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Support to the Promotion of Civil Society regional actions in the Western Balkans (Phase II)
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER ISSUED BY THE WESTERN BALKANS FUND

ISSUE VIII, MAY 2024



ERC GRANTS

EU-WBF Joint Action (Phase II) launches the largest grant scheme

On 9 May 2024, the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) chose to celebrate Europe Day in a unique and impactful way by announcing the launch of the ERC Grants (Empowerment Regional Cooperations Grants) Scheme, co-funded by the European Union through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III.

The Western Balkans Fund, established by the Foreign Ministries of the six Western Balkans countries (WB6), is dedicated to promoting regional cooperation and reconciliation. It plays a crucial role in supporting Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in their efforts to implement projects that enhance peace, stability, and cooperation across the region.

With grant sizes of up to 30,000 EUR per project, the ERC Grants are specifically designed to bolster the capacity for successful participation in regional cooperation processes. These grants aim to foster networking, facilitate exchange, and encourage innovative approaches to reconciliation and cooperation.

Civil Society Organizations and associations from various sectors, including education, media, culture, and sports, in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, are eligible to apply for these grants.

The application period is open from 9 May to 17 June 2024. Interested organizations can apply by visiting the Western Balkans Fund's website at www.westernbalkansfund.org.

In the first phase of the "Support to the Promotion of Civil Society Regional Activities in the Western Balkans" project, which ran from July 2021 to January 2024, the EU/WBF Joint Action successfully awarded 69 grants to over 250 organizations across the WB6.

The second phase of this project commenced on 13 January 2024, continuing the mission to support and enhance civil society activities that contribute to regional cooperation and development.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



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High Level meeting at EU Commission HQ in Brussels



In mid-April, the Executive Director of the WBF, accompanied by the Members of the Council of Senior Officials and selected employees of the Secretariat, attended a meeting with high representatives of DG Near headquarters in Brussels.

At the meeting with DG Near Director for Western Balkans, Ms. Valentina Superti and other EU officials, WBF and its board shared the results of the First Joint Action.

We also briefed the officials for the upcoming ERC Grants, which were then subsequently launched on Europe Day (9 May 2024).

From their behalf, the representatives of the Ministries of the Foreign Affairs of the Region, by attending this meeting, wanted to underline their support towards our organisation and the EU-spearheaded Joint Action.

EU officials encouraged our Fund to persevere in the chosen path and to strengthen our mission, enhancing cooperation, reconciliation, and people-to-people links in our Region.

WBF at the Europe Day Fair

On the same day of launching the most ambitious Grant Scheme open to Civil Societies and other eligible beneficiaries, a WBF Team participated at the EU Fair of Opportunities in Tirana.

For the full day, we represented the Fund and the Joint Opportunities provided to hundreds of citizens and students, receiving overwhelming positive feedback about our mission.

During the Fair, we had a pleasant and open discussion with the EU Ambassador to Tirana, H.E. Silvio Gonzato.





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ERC Regional Tour of Info Sessions

In the third week of May, hundreds of potential applicants and other interested stakeholders participated in the Regional Tour in the Western Balkans, organized to present physically the ERC Grant opportunity to regional stakeholders.

During the meetings, different teams from the Secretariat emphasized the role of the European Union in driving the historical Cooperation and Reconciliation Process in our Region.

We also emphasized that the ambitious objectives of the ERC Grants will contribute towards building a stronger WB Region, whose future belongs clearly to the European Union.

The Regional Tour kicked off on Monday, 20 May, with an Info Session held in Tirana, “Europe House”, in front of dozens of participants from Civil Society Organisations and other stakeholders.

On the same day, in front of a highly interested crowd, we delivered another Info Session in Podgorica.

On 21 May, two different teams of WBF visited the EU House in Prishtina and Skopje, participating in two other crucial meetings with the stakeholders based in those two locations.

The Regional Tour concluded with the Sarajevo and Belgrade Info Session on 22 and 23 May.

However, this is not the end of the Fund’s outreach efforts. Starting in June, we will be organizing a series of Online Info Sessions in English to facilitate the application process, also in all the official languages of the Region.





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Meet the Team implementing the Second Phase of the Joint Action

The Second Phase of the "Support to the Civil Society Regional Actions in the Western Balkans" project will rely on the human resources of the Secretariat.

Building on the successful experience of the First Phase, the team will be headed again by the WBF-EU Project Manager, Mr. Fjordi Bisha. Employed directly as part of the Joint Action implementing team are Mr. Citakovic (MEL Officer), Mr. Gjoni (PR Officer), and Ms. Kollarja (FAO).

In addition, the Fund relies on the experience and expertise of all the Project Managers, namely Ms. Dedja (Albania), Ms. Valjevac (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Mr. Korkuti (Kosovo), Ms. Vukmirovic (Montenegro), Mr. Umeri (North Macedonia), and Mr. Citakovic (Serbia).

Ms. Beqiri, Senior Program Manager, and the Executive Director, Dr. Murra, are directly involved in ensuring the successful implementation of the action.



Part of the Western Balkans Fund Secretariat, during the WBF-EU TACSO training of December 2023 in Durres, Albania

FULL TEAM ON - www.westernbalkansfund.org

High Level Dialogue on the Future of Western Balkans



Today, at the Albanian Institute for International Studies, the Western Balkans Fund and the EU Delegation Ambassador to Tirana, H.E. Silvio Gonzato, participated in an immersive dialogue about the European Future of the Western Balkans Region.

Open Vacancy: External Evaluator



The Western Balkans Fund is looking to hire an External Evaluator, to help us in the evaluation and scoring process of the project proposals received in as part of the Call for Proposals of the ERC Grants.

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WBF-EU TACSO join hands: What's next for CSOs of our Region

Family picture of the meeting with over 50 organisations in the Durrës workshop from 5-7 December 2023



From 5-7 December 2023, together with over 50 grantees of the 1st and 2nd Call for Proposals, in the city of Durrës, in cooperation with EU TACSO, we organized a large 3-days workshop focusing on building capacities, partnerships, and sustainability in the Western Balkans Region.

After six thematic workshop sessions and panels organized in cooperation with selected experts of EU Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Türkiye (EU Tacso), on the final day, we wrapped up with a list of recommendations and the decision to continue cooperation further with EU TACSO in the future.

Recounting the findings of the main session, Dafina Beqiri, WBF Senior Program Manager, set the tone by emphasizing the importance of donors allocating more funds to enhance partnerships. She underscored the value of workshops like this for all participants.

Jelena Pajovic van Reenen, EU TACSO expert, was asked to elaborate on specific insights regarding how to ensure funds are dedicated to activities that aim to increase cooperation.

“To build a successful partnership, you need trustworthy partners who understand their roles. From what we heard yesterday, there is a need to insist on sustainability within existing grant calls. Organizations should describe how they will continue their activities after the funding ends, emphasizing investment in long-term impact”, she responded.

Part of the experts, Andreja Tonc highlighted the importance of involving project partners from the beginning to the end for a full Project Cycle Management (PCM)

She also stressed the significance of partners participating in training sessions organized by different donors to collectively increase capacities.

Regarding small-budget projects, Andreja mentioned that initiatives are sometimes overlooked, and stakeholders may not take them seriously due to limited funds. Additionally, Ms Tonc emphasized the importance of stakeholder involvement throughout the PCM, encouraging a thorough analysis of stakeholders at the project’s beginning and continuous assessment of their importance.

Natasha Nazari, from EU TACSO underlined: “We have guidelines aligned with EU standards for civil society. Now, we are in the process of evaluating indicators of Civil Society Organisations in the Region. CSOs have the chance to contribute, and I invite everyone to share in focus group consultations to strengthen our collective impact.”

Fjordi Bisha, WBF-EU Joint Action Manager, concluded the panel by underscoring: “Partnership was a keyword of this workshop, with community support, elevating knowledge, and bringing together diversity as key pillars. Community support, not only for CSOs but also for WBF, is crucial for sustainability. Bringing together diversity, both in partnerships and ideas, enhances regional cooperation. Elevating knowledge has a reciprocal effect, enabling organizations to better understand their communities and plan for the future.”

Proud to be referred as a model by TACSO



Joint Action Manager, Fjordi Bisha (R), at EU TACSO meeting in Sarajevo

We are immensely proud to be recognized as a beacon of excellence for our efforts in the Western Balkans Region by the EU TACSO. Reporting on last November’s meeting in Sarajevo, the EU Funded Assistance for Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Türkiye specifically distinguishes our approach. Quoting EU TACSO: “Reflecting on the first year of the FSTP CoP, Mr Fjordi Bisha from the Western Balkans Fund emphasized the balance between supporting grassroots organisations and navigating necessary procedures. Our main focus is on grassroots organisations, and we aim to bridge the gap between bureaucratic requirements and supporting their needs. We don’t just show procedures; we mentor through them. Our approach is hands-on, working closely with our grantees to guide them through the process”.

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2 CfP Call
Report
published



After extensive work, the full catalog of projects and achievements of the Second Call for Proposals was published in December 2023. This follows the publication of the previous, first report of the Call for Proposals in July 2023.

The second, comprehensive edition offers valuable insights into the outcomes of all 39 regional projects that were executed within the framework of the Joint Action.

What sets this report apart is its keen focus on the regional impact, particularly in terms of forging new people-to-people connections, fostering enhanced cooperation, and promoting reconciliation.

These objectives are at the heart of our mission, and the report showcases the tangible results achieved in these critical areas.

For your convenience, we've included a QR Code that will direct you to the full Call Report, accessible on our website.

Promoting a green
environment



In a world where the demand for clean and sustainable energy is at an all-time high, solar energy is emerging as a clear solution. The Western Balkans Region is blessed with an abundance of sunshine, yet there is still much work to be done in consolidating strategies for exploiting this largely untapped potential. In October, in Korça, stakeholders from all the Contracting Parties have come together to exchange best practices and identify ways to further promote the use of solar power. Part of the project initiated by “Friends of Korça”, this event resulted in the creation of the first regional database of stakeholders operating in the field of solar power.

Supporting people
with disabilities



In October, in Podgorica, a highly successful regional conference that focused on improving the connection between education, health, and social protection gained the attention of many TV channels. Among other initiatives, the ‘Aryse’ project, implemented by NVO Juventas and its partners, aims to enhance sensitivity towards marginalized and physically challenged students. The project wrapped-up with a concrete set of recommendations addressed to the governments of the Region for the facilitation and support of the daily accessibility of peoples with disabilities.

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EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE - From 15 to 20 September, in Petrovac took place the “Summer School for Future (STE)M Leaders”. The School promotes math and sciences in general by connecting multiple higher education and research institutions from the Western Balkans. In addition, special lectures in the Summer School promote girls’ and women’s participation in STEM. STEM School is run by the University of Montenegro, Faculty of Mathematics in cooperation with the Ismail Qemali University of Vlora, the Mathematical Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade; University of East Sarajevo, Faculty of Production and Management; University of Mostar, Faculty of Natural and Educational Sciences; Ss Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. The intention of the organisers is to build upon this school and create a yearly STEM School that will train and connect the best students from all the WB Region.



ENERGETIC SECURITY – In September, we had the distinguish pleasure to attend to the Conference “Enhancing Security through Energy Alliance – A joint Action”, organised by our grantee, the Albanian Institute for International Studies. Many excellencies’ Ambassadors and representatives of the diplomatic services attended and delivered keynote interventions. Among the participants was also Mr Daniele Aloisi, Programme Manager at DG NEAR, who closely followed our activities as a Fund for three days in a row. The Energy Security Alliance has established an interactive platform for information, discussions, analysis, academic research, policy recommendations, advocacy and networking on all aspects of energy security in our Contracting Parties. Green transition and the adaptation of new technologies in the field of energy, especially given the dramatic energy situation the Western Balkans Region experienced last year as result of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, are key objective’s of this project.

GREEN TRANSITION - Civil Society and Local Governments should play a more prominent role in mitigating the adverse effects of climate change in the Western Balkans Region. Furthermore, solutions can only be found if communities work together at a regional level. This is the fundamental message deriving from the round table “Adaptation and strengthening the resilience of local communities to climate change”, an event held yesterday at the University of Donja Gorica (UDG), in Podgorica. The event united representatives of 9 municipalities from 3 Contracting Parties, diplomatic representatives, competent ministries and administrative bodies, NGOs, state-owned enterprises, Universities, media, businesses, Community municipalities, etc. The Municipalities represented at the round table were the Municipalities of Bijelo Polje, Gusinje, Plužine, Foča, Goražde, Novo Goražde, Čajetina, Svilajnac. Among others, the participants focused on the joint management of the Drina River basin, the sustainable production of hydropower energy, the fragile environment around Gusinje, Zlatibor and other parts of the Region.



ARTISTIC COOPERATION - The [#TeenDOC](#) workshops took place in August in Čačak. Organised by our grantee, NFC Filmart, the workshop provided a platform for students to learn, socialize and engage through documentary films. Earlier in July, we also learned that the grantee of the 1 CfP, the “Balkan Shorts Film Network” had expanded its work in Central Europe. Initiated thanks to the Joint Union grant, Balkan Shorts Film Network applied successfully to the Visegrad+, obtaining funding to participate and promote the work of regional artists in three prestigious film festivals, the Short Waves Festival in Poznan (Poland); BuSho Film Festival in Budapest (Hungary) and Azyl Shorts in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia). We are tremendously proud that thanks to WBF support, the Balkan Short Film Network has become a true hub for young filmmakers and we are proud to see the tremendous growth of our grantee in only few months.

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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – Gender Balance and Empowerment of Women are key objectives that we pursue through many of our grants. “Uproot Gender Based Violence” project by Fondacija Cure is one of them, with activities that took place both in the Region and in a EU Member Country like Croatia. Another projects focused on equal pay and empowerment is the one of Pazarski Bazar Rokotvorina, based in Serbia, which together with partners from Prizren and Durrës focused on promoting the artisan products of Women. Another grantee, NVU Djeca Crna Gore embarked on a remarkable journey of empowerment as part of the “Girls – the game changers of politics” project! Collaborating with Albanian Institute of Public Affairs – AIPA and Lifelong Learning Network Macedonia in Tetovo, this project was about empowering young girls to create positive change in their communities.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - Astrotourism is an unlikely, yet great tool to promote large-scale innovation, cooperation and reconciliation. In the Western Balkans Region. It is also a perfect tool to promote sustainable growth through a new type of tourism that benefits primarily the rural and underdeveloped areas of the Region. In August, in Tetovo, partners, space enthusiasts and many other citizens attended the key Conference of the “Astrotourism – fostering STEM and SDG!” Conference. Through a tailor-made approach, the partners of this project are aiming to establish a robust Balkan Network of entrepreneurs aiming to expand the current portfolio of our regional touristic offer. This project is being led by STEMLab in Tetovo, with partners STEM Akademija in Tuzla, Edu Act in Tirana and Universi in Prishtina. According to the organisers, steps are being taken to expand the initiative in the future, including new partners from other parts of the Western Balkans.

BRINGING INSTITUTIONS CLOSER – One key feature of the 5th Call for Proposals is the ability to connect institutions with civil society organisations and youngsters that are keen to work together and share experiences in the regional level. In Kragujevac, a forum for young people was organised as part of the Regional Youth Festival “Little Night Music”. Civil and public sector participants from Kragujevac, Ohrid, Bar and Foča exchanged knowledge and experience and formed common recommendations for the improvement of youth policy in the region. The joint recommendations will be presented to the governments and interested stakeholders for future consultations. Simultaneously to the institutional element, in Kragujevac, youth organisations united in to participate in a number of tailor-made events, that promoted exchanges further.



YOUTH MOBILITY - In June, a group of enthusiastic young individuals hailing from Nikšić, Prijedor, and Subotica embarked on an enriching journey to the OPENS Youth Center in Novi Sad. This endeavor was part of a meticulously planned and executed youth mobility project, supported by the Western Balkans Fund. During their visit, these dynamic young minds enthusiastically engaged in a thoughtfully crafted three-day training program. This program was designed to empower them through interactive workshops, fostering personal and collective growth. The interactive workshops were not only informative but also encouraged active participation, allowing the participants to share their ideas, skills, and experiences.. The project was implemented by LDA Subotica in partnership with the Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Prijedor and the Agency for Local Democracy Nikšić / LDA Montenegro, with funding from the Western Balkans Fund.

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