

z

Non-state actors and impact to European integration: perspectives and challenges

INTRODUCTION

N

Z This paper, through a thorough review of the literature, examines the significant role of non-state actors in the European integration process, focusing specifically on the case of Albania as a candidate country for the European Union. The paper's purpose is to analyze how various non-state actors in Albania, such as civil society organizations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements, have contributed and are poised to further contribute to the country's journey towards European Union integration. The paper aims to highlight the opportunities and challenges these actors bring and how their involvement can shape Albania's path towards EU accession.

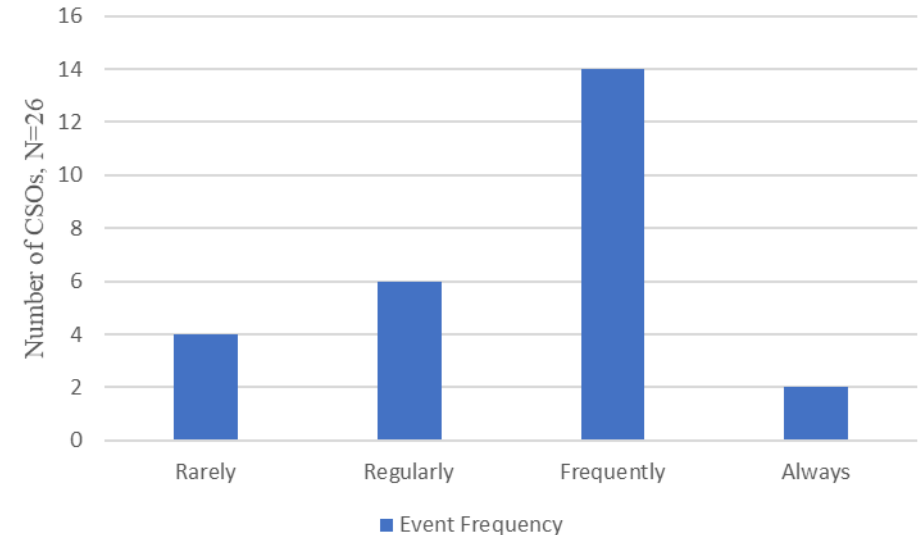
METHODOLOG Y

- Z In parallel, a survey was conducted among 26 local and national non-profit organizations operating in Tirana and other municipalities. The structured questionnaire covered aspects such as the nature of CSO involvement, their perceived opportunities and challenges, and an overall impact assessment. This survey provided quantitative data to complement the qualitative insights gained from the literature review and case studies.

2 FINDINGS AND ANALYZE

The survey results found that the twenty-six participating Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have a diverse focus across several key areas that reflect a commitment to improving social conditions and human rights along the spectrum of need. For instance, showing a strong emphasis on human rights, 76.9% of CSO responses indicate that they conduct activities and projects aiming to protect and represent these rights. Social justice is another crucial aspect of CSO work, extending their efforts to address social challenges and improve community conditions, with a concentration of 46.2%. Additionally, CSOs have a significant focus on health, as 30.8% of responses revealed the promotion of overall well-being and health in their communities. Civic engagement is another top priority for CSOs, with 30.8% of responses indicating their efforts to involve citizens in decision-making processes and contribute to the development of a participatory civil society. These areas reflect

Figure 1: Frequency of public events held by CSOs

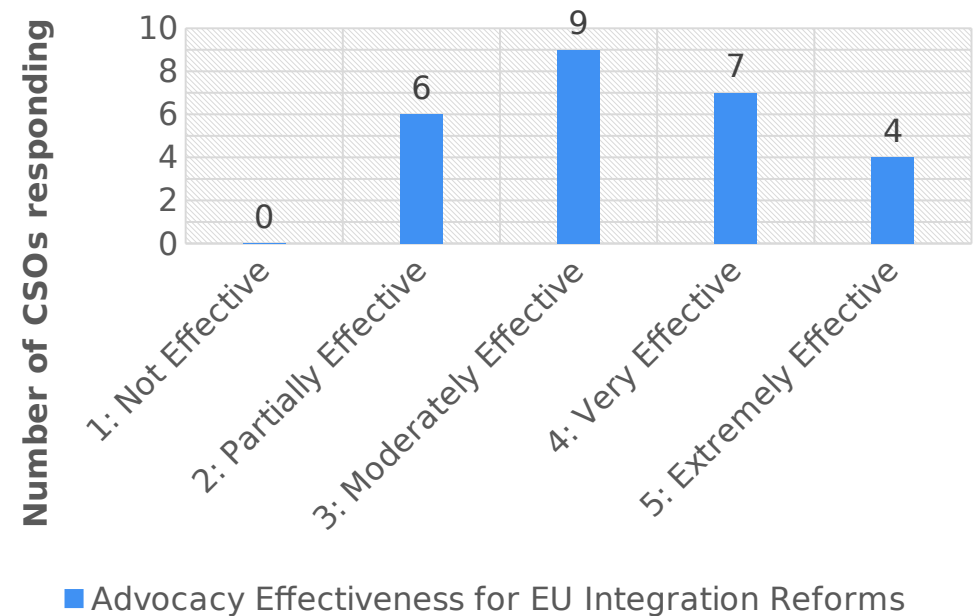


z

FINDINGS AND ANALYZE

The survey looked at a CSO's satisfaction level with its advocacy impact on political decision-making, measured on a scale from 1 to 5. Responses again reflected diverse perspectives among respondents. A notable 42.3% expressed a moderate level of satisfaction, assigning a rating of 3. Additionally, 23.1% indicated a high level of satisfaction, providing a rating of 4. Only two organizations, or 7.7%, selected the highest score of 5 for this category. On the other hand, 19.2% of CSOs were somewhat satisfied, assigning a rating of 2. These responses highlight varying degrees of contentment with the influence of CSO advocacy on political decision-making processes, showcasing both strengths and areas that may benefit from further improvement. The specific causation behind these self-reported advocacy results is, as above, beyond the scope of this thesis. But additional research into how CSOs measure impact on political decision-making and what factors influence high versus low scores on perceived impact. External benchmarks might also be useful here, to assess perceived CSO impact on political decision making with an objective measure of advocacy impact on decision making, such as new local regulations or improved social services.

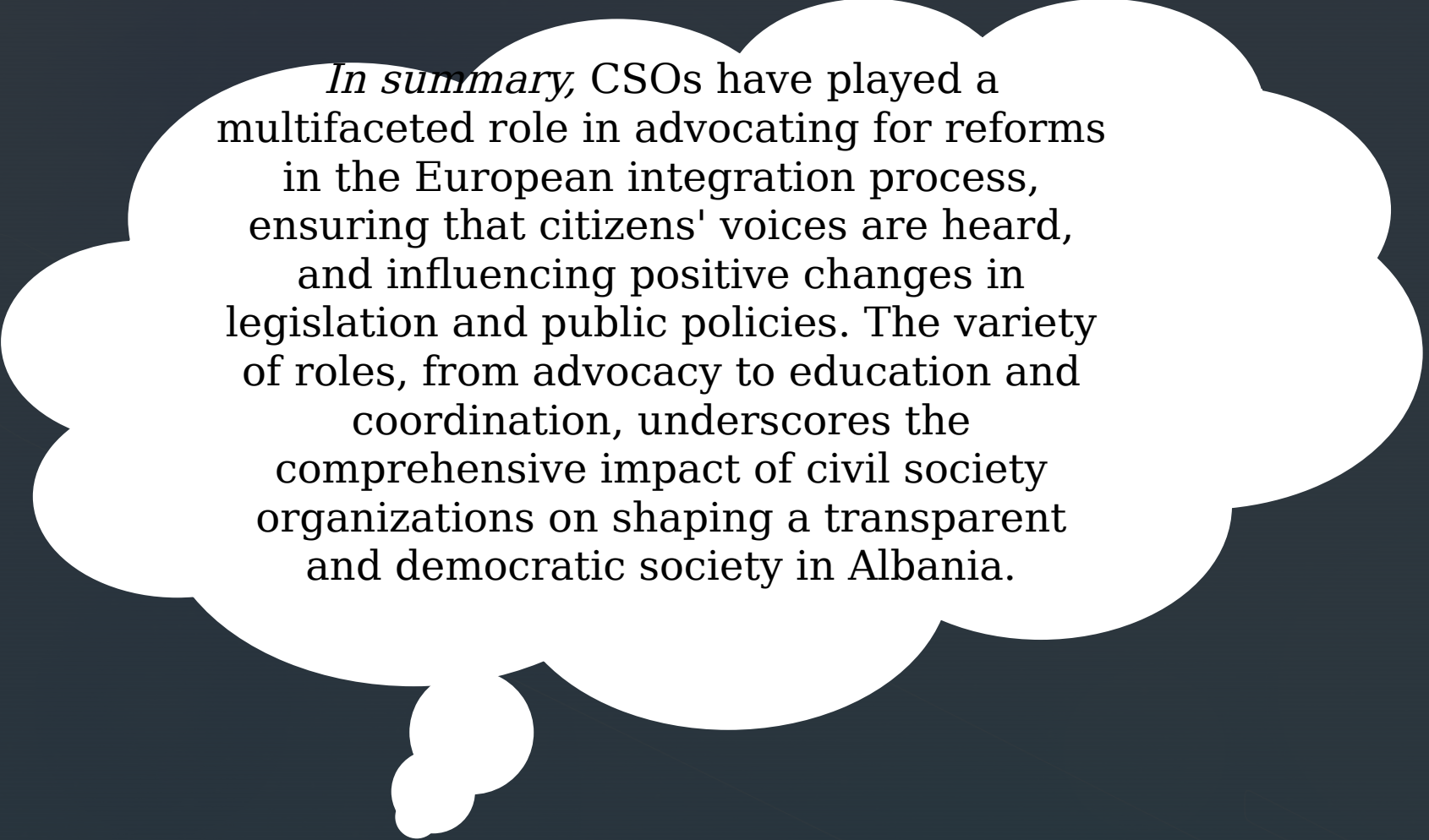
Figure 2: Perceived effectiveness of CSO advocacy for reforms related to European integration



z Specific CSO initiatives on Albania's EU integration have been particularly effective in promoting citizen involvement in the European integration process, with efforts concentrated on consultation, initiatives, and programs that facilitate integration conditions and align with European practices and legislation. The collaboration with researchers and academic institutions has been acknowledged as contributing to better knowledge.

CSOs have actively provided knowledge to support policies related to EU membership through various activities. These include training sessions, workshops, and academies aimed at enhancing the capacities of local governance units and relevant stakeholders. CSOs have played a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting active participation in reforms, particularly in areas such as education, global challenges like climate change, cyber security, and sustainable development. Efforts have been made to inform citizens about the integration process, benefits, and challenges, with a focus on youth involvement. CSOs have engaged in consultations, workshops, and training sessions with local civil society organizations, the media, and local authorities. Their activities have contributed to strengthening local institutions, improving waste management, and aligning local legislation with European standards.

CSO training initiatives have empowered citizens with legal knowledge and various aspects of democracy, fostering active participation and informed decision-making. The organizations have actively collaborated with institutions, contributing to policy development and public awareness through forums, conferences, and sensitization campaigns. CSOs have provided knowledge and expertise to support policies related to EU membership by creating continuous reports and analyses, organizing public forums for open discussions, and collaborating with institutions to contribute to policy development. Their activities have focused on raising awareness, understanding, and citizen engagement concerning EU membership and related issues.



In summary, CSOs have played a multifaceted role in advocating for reforms in the European integration process, ensuring that citizens' voices are heard, and influencing positive changes in legislation and public policies. The variety of roles, from advocacy to education and coordination, underscores the comprehensive impact of civil society organizations on shaping a transparent and democratic society in Albania.

- Some CSOs find it challenging to generate interest in European integration topics, and the non-participation of institutional actors further complicates the collaborative nature required for successful integration efforts.

Not surprisingly, a third major challenge faced by CSOs is financial constraints. Financial constraints pose a substantial obstacle for Albanian CSOs and several respondents mentioned the difficulty in securing funds for their initiatives. The "Financial Constraints" challenge underscores the need for sustainable funding mechanisms to support civil society projects related to European integration. Ironically, the amount of EU funding that has been made available to Albania to improve the lives of the Albanian people is staggering but very little of this money has been made available to CSOs. Information from EU Neighborhood and Enlargement indicates the level of investment through 2022

"1.4 billion Euros (much of that to infrastructure projects) (EU Neighborhood and Enlargement, 2024). The EU is the largest provider of financial assistance to Albania."

- The EU is supporting the socio-economic development and reforms in the enlargement region, including in Albania, with financial and technical assistance through the Instrument for Pre- accession Assistance (IPA).
- For 2021-2023, the IPA III funding for national programmes amounts to close to €250 million for Albania. This includes the dedicated €80 million from the 2023 Energy Support Package immediate measures, 90% of which have already been disbursed to support vulnerable families and SMEs facing the rising energy prices.
- The Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans aims to mobilise up to €30 billion in cooperation with international financial institutions until 2027.
- Under the EIP for Albania, the EU has already mobilised €1.4 billion in investments, out of which €470 million was grants.

WBIF may support any sector that contributes to the economic, social and environmental development of the Western Balkans in the following intervention areas:

- (1) Sustainable transport
- (2) Clean energy
- (3) Environment & climate
- (4) Digital future
- (5) Competitiveness of the private sector
- (6) Human capital development"

The Western Balkans Investment Framework has supplied more than €400 million in grants to the following entities:

Despite this massive investment in Albania by the EU and its partners, CSOs in Albania remain chronically underfunded, despite CSO initiatives aligned with several key areas of WBIF. Earlier research supported this current finding.



Support to Private Sector



The Western Balkans Enterprise Development & Innovation Facility

- €60.1m in financing for SMEs
- 666 SMEs supported in Albania



European Fund for Southeast Europe

- €123.1 million in sub-loans since inception
- 17,864 borrowers since inception
- 50 projects supported since inception



Green for Growth Fund

- €32 million sub-loan investments since inception
- 11,540 MWh/year primary energy savings
- 9,882 tCO₂/year emissions reduction



The Regional Energy Efficiency Programme

- €1.2m in financing for residential sector (GEFF)
- €5.2m in direct financing for private sector

Interestingly, a review of the WeBalkans.eu website indicates there are 31 projects focused on Albania. One of these in 2022 included funds to an NGO in Diber to foster civic engagement. This project was funded by Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations (TACSO), an EU-funded project "whose mission is to improve capacity and strengthen the role of civil society organisations in the Western Balkans" (WeBalkans.eu, 2024). TACSO is currently conducting its second survey on CSO progress against the DG goals (Tasco, 2024):

"The Guidelines outline the results towards which EU support to civil society in the enlargement region will aspire in the period 2021 – 2027, focusing on strengthening participatory democracies and EU approximation and integration through a strengthened contribution by civil society."

Many CSOs may be unaware of the scope and depth of funding available from non-state actors and other entities outside Albania. At the same time, outdated EC websites and lack of quantitative data on civil society progress indicates a lackadaisical commitment from the EC on civil society progress, especially when compared with infrastructure projects. Note: This paper did not inquire of the participating CSOs if any had applied for funds from these EU-related grant-making organizations, such as WeBalkans.eu.

²CONCLUSIONS RECOMMENDATIONS

AND

- CSOs in Albania have diverse opportunities to strengthen their role in the European integration process. One key avenue is the improvement of organizational capacities through training and development programs, enabling them to acquire the necessary expertise and enhance overall effectiveness. Both collaboration and coordination among civil society organizations are essential, fostering a collective impact and the sharing of valuable expertise, ultimately amplifying their influence. Active participation in decision-making processes is crucial for CSOs to contribute meaningfully to policy formation. This involves engaging in public consultations, meetings, and debates related to the integration process, ensuring their perspectives are considered. CSOs should keep their advocacy efforts informed and effective by staying abreast of EU standards and providing clear recommendations for legislative improvements.

- Innovation in projects that address specific issues and challenges related to European integration provides an impactful way for CSOs to contribute. Seeking financial support from various donors, both domestic and international, is crucial for the sustainability of CSO projects and initiatives. Active participation in EU structural programs is an additional avenue for CSOs to access funding and support for projects aligned with the integration process. CSOs can contribute significantly by providing expertise for legislative analysis, formulating clear recommendations for institutional improvements, and advocating for the alignment of national legislation with EU standards.

To more effectively utilize opportunities and address challenges faced by civil society organizations in the European integration process, they can follow certain steps and concrete strategies. One key step for improvement is the development of capacities through investing in specialized training and courses to help organizations enhance their skills in specific areas. Collaboration and coordination are crucial, and creating networks and collaboration platforms can intensify the exchange of knowledge and coordination of activities. Active participation in decision-making processes is fundamental. Civil society organizations must work towards active participation in decision-making processes, taking part in consultations, meetings, and dialogues with the government and other responsible institutions. Additionally, updated and effective advocacy involves using new tools and media platforms to communicate their messages effectively. Sharing best practices among CSOs should continue on a regular basis in order to enable knowledge transfer and improvement across organizations.

- Involving diverse target groups is another essential aspect. Building an all-encompassing environment and supporting the involvement of various groups can accelerate the organizations' goals in combating discrimination and presenting a richer perspective of society. International collaboration and knowledge exchange with other civil society organizations can bring significant benefits.