to be determined, but it is already clear that there will be an increased need for the types of work described in this report to strengthen resilience against organized crime in the post-COVID environment.

At the national resilience dialogues in mid-November 2020 and the cross-regional dialogue in mid-December, participants formulated a six-point strategy for the way forward.

1. The issue of organized crime and corruption needs to be brought closer to the community, related topics should be demystified and their impact should be explained in an accessible manner. Although the space for civil society is shrinking, civil society needs to continue their work not only by identifying organized crime and corruption but also by raising collective awareness of the associated problems and their impact. For this purpose, civil society needs to be creative in using tools such as social media to promote integrity, transparency, accountability and good governance.
2. Organized crime not only affects local communities but also extends into the regional and global space. As working together makes civil society stronger, networks should be based on strategic partnerships built across communities, countries, sectors and levels of government. These networks need to be reinforced and made more sustainable to optimize the impact of organizations' work. Different parts of civil society – i.e. the media, think tanks, community CSOs, service-oriented organizations and academia – need to find a way to cooperate, draw on one another's expertise and follow up on earlier work. Topics of common interest and possible entry points for connecting with the private sector should also be explored.
3. CSOs need to find a balance between constructively criticizing governments in order to hold them accountable and being open to engagement with governments to effect change. International actors could act as a bridge. Channels of dialogue need to remain open between CSOs and the government, however difficult this may sometimes be.
4. International donors should be more sensitive to the challenges of CSOs, particularly smaller organizations based outside of big cities. For example, they should be more transparent in their calls for application, better understand local conditions (including limited capacity for project administration, limited language skills and low absorption capacity) and ensure that support is needs driven. Donors should consider longer-term grants, which would help to enhance sustainability and strengthen resilience, and include civil society throughout the project cycle (from design to implementation). Finally, donors should support CSOs during implementation of projects related to fighting organized crime and corruption to demonstrate solidarity and increase the risks and political costs to those who pressure CSOs.
5. CSOs should formulate and communicate messages more clearly to shape the discourse on organized crime and they need to be present in communities' daily lives to optimize their reach. They should lead by example, be role models in their communities and strive to make the civil society sphere more attractive.

6. CSOs should initiate misdemeanour or criminal proceedings before the relevant state authorities after investigative journalists break a story, supported by relevant evidence of crime and corruption. The efforts of CSOs to raise awareness of the consequences of corruption, regardless of the extent, can help to prevent the perception of impunity.

In conclusion, this report gives insight into the important role of civil society in strengthening resilience against organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkan region. Moving forward, a better understanding of local forms of organized crime and corruption and their impact on the community is needed, as well as more coordinated action by civil society actors. To promote sustainable development, good governance and regional cooperation across the Western Balkan countries, change agents who can positively influence the criminal governance paradigm, both at local and national levels, need to speak up and increase awareness of the issues. Although CSOs face many challenges in the region, solidarity and networks can help them become stronger, together.

NOTES

1 The WB6 countries include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. References to Kosovo in this report are made without prejudice to positions on status, and are in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

2 Ian Tennant, What is resilience? Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, p. 7; The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Resilience in Sinaloa: Community Responses to Organized Crime, August 2017, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/resilience-in-sinaloa/.

3 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Resilience in Sinaloa: Community Responses to Organized Crime, August 2017, p. 6, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/resilience-in-sinaloa/.

4 For more information on the Resilience Fund, please visit www.globalinitiative.net/resiliencefund. Also refer to: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Rolling back criminal governance. The first year of the Resilience Fund, https://resiliencefund.globalinitiative.net/the-first-year/.

5 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, The UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.

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8 The organization identified is KRIK (https://www.krik.rs/en/).

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10 Samir Kajosevic, Adopted laws trigger new fears for media freedom in Montenegro, 28 July 2017, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/28/adopted-laws-trigger-new-fears-for-media-freedom-in-montenegro/.

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13 United States Agency for International Development, 2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: For Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, 23rd edition, October 2020, page 8f, https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-csosi-2019-report-europe-eurasia.pdf.

14 This is based on feedback from interviews and analysis of the respective laws in the WB6 countries, including (a) Albania: Law on non-profit organizations (nos 8788, 78/83,1); (b) Bosnia and Herzegovina: Law on associations and foundations (nos 32/01, 42/03, 63/08, 76/11 and 94/16); (c) Kosovo: Law on freedom of association in non-governmental organizations (no. 06/L-043); (d) Montenegro: Law on non-governmental organisations (nos 39/2011 and 37/2017); (e) North Macedonia: Law on associations and foundations (nos 52/2010, 135/2011 and 55/2016); (f) Serbia: Law on associations (nos 51/2009, 99/2011 and 44/2018).

15 Law on anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism (no. 9917), dated 19.05.2008, and the consecutive law (no. 10 391), dated 03.03.2011, as well as the law 33/2019 on the changes and amendments of the law number 9917.

16 Insights from interviews with CSO representatives conducted in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2020.

17 Interview with a civil society representative in Belgrade, Serbia, October 2020.

18 It is important to note that the numbers given here were provided by national registries, but the data available is often not updated. Where registries exist, they include all kinds of associations, including sports clubs, art foundations, etc. Informal organizations are excluded from government statistics. It is also important to note that the registration of CSOs is not mandatory in all countries (e.g. in Serbia, for which the number of CSOs is likely to be higher).

19 Interview with a civil society representative in Bihac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 2020.
20 Agency for the Support of Civil Society, Database of registered NGOs, http://www.amshc.gov.al/web/ojf/.
21 This analysis is based on the results of a thorough mapping process conducted between September and November 2020 as part of this project.
22 Serbia appears to be an exception, as 63% of CSOs are primarily financed by income from sold goods, products, services and membership fees and only 15% of organizations receive funds from international donors, including the EU. See: IPSOS Strategic Marketing and Dubravka Velat, CSO sector in Serbia in 2019: Assessment of the situation in the civil society organisation sector in Serbia, Representative Office of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation SRB, 2019, pp. 14–15, 82, https://act.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CSO-Sector-in-Serbia-2019_Full-study_FINAL.pdf.
23 Partners for Albania, Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, 2019 Report, p. 16, https://partnersalbania.org/publication/monitoring-matrix-on-enabling-environment-for-civil-society-development-country-report-for-albania-2/.
24 Other concerns voiced by interviewees included the preference of donors to work with counterparts they previously worked with and limited opportunities for smaller organizations (with no international track record) to apply.
25 An interviewee in the Una-Sana canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina, explained that it is almost impossible to get funds for projects that are not migrant related. Interview with a civil society representative from the Una-Sana canton, October 2020.
26 Statement at the national resilience dialogue in Belgrade, Serbia, on 13 November 2020.
27 Interview with a civil society representative from Mitrovica, Kosovo, October 2020.
28 Interview with a journalist in Podgorica, Montenegro, October 2020.
29 Interview with a civil society representative in Shtip, North Macedonia, October 2020.
30 Interview with a civil society representative in Belgrade, Serbia, October 2020.
31 This includes both international and local donors.
32 It is reasonable to assume that this also affects the quality of their work. Statement at the national resilience dialogue in Podgorica, Montenegro, on 19 November 2020.
33 An interviewee from Mostar explained: 'During my previous work as a bouncer in a nightclub I got important experience and insights into local trends and organized criminal groups.' Interview with a civil society representative from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 2020.
34 A civil society representative explained that 'they [salaries] are not bad and even comparable to the public sector as they reach between €400 and €800'. Interview with a civil society representative in Pristina, Kosovo, October 2020.
35 Srđan Puhalo and Stefan Vukojević, Kako građani Bosne i Hercegovine opažaju nevladin sektor? Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/12387.pdf; Prism Research, Socio-economic perceptions of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Union and United Nations Development Programme, May/June 2017, https://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/library/publications/young-people-in-bih-share-their-socio-economic-perceptions-and-e.html.
36 Interviews with civil society representatives from across the region, October 2020.
37 Statement at the national resilience dialogue in Tirana, Albania, 16 November 2020.
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