

# WESTERN BALKANS

### *Key trends in 2023*

- 🔍 Legislative initiatives aimed at stigmatising CSOs as “foreign agents”
- 🔍 LGBTQI+ and gender rights groups face hostilities marked by continuous smear campaigns and attacks on activists.
- 🔍 Deteriorating relationship between governments and civil society limits CSOs' involvement in public dialogue and policymaking processes.

### *Targeted recommendation:*

- 🔍 Prioritise reforms essential for advancing along the EU accession pathway, including the Rule of Law (RoL) process, to foster regional integration and a steadfast commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law.

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## Summary

Throughout the past year, civil society in the Western Balkans has operated in a narrowing civic space, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Legislative initiatives aimed at stigmatising CSOs and curbing dissent have emerged, including the reintroduction of criminal defamation penalties and the 'foreign agents' law in Republika Srpska. In Serbia, CSOs focusing on democracy and rule of law issues have faced threats, while LGBT+ and gender groups encounter a hostile environment marked by continuous smear campaigns and attacks on activists. Across the region, SLAPP cases targeting journalists and activists have risen, posing a further threat to freedom of expression. Anti Money Laundering and counter terrorist financing (AML/CFT) legislation and practice still creates major administrative burdens for CSOs, while the inconsistent implementation of tax and fiscal legislation poses limitations to the operations and development of civil society, starting from dysfunctional tax incentives to non-transparent and ineffective public funding systems. The deteriorating relationship between governments and civil society across the region poses a threat to democracy and limits CSOs' involvement in public dialogue and policymaking processes. These challenges highlight the urgent need for sustained efforts to uphold democratic principles, protect fundamental rights, and create an enabling environment for civil society to thrive in the Western Balkans.