

WESTERN BALKANS

SUMMARY

This strategy will guide the Olof Palme International Center's (Palme Center) support to democratic development in the Western Balkans. It covers the Western Balkan region with a special focus on Albania, Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina 2016-2020. The analysis builds on more than twenty years of experience of the Palme Center in the region. Lessons learnt from the ongoing period 2012-2015 from all programmes¹, the Palme Center's overall operational policy and strategy covering the period 2010-2014, as well as recommendations from the recently finalized evaluation of the Western Balkan programme commissioned in September 2014 and the evaluation of the Serbia CSO programme that has been running 2012-2014, form the basis of this strategy. It further builds on the experiences, strategies and recommendations of related stakeholders and partners in civil society in the respective countries, and has taken into account the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Sida's overall goals as well as the current regional strategy².

The strategy includes a presentation of the Palme Center's general approach as well as an analysis of the challenges to the development of democracy and human rights in the Western Balkans. The finalization of the four specific programmes and respective action plans are done in the coming country applications and their related Results Assessment Frameworks (RAF).

The underlying dynamics in the region has not essentially changed over the past four years and therefore the basic logic of the existing programme is still seen as valid and relevant. The existing focus on citizen participation and the legitimacy of civil society organisations will therefore remain further emphasizing the importance of activism, movement building and membership. This strategy also has a more thematic approach and focuses on labour rights, gender equality, the empowerment of underrepresented groups and anti-corruption. This increased focus on organising and the more narrow thematic focus is made based on the updated analysis of the current regional challenges and in an effort to bring the Western Balkan programme closer to the core operations of the Palme Center and its member organisations. In this way it is also expected to further contribute to the added value of the partnership. The thematic approach also simplifies the coordination within and between the programmes, facilitating cooperation and joint activities between partners. The strategy of 2016-2020 therefore covers all the Palme Center activities in the region. Bosnia and Hercegovina as well as the situation for sister parties in the region related to the support to party affiliated organisations (PAO programme) are included.

The intention is to continue the process of supporting vivid and creative forms of organising to strengthen and re-ignite citizens and civil society, bring our programmes and activities closer

¹ The programmes in Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina financed through Sida's Support to Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and the programmes in Serbia, Albania and Kosovo financed through Sida's Reform Cooperation Western Balkans.

² Regional Strategy for the Western Balkan, Eastern Europe and Turkey 2014-2020, Sida/UD

to each other, make cooperation, exchanges of ideas and experiences as well as strategic relationship building in the region possible.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The development in the Western Balkan region is characterised by duality. In their respective stages of development Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo and Serbia find themselves at crossroads where continued positive developments as well as severe setbacks seem equally possible.

All countries, with the exception for Bosnia and Herzegovina³, where the process has slowed down due to the political deadlock and a lack of political will, are actively engaged in reform efforts to become members of the European Union⁴. The accession process provides possibilities for civil society organisations (CSO) to influence developments towards a more democratic society. The importance of a vibrant civil society is highlighted by the EU in its transformative agenda and CSO:s role as partners for cooperation and consultation is clearly acknowledged. This offers an opening to consolidate progress in relation to transparency, participation and accountability. CSO:s already facilitate participation and dialogue with local and national authorities, advocate and promote reforms in these fields and monitor performance of local and national government. However, advancements are uneven and sporadic, results fragile, legitimacy and representativeness sometimes weak and there is a need to further support efforts to institutionalise and strengthen civil society in this regard. That CSO:s fulfil this role is key to the democratic transition of the Western Balkans.

Greater political stability has provided possibilities for increased economic growth and decreased levels of conflict. Development however is also characterized by high levels of unemployment, rising inequality, rural underdevelopment, widespread corruption and a malfunctioning public administration and judicial system. Serbia finds itself in a dangerous position economically⁵ defined by poor management of public finances endangering the socioeconomic rights of citizens. In Kosovo unemployment levels are unsustainable leading to high levels of poverty for especially underrepresented groups such as women, youth and minorities. Despite recent positive developments Albania has been unable to bring down corruption and in Bosnia and Hercegovina, the structure of the state paralyzes development and hinders reconciliation.

Kosovo and Serbia recently succeeded in negotiating a historic agreement in an effort to normalize relations. The process, carefully supervised by the EU, has stabilized the situation and offers increased possibilities for cooperation between the two countries. Kosovo is however struggling with persistent inter-ethnic conflicts, similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina that shows dangerous tendencies of regression in this regard.

The international conventions on human rights have been ratified in most countries and the respect for human rights are legally protected. The implementation of these laws however is lacking. The political, cultural and socio-economic rights are frequently not respected, especially related to labour rights, and systems of sanctions are missing. Underrepresented groups, such as the Roma community, face discrimination at all levels of society, they lack access to education and proper housing, and are excluded from participating in public decision making. Workers possibilities to organise in the workplace are circumscribed by both threats

³ EU Progress report 2013

⁴ Nations in transition report 2014 Freedom House

⁵ News on Western Balkan Countries. www.euinside.eu

and unlawful dismissals from employers, high unemployment rates and the spread of precarious work. In some parts of the region the freedom to association and right to assemble is at risk. The wide spread corruption in the region further endangers the quality of judicial institutions and the right to access to justice.

In sum, the often low levels of citizen's engagement, weak legitimacy and capacity of CSO:s, corruption, poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, lack of respect for labour rights, citizens generalized lack of trust in institutions, all constitute threats to democratic development and stability in the region. They are crucial components of a functioning democratic society that respects the rights of its citizens as well as sustained and secure development. These matters are furthermore closely intertwined. The previous experience in the region and the analysis of our partners sustain this conclusion. Deficiency in these areas is a serious threat. Corruption is both a symptom of and a cause to poverty and malfunctioning democratic institutions⁶. Poverty in turn affects the extent of the informal sector, increasing the power of employers making it easier to abuse the rights of workers. The increased rate of unemployment in turn affects the entire economy, reduces the chances to quality jobs and decent work and limits access to socioeconomic rights. Women, youth, ethnic minorities, the Roma community and LGBT persons remain underrepresented to a large extent. These groups also suffer most from the unequal power structures that persevere in the region. Legitimate and representative CSO:s and trade unions are crucial in the struggle for an equal distribution of power, access to social justice and for a democratic society based on solidarity to be achieved. Social engagement and organising is central in this regard and the Swedish labour movement's experiences, tools, and networks is intimately linked to this. The strategy represents a long term commitment on behalf of the Palme Center to support sustainable change in relation to these challenges and their solutions.

POPULAR PARTICIPATION AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society in the Western Balkans has strengthened its position in the last five years. CSO:s are consulted more often than before in local and national decision making. There are also positive signs of progress in relation to the status and position of the sector as a whole and several changes in legislation, policy and budgets have been made taking into consideration the will of citizens. This due at large to successful negotiations and public pressure from civil society. There is reason for cautious optimism. Still, this process of democratic consolidation is only in its beginning and the lack of legitimacy of CSO:s remain a concern, generally characterized by low levels of popular participation and a weak popular base. This relates to both the lack of public trust in CSO:s as vehicles for change as well as limitations in the civic culture common for many post-communist states. As a consequence civil society generally lack dynamism and pluralism, which limit popular influence in decision making and public policy. The efforts to empower CSO:s that share our values and visions through increased organisational capacity, strengthened legitimacy and an expanded popular base therefor need to continue. As a representative body of the Swedish labour movement's international solidarity work our aim is to cooperate with CSO:s that are well anchored in a broad popular base characterised by high levels of membership and internal democracy. This will allow us to develop a close relationship with our partners. The Palme Center will intensify its support to partners' efforts in this regard. Improved institutional transparency is key to build both trust

⁶ Petros Sioussiouras and Ioannis Vavouras: Political rights, development and corruption in the Balkan and Arab Mediterranean countries.

and increased popular support and it is essential to convince and manage to involve local constituencies.

The underrepresentation of women, youth, ethnic minorities, Roma and LGBT lead to discrimination in different ways and at various levels. They are also more prone to poverty, and social exclusion, leading to limited possibilities to exercise their active citizenship and influence public policy that affect them. The Palme Center has a multifaceted understanding of poverty as emanating from the lack of power of individuals to change their own lives, including both material resources, knowledge and access to human rights. Therefore the Palme Center focuses its work on supporting popular mobilisation and organising, guaranteeing equal access to rights and dismantling power structures. The work to support the organising of these underrepresented groups will intensify in the period of this strategy with a clearer focus on the before mentioned specific thematic areas. Our experience is that social and political organising is a powerful tool for people to influence and define development. They increase popular engagement, enable active citizenship and democratic participation and thus contribute to social development and the emergence of a sustainable democracy. Notable achievements to build on relate to local Roma communities increased involvement in decision making in Kosovo, the advancement of women's political representation in Albania at a national level, greater civic engagement of youth in Bosnia and Hercegovina and the increased involvement by students in Serbia.

The Palme Center will continue to support partners' efforts in realigning with their constituencies and strengthen their popular base through the creation of membership, increased volunteerism and activism. A greater focus on trade union activism and popular education with study-circle methods will be prioritised since it has proven to be powerful tools of empowerment, mobilisation and inspiration, especially to underrepresented and stigmatized groups. As progress has already been made in this area over the past several years, the strategy aims at reinforcing these advancements by making interventions more direct and deliberate.

THREATS TO LABOUR RIGHTS

The right to freely organise is generally accepted but as a result of weak economic growth, the spread of precarious work, high unemployment and poverty levels as well as low levels of organising, workers situation in the labour market is increasingly difficult in the Western Balkans. Workers are also increasingly discriminated and exploited in the workplace, limiting their access to fundamental socioeconomic rights. The growing informal market within the region benefits many employers since there are no legal agreements that guarantees workers' rights within these sectors⁷. Employers continuously abuse existing legislation and benefit from unequal power structures. As a result, people compete with jobs through lower wages and poorer working conditions leading to increased poverty and corruption. Trade unions are frequently portrayed as hostile, separate interests in the media, creating a generalized negative public perception. These conditions prevent trade unions and limit their ability to assume the role as key players in enforcing labour rights. Organised labour also suffers from a number of internal weaknesses, partly because of historical ties to the state, inner divisions and fragmented representation in the work place. Similar to the rest of civil society, they many

⁷ Booklet: Making the system work. Ensuring decent work and quality jobs in the western Balkans. www.solidar.org

times lack legitimacy and trust, with low participation, a weak popular base and limits in their organisational capacity and a low representation of members.

The Palme Center recognises the guarantee to decent work as crucial to ensure socioeconomic rights as well as sustainable economic development. Without a system that provides social protection and structures for social dialogue the informal sector will continue to expand, having widespread negative effects on society at large. It is imperial to support trade unions and other labour organisations in their work to address labour rights. The Palme Center will continue its support to labour organisations in their fight for non-discrimination in the workplace, freedom to safe and healthy working conditions, freedom from child labour and freedom of association, as identified in the eight core conventions⁸ of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This lays at the core of the Swedish labour movement's international work, to support trade unions in their efforts to create basic systems for social protection allowing the economy to grow and to provide quality jobs. The strategy therefore includes an increased focus on strengthening the legitimacy of trade unions and other CSO:s working for access to decent work and the rights of workers.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND HIGH LEVELS OF CORRUPTION

Corruption constitutes one of the major challenges to democratic development and open and transparent political structures in the Western Balkans. The widespread corruption puts strain on economic and social development, is a threat to poverty reduction and limits access to socio-economic rights. In all four countries of focus in this strategy corruption is persistent and Albania and Kosovo the problem remains at an alarming level, getting the two lowest score in the Corruption Perception Index 2013⁹ in Europe. Citizens demonstrate low levels of trust to the public and private sector alike. The structural deficiencies underpinning corruption relate to an unreformed and malfunctioning judicial system, blurred separation of powers, lack of political will and interest, limited possibilities for citizen's influence and participation in decision making procedures, public and private procurements and investments as well as lack of resources, knowledge and capacity of public officials. Impunity in this field is a big problem and corruption cases are very seldom taken to court and if they are, rarely leads to a conviction. The correlation between political and democratic development and the reduction of corruption is highly significant. This relates to popular participation and engagement in elections off course but more importantly to active participation in public affairs. A vibrant democracy with a widespread public participation followed by transparency with access to information simply diminishes corruption. However, this requires not only a democratic adaptation but also a democratic tradition that takes time to build¹⁰. The allocation of political power, is also important in this regard, since decentralisation tends to facilitate both insight and participation. Positive developments can be seen at the local level in relation to increased public participation in decision making and increased access to information on budgetary procedures and policy making.

The Palme Center is determined to continue to support the capacities of civil society to hold public officials and politicians accountable and demand transparency in public and private institutions. To ensure transparency and accountability citizens need to organise collectively, demand that public officials at both local and national increase their cooperation with relevant parts of society, share information with the public as well as advocating for a functioning

⁸ NORMLEX. <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:71:0>

⁹ Corruptions Perceptions Index 2013

¹⁰ Petros Sioussiouras and Ioannis Vavouras: Political rights, development and corruption in the Balkan and Arab Mediterranean countries.

judicial system and good governance. It remains pivotal to support the legitimacy of partner organisations in this regard; to gain recognition as relevant platforms for organising and consultative partners to local and national governments. Furthermore the struggle for a free press and the freedom of speech, a judicial system with integrity, and increased transparency, are crucial to decrease the spread of corruption. This is also closely related to the role of CSO:s to monitor the implementation of political decisions and functioning of public institutions.

THE CONTINUED WORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Gender inequality constitutes a major barrier for women to enjoy equal rights in the Western Balkans because of the highly patriarchal structures that characterizes the entire region. There has been some progress regarding women's representation at the national level, with quotas being established in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. Positive developments in relation to the protection of women's rights has also been made, with new and improved legislation in place. However, the majority of women are still underrepresented in governmental and political bodies, especially at the local level, and are overrepresented in unemployment. Domestic violence remains a serious problem and women are subjected to sexual harassments and discrimination in the workplace. In Albania and Kosovo we can see positive developments as a result of the existing programme. Local organisations have managed to organise women in political processes and the support to women in political parties lead to the election of the first women being elected as mayor in Kosovo. In Albania, partners have lead the civil society coalition demanding respect for the gender quota in parliament, raising the level of women participation in the past elections. These are experiences to learn from, however more needs to be done and a more direct focus linking popular participation to political and socioeconomic rights is needed. The evaluation confirms the findings of a study commissioned by the Palme Center in 2013 within the Kosovo programme and points to the importance of continuing efforts not just in relation to increased gender equality at various levels in society but also in relation to the internal developments of CSO:s.

Persistent gender inequality hinders citizen participation and full enjoyment of rights. Emphasis in the strategy is thus placed on measures that lead to more equal distribution of power and recourses between the genders. The efforts relate to changes in society at large, but as with corruption, there is a need to strategically work with our own partners to increase their capacity and credibility as advocates for change. Peer learning in this regard will be explored further within the region. This would not only strengthen partners' understanding of gender relations but it also create opportunities for spontaneous and genuine regional cooperation.

THE SITUATION FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

During the last programme period general and local elections were held in all five countries of focus for the political party support in the Western Balkans. They were done in an open, free and fair manner, passing international procedural requirements, displaying however worrying trends in different ways. In Serbia and Macedonia (included in the PAO programme) increased autocracy and the high concentration of power of the ruling party poses a threat to positive developments, in BiH, nationalistic sentiments play a greater role once again and in Kosovo, the unclear constitutional situation hampered the formation of government for more than six months. Albania stands out in this regard as a positive example.

Most of the sister parties in the Western Balkans currently find themselves in a harsh climate, including harassments (Macedonia) and limited access to media (Serbia and Macedonia). In

Kosovo there is no sister party currently. In addition to this internal divisions and unclear political programmes and visions have led to a re-writing of the political landscapes and for the sister parties of the Palme Center in Serbia, Macedonia and FBiH the results in the last elections were devastating. In Albania however, the Socialist Party is currently in government. Organisational and programmatic reforms are needed to gain support and legitimacy. Hierarchical internal structures makes it difficult for party activists at the grassroots level to influence party politics, limiting internal democracy. Furthermore the political development and the national political context has in some cases made it difficult to implement programme activities and policies.

The party affiliated support has two significant areas of focus that are simultaneously contributing to the support to democracy. It places emphasis on strengthening relations between the trade unions and political parties and increases participation of underrepresented groups in decision making by working with think tanks that serves as a bridge to civil society. Relationships between trade unions and political party's helps strengthening both the parties and the trade unions which in a longer term is expected to have positive effects on the democratisation process as discussed in previous chapter. The support to sister parties in the region relates to a specific financial instrument and is implemented through a thematic programme. It is however, assessed as relevant to include it in this strategy.

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE PALME CENTER

The Palme Center's theory of change is firmly rooted in the conviction that social transformation and development is achieved through collective organising. When people come together they gain the power to shape the societies in which they live, and thereby their own lives. This is true in the fight against corruption, for gender equality as well as for achieving human rights and democracy more generally. For the countries in the Western Balkans, in a post-conflict situation and in the middle of a process of transition and democratic consolidation, civil society's role cannot be overstated. The thematic approach of this strategy align with the experiences and ongoing work of the Swedish labour movement. The strengthening of workers' rights, equality between women and men and an increased representativeness of underrepresented groups have been pivotal to the democratic development supported and led by the labour movement in Sweden. The Palme Center's member organisations offer an exceptional source of experience in terms of organising civil society for social change as well as providing access to a vast international network of sister organisations and institutions. As the Swedish labour movement's international development organisation, the Palme Center was formed to foster and support relationships of international solidarity and the struggle of collective organising. There is a strong belief in the transformative power of the organisation of civil society, and especially labour movements, to drive processes of transition towards democracy. The labour movement's broad popular base organising with a specific common interest, and a defined collective identity defined by common experiences, has a potentially great capacity for extensive and effective coordination of interests¹¹. The Palme Center's organisational history, identity and structure provides a constructive platform for more equal and close relationships. The idea of international solidarity, characterising our partner relations, defines cooperation as an agreement between equal partners. Local ownership, transparency and responsiveness is a precondition to accomplish this. The work to achieve it is reflected in the partnership with CSO:s in the Western Balkans and has been verified in partner assessments. In its work the OPC and its member organisations carries out

¹¹ J. Samuel Valenzuela 1988, Labour movements in transitions to democracy: A framework for analysis

several activities in providing possibilities for education, exchange of best practices, regional networking among partners and with Swedish member organisations as well as other international institutions in an effort to build relationships based on solidarity.

The Palme Center has more than twenty years of experience of working in the Western Balkans for sustainable peace, reconciliation and democracy and has established itself as a well-recognised international partner in this regard. We seek cooperation with organisations that share our values and goals for a democratic society based on solidarity. The results achieved so far in the programme provides a good basis for continued engagement and has broad reach. Our partners have developed mechanisms for civic participation at both the local and national level, institutionalising them in some cases. This is true for participatory budgeting processes in Albania and Kosovo, local forums combating corruption in Serbia and broad grassroots engagement in BiH. Through advocacy campaigns change in legislation and public structures has been achieved. In Albania this has led to changes in the legislation governing both women's representation and the formal coordination of civil society, in Serbia partner propositions have been included in the government's strategy for fighting corruption and in Kosovo partners have been organised to influence the national strategy on culture. The focus on real and substantive change in society is at the heart of the cooperation and guiding the implementation of the programme. When necessary change in project plans and focus is therefore facilitated as long as it is in line with the objectives of the programme. The focus on achieving results, flexibility and sensitivity towards existing needs is recurrently underlined by local partners as an added value of the cooperation with the Palme Center.

The Palme Center's regional approach and programmatic structure offers a platform for networking and exchange of experience between partners. Since the development in the region is heterogeneous, defined by dualism and unevenness in progress, access to different realities and experiences has been constructive so far in the programme. When offered the possibility to engage in joint action, partners, albeit hesitant in the beginning, have taken initiatives in this regard. In the accession process the importance of the exchange of experiences among civil society organisations will only increase and it forms a significant part of the current strategy.

In the present situation of heightened polarisation and increased politisation of public institutions in the region, the value of an international donor as a more unbiased and neutral party is expressed in dialogue with partners. The newly established official support structures lack the trust of ordinary citizens and there are worrying signs of political influence and control when attributing funds. This more general value of external support further motivates continued engagement.

The method of outcome mapping used in the Western Balkan programme strengthens ownership and allows for partners to set their own strategies. It promotes the involvement of partners when identifying challenges and defining objectives as well as measures needed to tackle them. To make this happen the method proscribes a close partnership and an active presence in the field, close to partner activities. The central place that dialogue and joint analysis has in Outcome mapping and in the process of "harvesting results" is interactive and participatory. In this way it fits well with the Palme Center's understanding of equal partnerships. The Palme Center's local offices plays a key role in this regard, making a close and informed partnership possible. It further contributes to the fulfilment of the ambitions set out in the Paris Agenda¹², and the Accra and Busan agreements subsequent increased focus on

¹² Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action. www.oecd.org

ownership, inclusive partnerships, and capacity development¹³ that requires close and consistent interaction. The support mechanisms established in the Palme Center's Western Balkans programme, coupled with a shared political vision for increased social justice with our partners provide the necessary conditions to comply with such criteria and add to our comparative advantage in relation to bigger institutions with less possibilities of being flexible, responsive and close to partner activities.

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

Programme 1: Reform Cooperation Western Balkan Programme¹⁴

Vision

Political and social processes in the region are transparent and participatory, reflecting the rights and interests of empowered and organised citizens that hold decision makers accountable.

Mission

To strengthen the capacity and legitimacy of civil society organisations and support activities that ensure the participatory nature of political processes and the accountability of local and national official duty bearers. Civil society organisations will encourage activism and mobilize citizens on issues related to corruption, labour rights, gender equality, and the empowerment of underrepresented groups in their work toward social justice.

Programme 2: CSO Western Balkan Programme

Overall objective

Political, social and economic policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are transparent, harmonized, integrated, and implemented, reflecting the rights and interests of equal, empowered and organised citizens.

Programme objective

Underrepresented groups and workers succeed in creating and influence changes that safeguard their rights and interests and close the gap between different groups in society.

Intermediate objective 1

Labour rights have been strengthened with more efficient forms of trade union organising, increased access to collective bargaining deals, and an established positive image of trade unions.

Intermediate objective 2

Partner organisations have strengthened their capacity to internally allow and externally ensure access of underrepresented groups and workers to decision making processes, and have developed an ability to work in cross-sector partnership.

Intermediate objective 3

Individuals and groups that are underrepresented due to gender, ethnicity, and their socioeconomic situation are empowered to negotiate for their rights and interests and are able to utilize their skills to empower others.

¹³ Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation. www.oecd.org

¹⁴ The programme works with a different results based framework, Outcome Mapping, and the concepts Vision and Mission is therefore used here.