

## **BCSDN REACTION**

### **to the DG NEAR Consultations on the IPA CSF and Media Programme 2021-2023**

*Balkan Civil Society Development Network*  
14 January 2022

In relation to the consultations on the first regional call of the IPA Civil Society Facility (CSF) and Media Programme 2021-2023, published on 4 January 2022 on the TACSO website on behalf of the DG NEAR, BCSDN has submitted its input in the online form provided. However, acknowledging the limited space for contribution both in terms of time available and structure of the survey itself, with this reaction, we hope to give additional feedback on the regional Call for Proposals. Moreover, we would like to express serious concerns over the effectiveness and credibility of these consultations.

In times of declining freedoms, growing constraints to civil society operations in the enlargement countries, and continuous shrinking of the civic space for several years, confirmed by the most influential reports on the state of democracy, as well as the EC reports themselves, the highest priority of the regional call should have been supporting CSOs in **protecting civic space and countering back democratic relapse**. Unfortunately – and unexpectedly – this regional call does not address this priority at all, nor focuses on a democracy agenda. The IPA CSF should firmly support a more enabling environment for civil society development - which encompasses not only the basic freedoms, but also CSOs' financial viability and sustainability, as well as cooperation with the public institutions - as a precondition for the existence of a strong civil society able to contribute in the promotion of the rule of law and democratic principles, fighting back the negative trends.

The EU should put a stronger **focus on core and long-term support** for CSOs rather than short-term project support. For years, CSOs have been [advocating](#) on the need to consider long-term investments in civil society through more operational grants and more flexible support for enhancing regional cooperation. Support to regional networks would enable the creation and sustainability of regional platforms for solidarity and collaboration among CSOs, while bringing a new momentum to the post-pandemic cooperation in the region, and going hand in hand with the efforts for regional integration. This way, instead of engaging costly international consultancies or intermediaries, the EU would support the work of CSOs grounded in knowledge of the local needs and challenges, committed to the long-term positive development of their societies. Core/operational support will allow CSOs to more efficiently pursue their core missions, instead of responding to calls for proposals with predetermined priorities.

Finally, we want to remind the EU and its implementing partners what are the **good practices of public consultations**. The policy dialogue between the EU and the civil society needs to be a structured process with clear rules and procedures for regular and inclusive consultations, for which there is proper preparation and representation, as well as timely feedback and exchange of inputs. Unfortunately, civil society in the region has noted a worrying lack of opportunities to participate in timely consultations both on national and regional level, as well as limited access to information throughout the process. Likewise, CSOs have noted lack of effectiveness of these consultations, considering the lack of reflection of our recurrent opinions and [feedback](#) on the IPA programming. At this stage, when the priorities and the budgets are already set, these consultations – open for only ten days in the middle of national holidays throughout the region – seem far from being genuine, and are contrary to what an inclusive dialogue with civil society should look like.

We hope the EU will show better recognition and consideration of the needs, positions and – even more so – the value of CSOs in the region, and start setting an example to the Western Balkan governments on what enabling meaningful participation of CSOs means. CSOs are the EU's strongest partner in promoting the EU values and the accession process. Highlighting the most recent [ECA findings](#), seems the EU's best chance not to lose its credibility is to **start relying more on CSOs** as partners in the socio-economic development of the enlargement countries, boosting its support to independent civil society through the IPA funding.