



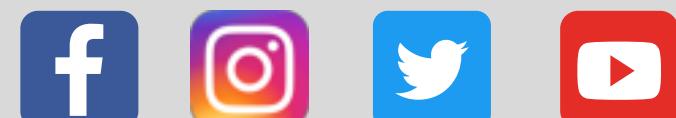
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## Support to the Promotion of Civil Society regional actions in the Western Balkans

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER ISSUED BY THE WESTERN BALKANS FUND

ISSUE I, JANUARY 2022



### Building a European future in the Western Balkans – EU/WBF joint action enhances broad cooperation in the whole area.

Promoting regional cooperation was a crucial component of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans. This is reflected throughout the EU's policy channels and in the diplomatic activities of the EU and its Member States. The benefits of regional cooperation can be observed in numerous sectors, from education to trade, from infrastructure to reconciliation. The Western Balkans Fund (WBF) establishment is considered a sign of a new cooperation spirit taking roots in the Western Balkans region, coming from the highest institutional level. The agreement for the establishment of the WBF was signed by all the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the region in November 2015.

The WBF became operational in October 2017, after the conclusion of the ratification procedures by the Parliaments of all its contracting parties.

The bigger-sized projects financed by EU Commission and other donors within the Western Balkans region offers an excellent opportunity for WBF to expand its support towards grass-root organizations lacking capacities in absorbing bigger donor funds.

Through its grant schemes-in total, 3 Regional Calls, from November 2017 to May 2020- the WBF attracted over 890 applications from civil society organizations and other stakeholders, with the direct inclusion of 3,430 organizations, like lead and partner organizations. The financial support requested was up to 9.2 million Euros, which shows that the demand expressed to WBF is ten times bigger than WBF's currently available support package. In that sense, the Western Balkans Fund is a uniquely positioned mechanism to serve as a platform for these investments. Now, thanks to the funding provided by the European Union for the next 30 months (starting July 2021), the Western Balkans Fund aims to become increasingly relevant in promoting new partnerships between the Contracting Parties and forging a new spirit of cooperation that is taking place in the region.



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### IN THE SPOTLIGHT



#### EU/WBF joint action kicks off

The inaugural ceremony of the "Support to the promotion of Civil Society regional actions in the Western Balkans," a regional project co-funded by the European Union, through IPA – Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, was held on 23 November in Tirana. During the ceremony, the European Union Ambassador to Tirana, H.E. Luigi Soreca, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, H.E. Olta Xhaçka, the North Macedonia Ambassador to Albania, H.E. Dancho Markovski, and the WBF Executive Director, Gjergj Murra, delivered keynote speeches.

In his remarks, Mr Soreca emphasised the importance of regional cooperation for the future of the Western Balkans. "The action that we kick off today is indeed designed to increase the participation of grassroots organisations in the regional cooperation, in view of good neighbourly relations and reconciliation. We consider civil society in the region as an essential and reliable partner, and we recognise the multiple roles civil society plays", underlined Mr Soreca.

On behalf of the Western Balkans Fund, Dr Murra added: "Like Europe, the Western Balkans will not be made through a single plan, a single action or into a night. But, projects, like the ones we jointly fund bring the Western Balkans closer to the European Union, the only possible destination for our society." Minister Xhaçka, in her speech, underlined the importance of supporting grassroots organisations and cross-border projects for the sustainable development of the region. "The region is changing, and what was once impossible is becoming a reality. It is the truth that we can all see", said the Minister.

H.E. Ambassador of North Macedonia to Tirana, Dancho Markovski, replaced in this event the Deputy MFA, Fatmira Isaki, who had to urgently return to Skopje due to a tragic accident that claimed 46. The short statement of H.E. Markovski focused on the importance of regional cooperation and the full support of Skopje towards improving collaboration and good neighbourly relations.



[FULL REMARKS H.E Luigi Soreca, EU Ambassador to Tirana](#)



[FULL REMARKS Gjergj Murra, Executive Director of WBF](#)



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### IN THE REGION

With the co-funded grant Call for Proposal launched on 8 November, the Western Balkans Fund team embarked on a regional tour of Info Sessions. WBF multiple teams physically visited six Contracting Parties and 12 locations to meet with eligible beneficiaries.

In five out of six capitals, namely in Tirana, Pristina, Skopje, Sarajevo, and Podgorica, European Union representatives delivered keynote speeches focused on the importance of reconciliation and neighbourly cooperation for the European future of the region.

In Tirana, H.E. Luigi Soreca was invited among Ministers, ambassadors, representatives of the diplomatic corps, regional media, and Civil Society Organisations. In his words, Mr Soreca underlined that the EU-WBF joint action is explicitly designed to increase the participation of grassroots organisations in regional cooperation. He also emphasised that civil society in the region is an essential, reliable, and cherished partner.

In Pristina, a speech was delivered by Mr Dario di Benedetto, team leader in the European Union Delegation, EU Policies and Social Development. He stressed that the Western Balkans are an essential part of Europe, and such actions aim to bring the region closer to the EU. Apart from Di Benedetto, the Deputy Foreign Ms Liza Gashi thanked the European Union's crucial role in bringing long-lasting peace and cooperation.

In Skopje, Ms Irena Ivanova, Project Officer at the European Union Policies/Democracy and Governance Department of European Union. She spoke directly after the Deputy Foreign Minister, Ms Fatmire Isaki, underlining the complete dedication of her delegation in supporting further regional projects like ours.

On behalf of the European Delegation to Sarajevo spoke to Mr Vladimir Pandurevic, Programme Manager for Civil Society, Youth and Culture at the Delegation. In his short remark, Mr Pandurevic emphasised the importance of reconciliation and cooperation for the European future of the Western Balkans.

In the closing Info Session of Podgorica, Ms A.M. Tome de Freitas Mariguesa Lorentzen, International Aid/Cooperation Officer – Civil Society development and social policies from the European Union Delegation, attended in person. She expressed her belief that such initiatives are critical in increasing regional cooperation and sustainability in many fields in the region.



Skopje



Pristina



Sarajevo



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**WBF** Western Balkans Fund  
Supporting Common Projects

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### IN BRIEF

**Record Number of Applicants** - The Fourth Call for Proposals was open from 8 November to 27 December. All interested Civil Society Organization, associations, or other potential beneficiaries from the six Contracting Parties were able to apply. At the end of the process, 527 organisations, more than ever before, registered to the online application system. Over 200 submitted the application successfully. Despite the results, the WBF has already achieved the primary goal by creating at least 750 new partnerships around the Western Balkans. [MORE](#)

**Survey of the dissemination plan** - WBF Secretariat and Project Unit have completed successfully its dissemination plan of the period covered by this Newsletter. Upon completing each info session, attendees were presented with the Q.R. code that directly brought them to the prepared online survey. The direct feedback from the potential grantees is a learning tool that helps future growth and improvement of the Calls for Proposals, hence, the Fund itself. This survey provided deep insight for future info sessions. The total number of participants totals 206, averaging 17 participants per info session.

[MORE](#)

**Opinion Research** - On November (18-19), the Western Balkans Fund conducted an opinion research campaign with stakeholders from all the Contracting Parties to identify current obstacles to regional cooperation, local realities and ways to bring WBF closer to the needs of Civil Society Organisations and other eligible stakeholders. To that end, WBF organised six Focus Groups in each of the Contracting Parties. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the Focus Group were conducted through an online Conference Call. [MORE](#)

**Media coverage** - Regional media coverage is essential to the Western Balkans Fund. Thanks to the special status of the organisation, EU/WBF joint action has enjoyed considerable support from the national press agencies, such as ATA, MINA, MIA, or Kosovo Press. The press releases have targeted the regional media, many in the local languages of each Contracting Party. November-December registered a 400% increase in Facebook and 312% in reach in Instagram, compared with the same quarter. WBF kick-off event figured in many local media, and during the Info Sessions, media were present. [MORE](#)



**Work Package One Completed** - After a long process of revisions of the Description of Action and other application documents, the contract with the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations was signed on 12 July 2021. Immediately, the Western Balkans Fund Secretariat, led by the Executive Director, started the project's implementation phase as described in the Work Plan. The Western Balkans Fund completed the recruitment process of the Project Manager, Public Relations Officer, Finance and Administrator Officer, and External Guideline Expert. The Fund also identified, rented, and furnished the project office very close to the Secretariat premises. With the kick-off on 23 November and recruitment of external expert, the full Work Package One is now completed. The news staff members are Fjordi Bisha, EU/WBF joint project manager, Klevis Gjoni, Public Relations Officer, Juliana Muço, Finance and Administrate Officer.



EU Project Team duringt the Info Sessions, from left to right: Ms Muço, Mr Bisha and Mr. Gjoni



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### OUR PUBLICATIONS

Western Balkans Fund, loyal to its tradition, published its yearly calendar for 2022 with selected pictures of bridges from photographs from all over the region. Amateur photographers from the Balkans were invited to a competition where they sent their photos from the bridges. Why bridges? Because of everything that man creates and builds in his need for living, nothing is more valuable than bridges. They are more important than houses, blessed like shrines. For the fifth year in the row, our organisations aim to bridge the people living in the Western Balkans and help bridge the gap between the Western Balkans and the European Union.

### "Empowering Champions of Regional Cooperation"



### AGENDA

The trimester covered by the following newsletter will be very important in the EU/WBF joint action timeline.

**Mid-January** – The new year starts with important tasks, such as the evaluation and hiring of external assessors, who will help the WBF Team in the evaluation of the proposals received.

**Late January** – Training, creation of the evaluation panel and beginning of the individual evaluation of the projects received. The process is expected to take two months.

**March** – Completing the evaluation process and recommending the best projects for endorsement to the Council of Senior Officials.

**Mid-Spring** – Start of the awarding phase. Implementation of the projects

### DISCLAIMER

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