



The role of civil society organizations in the fight against corruption in North Macedonia



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Executive summary

Citizens in both 2023 and 2021 consider corruption to be the most serious societal issue. It is worth noting that 63.5% of respondents, up from 46.1% in 2021, consider corruption to be the most serious issue among the alternatives presented. According to the citizens, the existence of a moral crisis in our society, the inefficiency of the judicial system in the fight against corruption, the desire for quick personal enrichment of those in power, and the inadequate protection of those who report corruption are "to blame" for this situation. In this setting, civil society organisations become crucial players in the fight against corruption, frequently playing a significant role in promoting transparency, accountability, and integrity in society.

Although the legal framework guarantees that the state will not interfere in the internal affairs of associations, foundations, and other types of non-profit entities, civil society organisations continue to face a variety of pressures, particularly those working in the fields of good governance and anti-corruption. On the other hand, there are both official and unofficial collaboration mechanisms between civil society organisations and state authorities. The Council for Cooperation with Civil Society and the Government, the Unit for Cooperation with NGOs, and the network of public officials for monitoring the implementation of the Strategy are the main institutions and mechanisms in charge of facilitating cooperation between the Government and civil society organisations as a whole, while individual institutions choose to include and consult representatives of civil society organisations in their work in other ways: participation in work groups and workshops, conferences etc.; from campaigning for legal reforms and policy changes to carrying out long-term anti-corruption measures, the actions and activities given demonstrate proactive participation and persistence. On the other hand, combined initiatives including civil society organisations, state institutions, and other stakeholders (media) demonstrate the power of collaboration in promoting long-term change.

In the fight against corruption, effective collaboration among civil society organisations, government institutions, and funders is critical. The proposals in the document seek to inspire stakeholders to undertake effective anti-corruption measures by fostering tighter collaboration and exploiting each stakeholder's capabilities. Civil society organisations lobby, raise awareness, and monitor; donors provide critical resources and assistance; and the government plays an important role in policy formation and implementation. Through cooperative efforts led by transparency and accountability, they may accomplish big reforms and develop a system that is more resistant to corruption.

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Introduction: Understanding the role of civil society organizations in the fight against corruption

Corruption poses a severe threat to the stability and prosperity of North Macedonia. It has invaded all aspects of society, eroding faith in institutions, impeding economic progress, and disrupting social flows.

Citizens in both 2023 and 2021 consider corruption to be the most serious societal issue. It is worth noting that 63.5% of respondents, up from 46.1% in 2021, consider corruption to be the most serious issue among the alternatives presented.¹ According to the citizens, the existence of a moral crisis in our society, the inefficiency of the judicial system in the fight against corruption, the desire for quick personal enrichment of those in power, and the inadequate protection of those who report corruption are "to blame" for this situation.

Furthermore, the European Commission's Report on North Macedonia for 2023² is quite concerning in this regard. The progress ratings in this report are lower than previous year³, thus instead of "some progress," the majority grade is "no progress" or "limited" improvement. In this report, the ratings of the judiciary and the fight against corruption are particularly concerning as important areas on which the whole path of EU membership discussions rests. In the subject of corruption, it has been highlighted that there is no progress, and in particular, great worry is voiced over the repercussions of amendments to specific laws.

In this context, civil society organizations become key participants in the fight against corruption and often play a major role in promoting transparency, accountability and integrity in society. However, only a few civil society organisations operate in the area of corruption. Only 35 of the 16,500 registered organisations were⁴ identified as engaged in this subject. The majority of the organisations are centred in bigger cities (24 out of 35 are in Skopje), which is understandable given the obstacles that civil society organisations confront, such as pressure, funding, and concern for their safety. However, through their diverse activities, from advocacy and awareness-raising to monitoring and detection of cases, empower citizens and complement government efforts in the fight against corruption. By engaging communities, mobilizing resources and advocating for policy reforms, CSOs contribute to increasing resilience to corruption in North Macedonia.

This policy paper investigates the multifunctional role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the fight against corruption, with a focus on North Macedonia. By exploring the mechanisms through which CSOs cooperate with the government, presenting (successful) examples of CSO initiatives in efforts to fight corruption, and analysing the challenges for financial sustainability, the

¹ [Corruption Assessment Report in North Macedonia 2023 - Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation - MCIC \(mcms.mk\)](#)

² Report of the EC for North Macedonia for 2023, www.sep.gov.mk

³ Report of the EC for North Macedonia for 2022, www.sep.gov.mk

⁴ Global Initiative, Stronger Together, bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WBalkans-CSOs-web.pdf>

document eventually offers recommendations for stakeholders in North Macedonia who want to improve the effectiveness of anti-corruption strategies.

Civil society organizations in the fight against corruption: Reinforcing their role

Challenges faced by CSOs in the fight against corruption

The legal framework assures that the state will not interfere with the internal operations of organisations, foundations, and other non-profit institutions. CSOs are independent, and the law assures that their internal structure and operation will be regulated. CSO pressure remains strong, despite the government's public abandonment of the De-Sorosization campaign, which claimed that CSOs were attempting to overthrow the government⁵. In a survey conducted by the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation in early 2021, among 293 CSOs, only 1% claimed to have faced government obstacles in their internal work; 1.7% experienced financial pressure through various audits; 2.4% reported unannounced inspections; 5.1% reported other forms of state interference in their work; and 5.5% faced threats from state officials.

Cooperation mechanisms of CSOs with state institutions

Three major institutions and mechanisms are in charge of facilitating cooperation between the government and civil society organisations as a whole: the Council for Cooperation with Civil Society and the Government, the NGO Cooperation Unit, and the network of public officials in charge of monitoring the Strategy's implementation. The major mechanism, the Council for Cooperation, was most active between April 2018 and 2020, with 27 sessions⁶ held. According to the published notes, the meetings concentrated on planning goals, criteria, and other issues concerning CSO funding from the state budget, choosing and electing members to various bodies, document discussion and review, etc.

In 2022, the Council held 4 sessions focused on state funding of CSOs. In the first quarter, the Council reacted to the Government's decision to cut MKD 15 million that are annually allocated to CSOs through an open call by the Secretariat. Following the Government's favourable response, CSO leaders resolved to boycott at a themed session on April 6, 2022, unless the Government's decision was altered. Furthermore, they decided to call the President of the Government to a meeting, but when they did not receive a good reaction again, they continued the boycott, and no meeting has been conducted since⁷.

⁵ Global Initiative, Stronger Together, bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WBalkans-CSOs-web.pdf>

⁶ [Council for cooperation between the Government and civil society | The department for cooperation with non-governmental organizations \(nvosorabotka.gov.mk\)](https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk/en/council-for-cooperation-between-the-government-and-civil-society)

⁷ Ibid

According to the findings of a 2022⁸ civil society poll, 36% of civil society organisations believe the Council to be a relevant authority for collaboration and influence in policy development. There is no specific authority for collaboration between civil society organisations and state institutions save for anti-corruption measures, however there is a representation of civil society organisations for democracy and good governance inside the Council for collaboration.

In addition to these institutionalized ways of cooperation, individual state institutions cooperate with civil society organizations in different ways through their inclusion in working groups, workshops, meetings, etc.

Case Studies: Examples of anti-corruption initiatives of civil society organizations

The following are various case studies, initiatives, and actions led by CSOs to demonstrate their effect in avoiding and fighting corruption. These projects demonstrate proactive participation and persistence by pressing for law reforms and policy changes as well as conducting long-term anti-corruption activities. Joint initiatives involving civil society organisations, governmental institutions and other stakeholders (media) demonstrate the importance of partnerships in fostering long-term improvements.

Participation and reactions of civil society organizations in adopting and changing laws and policies

Civil organisations working in this area, particularly through the Platform of Civil Organisations for the Fight Against Corruption, participate in the consultative process of developing good governance and anti-corruption policies and regulations.

Namely, civil society organizations were part of the process of passing the *Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest in 2019*. In addition, members of the Platform are part of the working groups for amending the Law on the Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest, drafting the *Law on Senior Management Service*, amending the *Law on the Protection of Whistleblowers*. Members of the platform withdrew from the working group for drafting the *Law on confiscation of property in civil proceedings*.

CSOs also engaged in the adoption and modification processes for the *National Strategy 2021-2025*, which were organised by the SCPC in 2023. The Deputy Prime Minister in charge of good governance policies also invited them to participate in the process of developing the *Work Plan for good governance policies for 2024*.

Draft law on confiscation of property in civil proceedings

⁸ Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development Country Brief for North Macedonia 2022 [North-Macedonia-MM-Brief-2022.pdf \(mcms.mk\)](#)

A working group led by the Vice-President of the Government in charge of good governance policies has prepared a draft law on property confiscation in civil proceedings, which will be submitted to the EU and the Venice Commission for feedback, and then considered at a public hearing before the general public, in order to pass a functional and applicable law in accordance with international standards. According to the government, such a law is required to boost the fight against corruption in the country⁹. Taking the time constraints and dynamics of the working group into consideration for this law, the Platform of Civil Organisations for the Fight against Corruption resigned from the group, acknowledging that the flaws found in the proposed language cannot be completely addressed. In addition to shortcomings in the consultation process, the Platform believes that there is a lack of adequate analysis of the state of affairs and the justification of such a legal solution, and that such an analysis will show that the state's legal framework already has mechanisms for the confiscation of property, which are not properly applied¹⁰.

Amendments to the Criminal Code

The most recent revisions to the Criminal Code of 2023 were enacted via a simplified procedure with a European flag. The modifications were received with widespread criticism and outrage in the public and civil sectors¹¹. The amendments reduced the penalties under Article 353 of the Criminal Code, which refers to abuse of official duty and authority, and eliminated the provision for sanctioning abuse of official position and authority during public procurement or to the detriment of the budget and public funds, and penalties reduction has been applied to the offence for criminal association from Article 394. By decreasing the amount of fines for the specified offences, the period of their statute of limitations was lowered, and the modifications removed the protracted seizure of unlawfully obtained property.

The Corridor Case

In July 2021, the Parliament passed a law designating a strategic partner for the building of corridor 8 and a portion of corridor 10. This statute exempted the project from the application of the statute on Public Procurement, and the contract was given immediately without a competitive procedure. In addition to the reactions of some state institutions, several civil society organisations have reacted to the disputed law, including the Platform of civil society organisations for the fight against corruption, which has requested that the agenda of the RNM Assembly session be withdrawn.

The request was filed because the Platform believes that the entire procedure poses a danger of corruption by evading general legislation. Despite these reactions, the Constitutional Court chose

⁹ Grkovska: There will be a broad public debate on the Law on confiscation of property in civil proceedings after receiving the opinions of the EU and the Venice Commission | Government of the Republic North Macedonia (vlada.mk)

¹⁰ [Letter to the Platform] Withdrawal from the working group for the creation of the Law on confiscation of property in civil proceedings – Anti-corruption | Anti-corruption platform (antikorupcija.mk)

¹¹ Criminal Code (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 37/1996)

not to commence proceedings or review the contested statute, and the justices provided no reason for their decision.

Request to stop the pressure on independent institutions in the fight against corruption

The platform of civil organisations for the fight against corruption requests that representatives of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia cease putting pressure on independent institutions working in the fight against corruption and ensure their smooth operation and fulfilment of their mandates. Criticisms of the fulfilment of any institution's mandate are well-intended and legitimate as long as they are supported by facts and results accomplished or not reached. Otherwise, when complaints are based on personal or general judgements and originate from high-ranking officials, they are regarded a direct pressure on the operation of the institutions¹².

Multiannual activities/initiatives implemented by civil society organizations

- The Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation is a long-standing organisation dedicated to promoting good governance and fighting corruption. For over a decade, the EU has supported the operations of the Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI), which promotes good governance and fights corruption. SELDI, led by MCMS, began implementing the new regional four-year programme in January 2023, with a total budget of MKD 90.6 million, which aims to improve participatory democracy and the process of getting closer to the EU by consolidating and strengthening the influence of civil society in the creation of policies and reform processes in the Western Balkans region in the areas of anti-corruption, the rule of law, and good governance¹³. In addition, "Citizens Against Corruption Activity" is a USAID-funded programme operated by MCMS¹⁴. The goal of this programme is to strengthen citizen participation and collaboration in the fight against corruption among civil society, the media, and the commercial sector. The programme began to be executed in April 2023 and will be implemented over a period of five years, with a total budget of MKD 345.5 million.
- Transparency International's GlobaLeaks reporting platform allows users to denounce wrongdoing anonymously through a conversation with a legal centre¹⁵. Additional EU TIs, in collaboration with regional partners supported by the EU and SMART Balkans, are working to empower citizens and civil society actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey to hold political office holders accountable for the integrity of political funding, lawmaking, and resource distribution¹⁶. It supports citizens in the fight

¹² [Request to stop the pressure on independent institutions in the fight against corruption - Anti-corruption | Anti-corruption platform \(antikorupcija.mk\)](#)

¹³ [Regional anti-corruption network \(RAN\) - Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation - MCIC \(mcms.mk\)](#)

¹⁴ [2468-gragjanite-protiv-korupcijata.pdf \(mcms.mk\)](#)

¹⁵ [Report corruption - Transparency International \(transparency.mk\)](#)

¹⁶ [Monitoring integrity in the Western Balkans and Turkey: CSOs in the fight against corruption with data on political integrity - Transparency International \(transparency.mk\)](#)

against corruption by strengthening the quality of democratic administration in Southeast Europe through a project executed from June 2022 to June 2024¹⁷.

- The Center for Civil Communications has also been working for many years in the field of fighting corruption, with a focus on public procurement. So, for more than 10 years, it has been analyzing the spending of public money by following the implementation of public procurements¹⁸, and in the last 5 years, in addition, as part of the Balkan Tender Watch coalition, it has been working on detecting vulnerable points for corruption in the public procurement systems of the Western Balkan countries through comparative monitoring and analysis based on pre-established and verified methodology and consultation with stakeholders; to provide timely and comprehensive information and analyzes on the state of public procurement in the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as to propose recommendations for changes in public procurement systems that would contribute to the reduction of corruption in public procurement in the countries of the Western Balkans¹⁹.
- Strengthening Municipal Resilience to Corruption in North Macedonia is a project supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which will be implemented by NDI over a period of 11 years and a budget of MKD 700.4 million.

Joint activities of civil organizations and state institutions

- The IDSCS analysis "Anti-corruption 2030: Foresight analysis of future and current corruption challenges"²⁰ aims to contribute to anti-corruption strategic planning. It examines potential scenarios for corruption and the fight against it until 2030, as well as how institutions can address future challenges. The analysis is an example of effective collaboration between a civil organisation, the country's primary anti-corruption organisations, and members of civil society²¹.
- The USAID-supported "Partnership Against Corruption Activity" programme²² commenced implementation in Q3 2023. This programme will be implemented over five years, with a total budget of MKD 691.2 million. This programme will assist the RNM Government and its institutions in fighting corruption while also increasing transparency and accountability.
- EU support for the rule of law²³ is a project created to support relevant institutions working in the field of justice, law enforcement, fighting corruption, and promoting and protecting

¹⁷ [Promoting active participation of citizens to fight corruption in Southeast Europe - Transparency International \(transparency.mk\)](https://www.transparency.mk)

¹⁸ [Centre for Civil Communications – Monitoring public procurement \(2008-2024\) \(ccc.org.mk\)](https://www.ccc.org.mk)

¹⁹ [Centre for Civil Communications – Balkan Tender Watch \(2023-2024\) \(ccc.org.mk\)](https://www.ccc.org.mk)

²⁰ Anti-corruption 2030: Foresight analysis of future and current corruption challenges [Antikorupcija-2030.pdf \(idsocs.org.mk\)](https://www.idsocs.org.mk)

²¹ [B5 scenario 2023MKD.pdf \(idsocs.org.mk\)](https://www.idsocs.org.mk)

²² <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/PAC%20March%202024.pdf>

²³ [Anti-Corruption - Rolaw - EU Support for Rule of Law](https://www.europa.eu)

fundamental and human rights to improve their capacities, effectiveness, and impact through multilateral access.

Ensuring longevity: Financial stability of civil society organizations

Civil society organizations in North Macedonia face a series of challenges, the most obvious of which is securing financial resources for their sustainability.

State financing of civil organizations

The Law on Associations and Foundations (Article 49) and the Law on Games of Chance and Entertainment Games control CSOs' financial support from the budget. However, additional regulations provide for the potential of financial assistance, not only from the budget, but also from the budgets of municipalities, including the municipalities in the City of Skopje and the City of Skopje itself. In 2022, civil society organisations received MKD 307,999,072 from the central budget. Of these money, MKD 213,882,847 were allocated by public notification, whereas 94,116,225 have not been notified.

Taking the entire income of civil society organisations, state financing, or money from the central budget into consideration, it accounts for 4%²⁴. Additionally, in 2022, municipalities dedicated just 0.1% of their budget to citizens' groups. In 2022, municipalities will give EUR 6.6 million under budget item 463 - "Transfers to non-governmental organisations". At the same time, more than 90% of the money was provided to sports clubs, which in certain towns got up to EUR 1 million each year²⁵.

Support from the donor community

Over the previous two years, the donor community has boosted its financial assistance in the theme areas of good governance and anti-corruption. According to data from the Central Conor Assistance Database (CDAD) of the Government of RNM obtained through the Request for Access to Public Information from the Secretariat for European Affairs (SEA), foreign aid in the amount of MKD 575 million was registered in these thematic areas between January 1, 2022 and October 31, 2023. In 2022, MKD 120 million were registered, and as of October 2023, MKD 455 million has been registered. USAID and the US Embassy in Skopje are the largest donors, with MKD 404 million. The EU comes in second with EUR 158 million, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Norway and the UNHCR also contribute with MKD 7.4 million and MKD 2.8 million, respectively. The remaining registered funds reflect minimal international or bilateral funding. Unlike in the past, when donor support was mostly focused on bolstering state

²⁴ [Only 4% is the share of state funding in the income of civil society organizations for 2022. - Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation - MCIC \(mcms.mk\)](#)

²⁵ [CCC: Sports clubs - favourites of the municipalities – DW – 20.12.2023](#)

institutions as the primary anti-corruption players, the donor community has recently increased its support for other stakeholders.

Aligning efforts in the fight against corruption: how to proceed?

In the fight against corruption, effective collaboration among civil society organisations, government institutions, and funders is critical. These proposals attempt to assist stakeholders to undertake effective anti-corruption measures by fostering tighter collaboration and exploiting the capabilities of various parties. Civil society organisations lobby, raise awareness, and monitor; donors provide critical resources and assistance; and the government plays an important role in policy formation and implementation. Through cooperative efforts driven by transparency and accountability, they may accomplish big reforms and develop a system that is more resistant to corruption.

Recommendations for civil society organizations

- It is of crucial importance that more civil society organizations engage in the field of good governance and the fight against corruption. Although the space for civil society is narrowing, CSOs should continue their work not only in the fight against corruption, but also by raising collective awareness of the impact of corruption on other related areas. To achieve this, civil society needs to be innovative in employing tools such as (large) open databases, artificial intelligence, and social media.
- CSOs should develop a more significant partnership and cooperation mechanisms between the government and civil society organizations that will allow more CSOs to be involved in all phases of processes of enacting/leading political, legal and strategic reforms.
- Direct meetings and consultations between government representatives/officials and CSOs should be part of the daily functioning of these stakeholders. Apart from monitoring, indications and requests, civil society organizations should also be proactive in these processes by sending short memos, documents with opinions and proposals for improving existing or preparing new measures and policies.
- CSOs should enhance their cooperation with other non-state actors, especially the media, in order to increase their visibility, presence in public, transmission of independent views and opinions as well as indications and detection of corrupt actions.
- Networking and greater cooperation between CSOs, especially in research and advocacy activities.

Policy recommendations for representatives of state institutions/bodies

- The government should demonstrate real political will to fight corruption by involving all stakeholders in this process. This means implementing transparent and accountable consultative processes at all stages that will lead to the creation of anti-corruption policies tailored to the needs of citizens, not individuals.

- Government representatives should show their willingness and readiness to improve the dialogue and cooperation with CSOs by enabling their engagement in the process of creating public policies through the exchange of information and consultations, as well as by nominating representatives of CSOs in temporary and permanent working bodies when dealing with the problem of corruption.
- It is necessary to improve financing for civil society organizations in general and civil society organizations that work in the field of good governance and the fight against corruption, as well as to establish mechanisms for transparent financing of these projects.
- It is necessary to participate and support activities of the existing anti-corruption networks of CSOs, and to initiate the creation of new ones in order to ensure better dialogue and more efficient cooperation of the competent state authorities and institutions with CSOs.
- Participation in public debates and other public actions, as well as finding a way to involve citizens in these activities.

Recommendations for donors and the international community

- Donors should rely more on the national expertise of CSOs and provide flexibility in selecting projects for financing based on the needs identified on the ground.
- The international community should focus more on mediating and enabling dialogue and cooperation between civil society and government.
- Networks (formal and informal) of CSOs working in the field of good governance and the fight against corruption should be more encouraged and supported, as they are an important element for improving expertise in order to improve and more constructive cooperation with state institutions.

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