

Society

## Policy Brief: The marginalization of CSOs leads to an exclusive form of democracy

by EWB 21. 07. 2023.



Viktor Orban and Aleksandar Vučić; Photo: Instagram / buducnostsrbijsav

VIENNA – The EU should use its new momentum and extend its future comprehensive civil society strategy and the European Civil Space Index to the accession candidates and Western Balkan countries to accelerate EU accession, recommends [Policy Brief “Civil Society organizations and their ‘space’ in backsliding democracies”](#), published within the WB2EU Network.

The authors urge that rules for applying to and eligibility for funding from governmental and




international institutions should be more transparent. “The EU needs to reduce or simplify the bureaucracy of the funding application process for civil society organizations in both EU and candidate countries”.

According to Policy Brief’s recommendations, the collaboration of independent media and civil society organizations might be useful to counter the anti-civil society organizations’ narrative of the government.

“The EU could support media campaigns to make people aware of the positive roles civil society organizations play in democracies. Furthermore, the international community should publicly report on the vilification, attacks, threats, and harassment of civil society organizations”, the authors recommend.

The Policy Brief addresses the situation of civil society organizations in Hungary and Serbia by analyzing the data provided by the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI). It is explained that the “shrinking spaces” of CSOs in both countries mean that the governments are trying to vilify these organizations in the media, control their funding basis, narrow their legal basis, and in some cases even intimidate CSOs representatives.

Although the political backgrounds of Hungary and Serbia are quite similar, the authors assess that the governments use different strategies to hinder the activities of civil society, adding that the marginalization of CSOs leads to an exclusive form of democracy, that ignores the needs and demands of the broader public.

**“ Hungary is an example of democratic backsliding within the EU, whereas** 

***Serbia is stuck on the European integration path and lacks the capacity to develop a democratic system.***

## **The Hungarian case: Undermining the legal environment for CSOs:**

The Policy Brief recalls the annual CSOSI report data from 2021, in which Hungary received a score of “4.0” and was therefore categorized as a country where the overall CSO sustainability is evolving.

**“ According to Policy Brief, the Hungarian case shows that civil space gets easily restricted by legal means by the government, which claims to protect the interests of an allegedly homogenous society against “foreign” and liberal influences.**

The Authors assessed that in Hungary, beyond the anti-NGO legislation, the government also aims to influence the public image of CSOs negatively. Due to the dominance of Fidesz party over the Hungarian media landscape, pro-government media outlets can easily shape the public image of the CSOs through the anti-CSO strategy of the Hungarian government.

“They are generally hostile towards those Hungarian CSOs, that are not supported by the government. After CSOs dealt with migration, the main targets of the media outlets were LGBTQIA+ and children’s rights organizations. They were accused of spreading the ‘transsexualization of children’, ‘gender craze’, and ‘homosexual propaganda’ among others”, the authors explain.



## The Serbian case: A divided civil society

Serbia's CSO Sustainability Index in 2021 reached a score of 4.3 on a scale from 1, the highest, to 7, the lowest grade. Serbia and the neighbouring Western Balkan countries fall into the category of "evolving" concerning the level of strength and sustainability of the CSO sector in the country.

The authors stress that the worsening situation for CSOs in Serbia was recorded in the 2022 European Commission Report on Serbia, which mentioned that "systematic cooperation between the government and civil society" needs to be established and "enabling environment and service provision deteriorated, but advocacy, due to the environmental protests in 2021, improved".

Policy Brief recalls that the Serbian government gained full control of the Parliament in the summer of 2020 because of the election boycott by the opposition adding that during that time, members of CSOs received death threats, property was damaged, people were attacked, and smear campaigns were orchestrated.

**“ The authors underline that in Serbia, legally, there are no restrictions for CSOs, but the overall political situation is not conducive to civil activism.**

The authors name the case from 2020 when 57 CSOs were investigated for money laundering and terrorist financing.

"CSOs are officially allowed to accept foreign funding, however, suspicion of externally funded CSOs is fuelled by negative government and state media narratives. Consequently, the reputation of externally funded CSOs is tainted;



hence, state institutions or municipalities might shy away from cooperation, as this might have negative political implications for politicians or administrators collaborating. State funding for CSOs is limited and directed to pro-government institutions”, Policy Brief states.

It is added that Serbia is bound by the EU’s conditionality of the accession process; hence, it refrains from tampering with the legal framework of CSOs but falls back on informal measures to control the organizations. It seems that it might be in the interest of the Serbian government to foster divisions within civil society, as a way to further weaken and delegitimize the activities of the more liberal CSOs.

“A democracy with a weak civil society, unable to aggregate and articulate the various voices and opinions of a pluralistic society, is becoming more and more exclusive, ignoring society’s demands in the end. An exclusive democratic system is a regime, that dominates the political public sphere and marginalizes everyone else”, Policy Brief concludes.

***The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the WB2EU project. The project aims at the establishment of a network of renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, universities, higher education institutes and policy centres from the Western Balkans, neighbouring countries and EU member states that will be most decisive for the enlargement process and Europeanisation of the region in the upcoming years. The WB2EU project is co-funded by the***



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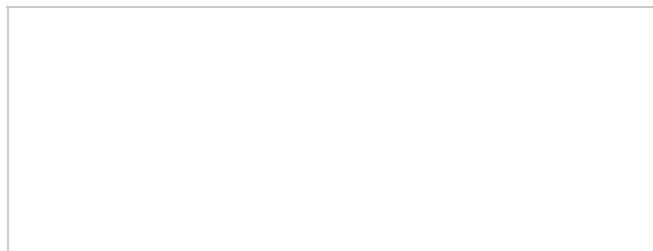
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