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Right Goals, Wrong Tools?
Civil Society Empowerment in the EU Accession Process

by Natasha Wunsch

Summary Civil society organizations (CSOs) have the potential to serve as important domestic agents of change. One of the European Commission's declared aims for countries aspiring to join the European Union is the empowerment of civil society throughout the accession process. This was a lesson learned from the previous enlargement toward Central and Eastern Europe, which was dominated by executive actors and saw only patchy implementation of adopted reforms. The Commission has sought to strengthen the involvement of CSOs in political processes by building their internal capacities and fostering an enabling environment for their operation. Nonetheless, both empirical evidence and the very setup of the EU's support suggest that the Commission struggles to move beyond a purely instrumental use of civil society empowerment. Croatia's accession process illustrates the limitations of the Commission's current approach. The recent addition of a more political dimension of civil society support is welcome, but further steps are needed to strengthen CSOs as active partners in the policy-making process. This paper concludes by proposing seven concrete steps that the Commission should take, from further strengthening the political dimension of civil society support and insisting on the involvement of CSOs in membership negotiating processes to supporting ongoing CSO initiatives on the ground.

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Introduction

Countries aspiring to membership in the European Union are required to undergo thorough transformation as part of the accession process.[1] Meeting all EU membership criteria has become more challenging than ever. Not only have EU standards evolved, but the gap between those standards and the current realities in candidate countries is also growing. Moreover, enthusiasm within the EU for enlargement is declining as the EU faces difficulties both on the economic front and in terms of uneven member state performance. Rather than countering member states' "enlargement fatigue" with increased efforts to demonstrate their own readiness to enter the EU, candidate states have mirrored the EU's disengagement with "reform fatigue." For the countries of the Western Balkans, the accession process has been dragging on for over a decade.[2] Moreover, the new president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has declared that there will be an "enlargement pause" under his mandate. With no entry imminent, finding alternative ways to foster change is crucial. It is in this context that the EU's support for civil society in accession countries merits closer examination.

Support for civil society has emerged as the cornerstone of a more comprehensive approach to EU enlargement over the past decade. First mentioned in a communication on Turkey in 2004,[3] the Commission's focus on developing civil society was extended to Croatia and the remaining Western Balkan countries the following year.[4] The Enlargement Strategy of 2007–08 underlined the need "to strengthen civil society bodies and their role in the political process."[5] This push for civil society empowerment in the accession process reflects a more general desire inside the EU to make decision-making more transparent and to foster "participatory democracy" both within the EU and in its engagement with third countries.[6] With civil society promotion a core element of the European Neighborhood Policy and the EU's external relations, insights from the Western Balkans are relevant beyond the enlargement setup and can serve as a test case scenario for tools that might be deployed in other geographic areas.[7]

The need to enlarge the circle of actors involved in the accession process is a direct lesson of the enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007, during which twelve mostly Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU. Despite being hailed as an historic reunification of Europe, the enlargement also left a bitter aftertaste: unfinished reforms and a modernization process driven essentially by elite executive actors.[8] Both legislative and non-institutional actors remained marginalized, despite the fact that their participation had the potential to forge a deeper and more sustainable transformation of their respective countries. The disappointing performance of Bulgaria and Romania – and, even more worrying, the recent democratic backslide in Hungary – confirmed the need to rethink the nature of the accession process.

The Commission's approach to civil society is still evolving. Croatia's recent experience – as the first accession country to fall within the scope of the Commission's more inclusive enlargement policy – offers a good occasion to take stock of the achievements and shortcomings of the EU's support for civil society in the enlargement context. How successful has the EU been so far in empowering civil society throughout the accession process? And how can the EU ensure that its efforts to transform relations between domestic policy-makers and civil society actors are sustainable beyond the accession date?

This assessment is based on the analysis of documents relating to civil society published either in Brussels or by official and non-institutional actors in the accession countries. Empirical insights were also collected through fieldwork conducted in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Brussels between August 2013 and October 2014.[9]
The analysis addresses the two different levels of the EU's support for civil society: the domestic level and the EU level. In the (potential) candidate countries themselves, EU policy has evolved from a focus on capacity building

into an increasingly political approach that seeks to shape the institutional environment of CSOs and improve state-CSO relations. At the EU level, the Commission directly consults CSOs to gain insight into the situation on the ground and to offer a model of best practice to national governments. Still, the example of Croatia points to some important shortcomings in the EU's approach, most notably when it comes to using the accession process strategically as a means of empowering civil society actors in the long term. The analysis concludes with concrete recommendations for how to further improve EU support for civil society in accession countries.

1. Evolving Support for Civil Society at the Domestic Level

The EU's policy of civil society support in the accession process started out as a reaction to the unsatisfactory results of purely executive-driven reforms, and has undergone a number of adjustments and refinements since its inception. The 2007 enlargement package made civil society development a key priority for EU accession, elevating improvements in this area to a political criterion.[10] After an initial focus on strengthening the internal capacities of CSOs, the European Commission began placing emphasis on improving the environment in which CSOs operate. Most recently, efforts to streamline support for civil society now tackle state-civil society relations as a crucial link between these two dimensions.

1.1 Capacity-building and technical support

In addition to recognizing civil society as a political criteria for accession, the Commission's 2007–08 Enlargement Strategy announced the launch of a specific Civil Society Facility to provide various forms of support. These included capacity-building, exchange of experiences between EU-level organizations and CSOs, and direct project grants.[11] A large portion of technical support is coordinated through the TACSO project (Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organizations), which has offices in each of the capitals and acts as training hub and facilitator for establishing collaboration between CSOs from the region and member states. In terms of direct grants to CSOs, 44.5 million euros were made available for regional and country projects in Turkey and the Western Balkans in 2014, and 24.65 million euros are slated for 2015.[12]

One visible impact of the EU's efforts has been the undeniable professionalization of the civil society sector throughout the region. A large number of organizations have begun to work on accession-related issues and to design projects that correspond to the key priorities identified by the EU for each candidate country. While this serves the Commission's purpose of strengthening non-state actors that are able to feed into its ongoing evaluation of reform progress made on the ground, the strong involvement of the EU in civil society development brings with it a set of less desirable consequences.

To begin with, EU grants have become a major funding source for CSOs, especially as international donors increasingly withdraw from the Western Balkans region. This has led to a streamlining of organizations and a strategic orientation that mirrors the EU's agenda more than it reflects domestic needs. Organizations often adapt their activities to the current priorities set by the EU, leading to sudden shifts in focus or to an overly broad scope of action that reduces the depth of expertise CSOs can bring to the table. The multiplication of organizations sharing a similar focus and approach within each country frequently leads to energy lost in bickering among organizations – at the expense of creating constructive input for the reform process.[13]

In addition, the double function of the EU as the key donor and major reference point to back up CSOs' policy recommendations also affects the positioning of these organizations within society. Contrary to the participatory democracy model that sees CSOs as a link between a complex policy-making process and the average citizen, CSOs are becoming increasingly alienated from their original constituencies. Not only does the bureaucratic application procedure for EU-funded projects absorb a significant amount of human resources, but this situation is accentuated by the fact that the bulk of EU financial support is project-based. CSO staff must therefore juggle multiple projects simultaneously in order to ensure the organizations' survival, and time-consuming fundraising activities leave little space for engagement with the broader population. The initial hope that CSOs could both inform citizens about progress in the accession process and feed their concerns into the policy-making process has been largely disappointed. Instead, CSOs active at the policy level are often perceived as a sort of parallel elite disconnected from the general population, which has raised questions regarding the legitimacy of any request formulated by them on behalf of a larger group.[14]

Overall, the EU's approach to civil society is criticized as being overly driven by accession rather than geared toward the demands formulated on the ground. Both the strengthening of a small number of already well-established organizations and the priorities defined through calls for applications and training offers correspond more

closely to the Commission's immediate desire for civil society accompany the membership negotiations. This can run counter to the more long-term objective of creating a sustainable civil society able to feed constructively into the general policy-making process at the national level.

1.2 Creating an "enabling environment"

Creating an "enabling environment" for the work of CSOs is the second pillar of the Commission's efforts to enhance civil society involvement, alongside directing technical and financial support to these organizations. The concept – understood as the existence of supporting institutions and formal provisions for consultations at the national level – has in recent years become a major focus of EU assessments. Ensuring a favorable framework within which CSOs can evolve is the logical counterpart to enhancing their internal capacities.

The 2010–11 Enlargement Strategy first expressed the intent to tackle the formal interactions between the state and civil society, calling for "public consultation on policy initiatives and draft laws [to] become the general principle."[15] Civil society development and, most crucially, the dialogue between CSOs and state governments were thus recognized as a horizontal policy measure worthy of separate evaluation in the annual progress reports. Including this issue in the EU's regular evaluations sent an important signal to governments that the Commission was interested in seeing improvements in the legal and institutional framework in which CSOs operate.

On occasion, the EU has exerted direct political pressure to foster advancements in this area. In the case of Montenegro, for example, the improvement of consultation mechanisms for civil society was one of the ten key priorities the country had to meet in order to open formal accession negotiations.[16] Coming on top of significant domestic advocacy efforts in this area, the Commission's statement was followed by the adoption of two important decrees detailing the government's obligation to cooperate with CSOs and spelling out the required consultation procedures for adopting all new laws, by-laws, and strategic documents. Similarly, the opening of the Serbian Governmental Office for Civil Society in 2011 was largely a result of the EU's insistence that such a body be created, and both the head of the EU Delegation and various member state ambassadors have repeatedly shielded its director against attempts to replace her by less committed persons closer to the governing party.[17] Moreover, experts funded by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) were the driving force behind the recently adopted guidelines for consultations with civil society in Serbia.[18]

Despite these important advancements at the formal level, both previous accessions and the experience of civil society actors in the current candidate countries show that the introduction of formal procedures alone is generally not enough to change the practice of policy making. While consultations may be more frequent, they are still widely perceived as ornamental, with CSO input typically disregarded at the decision-making stage or even sought only once a document has been finalized.[19] The EU's increasingly vocal political support for civil society should therefore include fostering a fruitful climate for including civil society that would allow such practice to become a constructive part of the policy-making process rather than a mere legal obligation.

1.3 Streamlining support for civil society: political culture as third pillar

The EU's two most recent enlargement packages show efforts to streamline its policy toward civil society. In 2013, the Commission's strategy for the upcoming year mentioned for the first time that "a stronger role for civil society is key" when it comes to improving the democratic functioning of institutions.[20] The latest enlargement package goes even further, introducing a unified approach to civil society across all accession countries. Each individual country progress report therefore contains the sentence that "an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and should be recognized and treated as such by the state institutions."[21] This statement acknowledges both the democratizing potential of including civil society and establishes the need for a more proactive approach by state institutions as a criterion for future assessments of candidate countries' performance.

The new set of guidelines for the support of civil society in the 2014–20 period (adopted in October 2013) similarly emphasizes the role of civil society as "a crucial component for any democracy."[22] In addition to insisting on the two well-established dimensions of strengthening internal CSO capacities and creating a "conducive environment," the guidelines add changing relations between CSOs and governments as a third objective of civil society support in the enlargement context.[23] A monitoring matrix spelling out concrete indicators of progress was included as an annex to the document. This confirms the Commission's intention to make progress in the area of civil society more measurable in the future, enhancing its importance as one of the political criteria for accession.[24]

In formal terms, the guidelines provide a very useful framework for the EU's support of civil society, spanning all three dimensions of civil society empowerment:

internal capacities, institutional framework, and improved state-civil society relations. At present, however, their non-binding character means that national governments are in no way compelled to adhere to them. Rhetorical pressure is therefore the only means by which the EU can push governments to fulfill the objectives. This reduces the likely effectiveness of the guidelines, especially when it comes to the key element of improving the political culture that underlies relations between state-level actors and non-institutional players seeking to provide input into the policy-making process.

Here the EU can provide a model to national governments on how to effectively associate CSOs through consultative procedures that are mutually beneficial for both those actors formally in charge of decision-making and outside players seeking to provide input into such processes.

2. Consultations at the EU Level: Between Empowerment and Instrumentalization

Parallel to its efforts to foster changes for CSOs at the domestic level, the EU has deepened its own engagement with civil society actors. In previous accession rounds, bilateral interactions between the EU and the candidate state governments tended to dominate the negotiation process. The result was frequently a one-sided picture of government compliance; the EU had few means of checking the extent to which adopted legislation was implemented on the ground. In the Western Balkans, the EU has consistently sought to involve CSOs as sources of information for its regular assessments of the situation in (potential) candidate countries.

Initially established on an ad hoc basis, CSO consultations have since become a regular part of the EU's efforts to evaluate progress in the different candidate countries. They involve both the EU Delegations on the ground and the Directorate General (DG) in Brussels. Beyond providing the EU with insights from within the countries, however, the Commission's consultations with CSOs also send a message to national governments: it is absolutely crucial to involve civil society actors. To serve this purpose effectively, however, the Commission's current consultation procedures require important adjustments.

2.1 Deepening EU engagement with CSOs in accession countries

EU consultations with CSOs already began tentatively in 2006, when the Commission started seeking their input on specific issues. Originally launched in Brussels, the consultation process has become increasingly formalized and has been moved down from the DG Enlargement level to the level of the EU Delegations. The elaboration of the annual progress reports now foresees CSO input at different moments throughout the year, with open calls for comments on various areas defined by the Commission. An initial round of CSO input is sought in early spring by the Delegations, which formulate a first draft of the progress report. A limited number of CSOs – typically one per country, addressing a topic set by the Commission – are then invited to Brussels in June to elucidate their positions. Evidence-based assessments are strongly encouraged, as is language that reflects the Commission's own formulations.

Interestingly, this consultation cycle was formalized less as the result of a strategic decision on the part of the Commission than in response to demands from regional civil society actors, who wanted to be heard in Brussels. The Open Society Foundations (OSF) were particularly vocal in calling for more established procedures, both through their Brussels office and their local branches in the region. To this day, given the limited funding for CSOs to visit Brussels, the OSF covers the expenses of several CSO representatives travelling to Brussels for the June consultations.

In addition to the formal cycle of consultations, EU Delegations on the ground maintain regular contacts with CSOs in their respective countries to discuss specific issues throughout the year. Several of the stronger CSOs additionally keep in touch with desk officers in Brussels, frequently sending them input on current topics and sharing both success stories and particular concerns with them. CSOs generally tend to be satisfied with the accessibility of both the EU Delegations and the country units in DG Enlargement, even though there is a general feeling that the Commission assessments, when they are eventually published, tend to be more positive than CSO impressions warrant.

On the whole, the Commission's principle of leading by example has merit. Still, the EU's current approach remains overly instrumental in that CSOs are used first and foremost as sources of information rather than as partners, as they would be in an approach that truly reflects the participatory democracy model. The Commission sets the priorities, with limited space for CSOs to bring their own concerns to the table. For EU-level consultations to serve as a fully valid model for national governments, the partnership dimension of the exchange needs stronger emphasis.

2.2 Establishing CSOs as partners: Improving feedback structures

The consultation process at the EU level offers CSOs a crucial opportunity to seek EU backing for their claims, and CSOs throughout the Western Balkans are increasingly aware of the added leverage that EU support offers them. Nevertheless, feedback from the EU on CSO input is often lacking. Moreover, the setup of the consultations is merely bilateral rather than including government officials from accession countries. Both of these factors limit the ability of such consultations to serve as examples of civil society inclusion in domestic policy-making processes.

Providing feedback on CSO comments is a vital way for the EU to show that it values their efforts. In both Croatia and Montenegro, such a feedback loop is foreseen in the national regulations on consultations, with the desired effect of forcing state officials to listen to CSO input rather than ignoring it from the start. CSOs often lament that national ministries have only limited respect for this provision, though a call for feedback is explicitly contained in the Commission's guidelines on civil society support.[25] Nonetheless, there is no equivalent provision for the EU's own consultation procedures. While the Commission has lately introduced a general debriefing session for non-governmental actors following the publication of the annual progress reports, this gathering does not offer the opportunity for in-depth discussion of CSO remarks and the way they were used in producing the Commission's final assessment.

Despite the additional work it involves, such in-depth engagement is worthwhile on two counts. First, CSOs have a powerful incentive to offer substantial, well-argued recommendations – instead of submitting purely subjective viewpoints – if they can expect greater receptiveness. Second, given the Commission's insistence that national governments carry out effective consultations with CSOs, showing a high standard of responsiveness at the EU level sets an important example.

As for the formal setup of the Commission's consultation process, its engagement with civil society is currently limited to bilateral encounters between EU and CSO representatives. This format initially helped establish good working relations between these two sets of actors. The exclusion of state-level actors, however, forces the EU to go back and forth between state and CSO sources in order to establish its own position on certain contentious issues. Involving both state-level and CSO representatives in trilateral meetings would allow for more immediate exchanges, with the EU serving as a potential mediator. It would signal to state actors that the consultation of a wider circle of interested parties is a normal part of policy making. The need to articulate their criticism in constructive, applicable recommendations will likely improve the image of CSOs (who are still widely seen as anti-government agitators) and serve to develop more fruitful state-CSO relations. Finally, creating a routine of direct state-CSO interaction – interaction that goes beyond the pro forma involvement of civil society representatives in legal working groups – would be a first step toward encouraging that the practice continues once the accession negotiations have been concluded.

On the whole, the EU's consultation process offers a valuable opportunity for CSOs to channel their demands through EU actors, thereby benefiting from the additional pressure of conditionality in order to convince state-level authorities to act in certain areas. Still, including feedback on CSO input and facilitating direct state-CSO interactions would greatly improve the current process. Sharpening the Commission's consultation approach would be an important step toward using the full transformative potential of the accession process to foster civil society empowerment.

3. Using the Accession Process to Empower Civil Society

The evolving support to civil society in the enlargement countries as well as the Commission's own increasingly systematic engagement with CSOs from candidate states suggest that the EU's commitment to civil society empowerment is more than a fashion or a rhetorical exercise. However, close scrutiny of civil society development in Croatia both during and after that country's accession holds important lessons on how lasting civil society empowerment can be achieved.

3.1 Lessons learned from Croatia

Croatia is the obvious reference point, as it is the first member state from the Western Balkans to successfully complete membership negotiations under the Commission's more inclusive approach toward accession negotiations. Two contradictory elements emerge. On the one hand, Croatia's advanced institutional setup and progressive civil society policy now serve as a model for many of the remaining candidates from the region. On the other hand, disappointing developments in the civil society sector since Croatia's accession in 2013 partly call into question the EU's ability to foster participatory democracy after EU accession – and to some extent even cast doubt upon its credibility.

The Croatian case stands out for the early introduction of institutions enabling CSOs and for ongoing efforts to improve the institutional and legal framework under which CSOs operate. The same sort of triangular structures supporting CSOs in Croatia are, moreover, now emerging as the institutional template for the rest of the region. The Croatian Government Office for NGOs was opened in 1998 – long before the EU became interested in civil society empowerment in accession countries. The National Foundation for Civil Society Development, which disburses funding from national sources, was established in 2003, while the Council for Civil Society, an advisory body, was created in 2009.

Despite this favorable institutional environment, the degree of transparency and inclusiveness in the accession negotiations was largely unsatisfactory.[26] Civil society mobilization occurred rather late in the negotiation process, with CSOs essentially reacting to the imminent closure of chapter 23 of membership negotiation (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and what they felt was inadequate progress in the area of rule of law. A number of CSOs joined together to form a monitoring coalition to put together shadow reports addressing Croatia's fulfillment of the criteria spelled out in this chapter, pointing to crucial gaps that needed to be addressed before formal membership talks were closed.[27] While critical voices in Croatia informed some of the final exchanges between the EU and state-level actors,[28] CSOs nevertheless failed to see their most important recommendation honored: the introduction of an internal post-accession monitoring mechanism to prevent any backsliding on reforms.[29]

The dynamics at play in the Croatian case neatly show the temporal dimension of civil society empowerment through EU accession. Essentially, once the 2013 accession date was set (in June 2011), the EU's interest in obtaining critical CSO input evaporated. While the Commission and EU member state embassies in Zagreb gladly used information provided by CSOs during the ongoing negotiations, the imminent shift from Croatia's asymmetrical status as candidate state to full EU member caused the Commission to withdraw to a large extent. Member states, too, became reluctant to point their finger at a future peer. As a result, CSOs lost their once-powerful ally against reform-shy state-level actors.[30]

Acknowledging the new setup, the CSO monitoring coalition shifted its advocacy efforts from EU-level to state-level actors. In the run-up to the legislative elections in December 2011, the coalition (which had meanwhile grown to include over seventy organizations) changed its name to Platform 112. Together, its members challenged all parties running for election to commit to address 112 remaining shortcomings that they had identified. Two reports on the new government's performance followed, but despite significant media coverage, Platform 112 had largely run its course. Since then, the coalition has once again shifted its focus – away from interaction with political actors toward citizens – engaging in more narrow campaigns as it attempts to find its place in the post-accession political landscape.[31] However, in addition to time constraints of member organizations, the withdrawal of many international donors, and the transfer of funding disbursal from the EU toward decentralized structures in the member states have left even some of the strongest drivers of Platform 112 struggling for financial survival and therefore less able to feed constructively into the policy-making process.[32]

The post-accession difficulties faced by Croatian CSOs shed light on a crucial weakness in the EU's approach to civil society. While significant political and financial investment in empowering civil society may yield results during the accession process, these advances remain strongly linked to the EU's presence and financial support and therefore lack sustainability. To compensate for this inevitable structural constraint, the EU needs to use the limited duration of the accession process all the more strategically to set the course for durable changes. EU grants cannot continue indefinitely; associating CSOs with efforts to diversify funding sources is crucial to shaping their awareness of this fact. Financial sustainability is a core condition for the continued independent operation of CSOs after accession. It needs to be a priority both with governments and CSOs in the lead-up to the completion of membership talks.

3.2 Drawing civil society into accession negotiations

Part of the EU's support for civil society consists of periodically reiterating the importance of associating CSOs in the accession process. Indeed, the impact that the opening of membership negotiations has in terms of reshaping national administrations presents a prime opportunity to establish civil society inclusion as a model to be imitated in other policy settings. Regrettably, the EU's demand that civil society be included in the negotiations is often purely rhetorical. The Commission generally justifies this by noting its reluctance to impose a certain mechanism upon candidate countries, given the variety of models of state-civil society relations among EU member states. As in other areas requiring institutional adjustments, however, it seems that an objective evaluation of the mechanism

chosen by the national government would not constitute undue interference on the part of the Commission.

The disappointing experience of Croatia's civil society in the accession process has already provided CSOs in other countries with an important lesson. They are aware of the importance of mobilizing early and pushing for an official recognition of their role. In Montenegro, for example, CSO representatives succeeded in being formally included in governmental negotiating groups. Points of contention nonetheless remain. These include incomplete access to documents and a general disregard for the input of CSOs – although the government put forward formal CSO involvement as a sign of its intense cooperation with CSOs. Given the ambiguous Montenegrin experience, Serbian CSOs privilege hybrid and extra-institutional forms of mobilization. Recently they launched a so-called national convent composed of CSOs in cooperation with Serbia's National Assembly, whose EU committee has agreed to wait for the convent's input before pronouncing itself on accession-related issues. Finally, the Croatian CSOs involved in Platform 112 widely shared their experience with their counterparts in neighboring countries, including the elaborate methodology used for its shadow reports and the formal setup as a coalition. Similar initiatives are now underway throughout the region.[33]

Whereas the Commission regularly praises such innovative forms of inclusion, it could go further, particularly in recognizing initiatives that include actors from other sectors, such as legislative or judicial ones. Moreover, an open expression of support for CSO monitoring coalitions by the Commission would further demonstrate the importance the EU attaches to effective civil society involvement. Fostering close and productive cooperation between state and CSO actors throughout the negotiations can inspire state and non-state actors to perceive the eventual closure of membership talks as a joint success. This in turn sets the stage for further instances of constructive cooperation.

Conclusion: Toward Effective Empowerment of Civil Society

The EU's support for civil society has had the merit of raising awareness within candidate states' governments of the importance of drawing the civil sector into the substantial reform requirements of the accession process. The policy's unusual sensitivity to input from beneficiaries on the ground has allowed it to evolve substantially, both in terms of the areas tackled and the depth with which developments are evaluated.

The EU's support for CSOs extends the dynamic of the accession process beyond the traditional EU-state dyad. This change benefits the accession process, helping strong and capable CSOs compensate for the current lack of interest within the EU in enlargement. Faced with widespread corruption and weak state capacities at home, CSOs' role as watchdogs is crucial to holding governments accountable and contributing to the lasting democratization of the Western Balkans region. Moreover, EU support for CSOs also has implications beyond the accession context. In the long run, effective civil society empowerment and improved state-CSO relations in candidate countries will enrich the EU itself. The Union will ultimately benefit from new member states whose policies are discussed by a broad range of actors and supported by greater expertise than would be the case for mere executive-driven policy-making.

Obviously, improving the EU's policy of empowering civil society is only one side of the triangle. It cannot trigger fundamental change in state-civil society relations on its own. Not only must national governments demonstrate clear political will to include CSOs in the policy-making process, but domestic CSOs must also start thinking beyond the next project cycle about how to develop a funding model that ensures their financial sustainability (for the EU, like other international donors, will not be funding their projects indefinitely). In the meantime, the Commission can facilitate these processes by living up to its own commitment to fostering civil society throughout – and beyond – the accession process.

The following recommendations are intended to serve as guidelines for a further refinement of the EU's policy:

1. Strengthen the political dimension of civil society support in addition to focusing on capacity-building and fostering an enabling environment. Improving state-CSO relations beyond the institutional framework is crucial to ensuring an empowerment of CSOs that lasts beyond the accession date.
2. Require candidate state governments to adopt EU-level guidelines on civil society support (which are at present not compulsory). This would ensure states' clear commitment to meeting the objectives outlined in the guidelines. The alignment of national strategies for civil society development with the EU's guidelines and progress toward meeting the objectives should be regularly assessed, and any shortcomings should be raised in direct meetings with responsible state actors.

3. Improve EU-level consultations with CSOs by adding a systematic feedback element. This would place clear value on CSO input and encourage evidence-based comments over anecdotal criticism. The EU should provide its feedback at all stages in which CSOs are actively associated in the evaluation process, i.e. it should be provided both by desk officers in Brussels and by EU delegation staff on the ground.
4. Establish a routine of trilateral meetings involving the Commission, state officials, and CSOs. This would foster a culture of exchange and demonstrate the Commission's esteem for civil society actors. Such meetings should be held on specific sectoral topics and should bring together relevant state-level actors with CSOs engaged in the questions at hand. The EU delegations can help identify relevant CSOs, thereby preventing the state from engaging in overly selective practices.
5. Insist upon CSO involvement in the membership negotiation process. This requirement should be made early on, with candidate countries free to choose the model of inclusion they consider most adapted.
6. Make the accession process as open and transparent as possible. This includes making relevant documents available to CSOs and enabling their participation in all stages of the screening process – ideally in person, but at the very least through a two-way video link that allows CSOs to directly address participants of the screening process in Brussels.
7. Recognize and support civil society initiatives on the ground, particularly where these include a variety of organizations or go beyond the civil society sector to include representatives of parliament, the judiciary, or the media.

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Notes

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2 The EU granted the Western Balkan countries a "European perspective" at the Zagreb Summit in November 2000 and followed up with the concrete prospect of membership at the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003. Since then, Croatia has joined the EU. Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia have received candidate status, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo remain potential candidates. The EU's policy of civil society support covers the entire Western Balkans region as well as Turkey, regardless of a country's status in terms of its membership bid.
3 European Commission, "Recommendation of the European Commission on Turkey's Progress towards Accession," Brussels, October 6, 2004, COM(2004) 656 final.
4 European Commission, "Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries," Brussels, June 29, 2005, COM(2005) 290 final.
5 European Commission, "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007–2008," Brussels, November 6, 2007, COM(2007) 663, p. 14.
6 Participatory democracy is one of the three principles of democratic governance of Europe confirmed by the Lisbon Treaty.
7 See European Commission, "EU response to the Arab Spring: The Civil Society Facility," MEMO/11/638, Brussels, September 27, 2011; European Commission, "The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations," Brussels, September 12, 2012, COM(2012) 492 final.
8 Heather Grabbe, "How Does Europeanization Affect CEE Governance? Conditionality, Diffusion and Diversity," *Journal of European Public Policy* 8, no. 6 (December 2001), pp. 1013–31; Barbara Lippert, Gaby Umbach, and Wolfgang Wessels, "Europeanization of CEE Executives: EU Membership Negotiations as a Shaping Power," *Journal of European Public Policy* 8, no. 6 (December 2001), pp. 980–1012.
9 The author gratefully acknowledges generous support through the SSEES Foundation Scholarship and the CEELBAS Internship Scheme.
10 European Commission, "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007–2008," COM(2007) 663 final, p. 4.
11 Ibid., p. 14.
12 Civil Society Facility and Media 2014-15, decision available online <http://tacso.org/news/news_announcements/default.aspx?id=11412&template_id=73&langTag=en-US&pageIndex=1> (accessed February 1, 2015).
13 This is particularly the case in the area of rule of law and human rights, where organizations frequently accuse each other of taking funding away by working on "someone else's" topic.
14 Adam Fagan, *Europe's Balkan Dilemma: Paths to Civil Society or State-Building?* (London, 2013); James Ker-Lindsay, "Conclusion," in C*ivil Society and Transitions in the Western Balkans,* ed. Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, James Ker-Lindsay, and Denisa Kostovicova (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 257–64.

15 European Commission "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010–2011," Brussels, November 9, 2010, COM(2010) 660, p. 11.
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21 For instance European Commission, "Serbia Progress Report," 2014,p. 17; European Commission, "Montenegro Progress Report," 2014, p. 10.
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24 The monitoring matrix draws heavily on a similar matrix developed by the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), a Commission-sponsored consortium of various Western Balkans CSOs that monitor civil society development throughout the region.
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26 Marina Skrabalo, "Transparency in Retrospect: Preliminary Lessons from Croatia's EU Accession Process," discussion paper commissioned by the Greens / EFA in the European Parliament, November 8, 2012.
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28 Incidentally, the coalition's first shadow report reached EU officials during a meeting with Croatian authorities, leading to a host of uncomfortable questions being put to the Croatian negotiators.
29 A Croatian civil society activist in an interview with the author, April 3, 2014.
30 A representative of a member state embassy in Croatia in an interview with the author, May 4, 2014.
31 For instance, Platform 112 launched an extensive public campaign around the referendum on the introduction into the constitution of a de facto ban on same-sex marriage.
32 Representative of a Platform 112 member organization in an interview with the author, May 3, 2014.
33 Some examples of these initiatives include the Coalition for Monitoring Negotiations in Chapter 23 in Montenegro; prEUgovor in Serbia; and the Initiative for Monitoring BiH's European Integration in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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