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MLADEN OSTOJIĆ
NAOMI VAN STEENBERGEN

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania
www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro

Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



MLADEN OSTOJIĆ

Born in 1982, in Yugoslavia

Ph.D. in Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary,
University of London

Dissertation: *International Judicial Intervention and Regime Change in Serbia
2000-2010*

Researcher, Balkans Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), 2013-2014

Junior Fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies, Central European University
(Hungary), 2012-2013

Teaching Assistant, University of London (UK), 2007-2012

Research Assistant, Queen Mary, University of London (UK), 2011-2012

Analyst, Ministry for International Economic Relations, Republic of Serbia,
2005

Articles published in scholarly journals and chapters in edited volumes

Book:

*Between Justice and Stability: The Politics of War Crimes Prosecutions in
Post-Milošević Serbia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014)

THE POLITICS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ASSISTANCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Abstract

This paper discusses the nature and purpose of foreign assistance in the Western Balkans through an examination of donor strategies and practices for supporting civil society. It draws on a series of interviews with donor representatives across the region to challenge the current conceptualisations of foreign assistance as a tool for promoting democracy and building good governance. I argue that donor intervention in the region should be understood as a short-term support to the region's integration in the EU, rather than a long-term developmental project. As a result, donor practices have contributed to the emergence of a project-based, donor-driven NGO scene that is detached from the local communities.

Keywords: foreign assistance, development cooperation, civil society, democratisation, Western Balkans

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, international donor organisations and implementing agencies have been the driving force behind the development of civil society in the Western Balkans (WB).¹ International intervention has spurred the creation of a myriad of civil society organisations (CSOs) whose activities essentially consisted in implementing foreign-funded projects in areas spanning from democracy promotion and human rights protection to social care, environment and culture. The dependency of these organisations on foreign funding has made their subsistence contingent upon donor presence in the region, which has been increasingly questioned in the last few years.

The 2008 financial crisis has indeed set off a significant debate on foreign aid within and between developed countries. The austerity measures introduced by many Western governments have led some

politicians in these countries to call for the reallocation of resources from development cooperation to domestic spending. These pressures for the reduction of foreign aid have not been inconsequential. For the first time since the mid-1990s, the OECD registered a decrease in overall Official Development Assistance (ODA) for two successive years in 2011 and 2012.² A number of donor countries, such as the UK and the Netherlands, have decided to cut down their programmes in middle-income countries such as India and South-Africa which are now considered as emerging economies. Furthermore, the OECD is currently considering reviewing the way ODA is counted in order to include private sector investment in the computation. This move has been criticised as an attempt to stretch the definition of ODA in order to allow some countries to reach the UN target of spending 0,7% of their GNI on aid without increasing the allocation of aid.³

These developments are a source of concern for the NGO community in the Western Balkans. The region is one of the biggest beneficiaries of EU aid, Europe being the most important donor in the world (EU-managed and member-state aid combined). A significant share of EU programmes in the Balkans are either implemented through CSOs or aimed at the development of civil society. While the EU will continue to provide assistance in the medium- to long-term, this is not the case of bilateral and multilateral donors who have also been a significant source of support for civil society. Many bilateral and multilateral donors have indeed phased out or reduced their activities in some WB countries, which has caused anxiety about the sustainability of civil society in the region.

In spring 2013, I was commissioned to carry out research on donor strategies and practices for supporting civil society in the WB on behalf of the Balkans Civil Society Development Network.⁴ The objective of this research was to explore the motives and intentions of foreign intervention through an analysis of official thinking and policy-making on civil society assistance among donor representatives in the region. As part of this study, I have conducted 70 face-to-face interviews with representatives of multilateral, bilateral and private donors and implementing agencies in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. This paper draws on this research in order to explore the politics of donor assistance to civil society in the WB. It begins with an overview of the different conceptualisations of donor intervention in the Balkans before delving into the modalities used by donors to plan their activities and channel their assistance to civil society. The conclusion highlights the

tensions and contradictions between donors' purported goals and their practices on the ground.

1. Conceptualising Donor Intervention in the Western Balkans

International donors and implementing agencies came to the Balkans in the 1990s in response to the humanitarian crisis generated by the wars of Yugoslav succession. The magnitude of this intervention was colossal: the post-conflict reconstruction effort deployed by the international community in Bosnia and Kosovo was more important than any other international state-building project since WWII.⁵ According to Ivana Howard, the international aid outpaced the Marshall Plan in terms of dollar per capita amounts of aid 7 times in Bosnia-Herzegovina and 4 times in Kosovo.⁶ Between 1996 and 2007, \$14 billion in international aid was poured into reconstruction efforts in Bosnia alone. This post-conflict reconstruction effort was coupled with post-socialist democratisation and marketisation policies that were in place throughout the region. As a result, the existing literature has essentially approached the study of donor practices in the Balkans through the lens of "democracy promotion".

A. Civil Society Assistance as a Form of Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion can be broadly defined as "the assistance that is primarily and directly designed to inculcate or enhance liberal democratic values, institutions and practices".⁷ This concept incorporates a variety of practices and objectives associated with donor intervention. Thomas Carothers has drawn a distinction between political and developmental approaches to democracy promotion.⁸ The political approach refers to a narrow conception of democracy focused on elections and liberties, and involving direct support for pro-democratic political actors and civil society groups challenging authoritarian governments. The developmental approach involves a long-term intervention which incorporates socio-economic concerns in the concept of democracy and seeks to promote socio-economic development as a way of supporting democracy. While these two approaches are substantially different, they are nonetheless compatible and most donors use both approaches to democracy promotion.⁹

During the 1990s, donors largely resorted to the political approach in their attempts to promote democracy in the WB. This was particularly the case in Serbia, and to a certain extent, Croatia, where foreign assistance was channelled to pro-democratic groups that were acting in opposition to the nationalist authoritarian regimes of Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman. Following the Kosovo conflict, regime change in Serbia became a priority for Western governments. Through an exceptional democracy promotion effort, the American and West European public and private foundations substantially contributed to the ‘electoral revolution’ that led to the downfall of Milošević in October 2000. The strategy deployed by Western donors consisted in bolstering the credibility of the elections through parallel vote counts and monitoring, strengthening opposition political parties, fostering public belief in the desirability and possibility of change, and supporting a massive Get-Out-the-Vote campaign.¹⁰ While the opposition parties were the principal recipients of assistance, a substantial proportion of the aid was channelled to civil society and independent media which played a key role both in advocating political change, promoting voter turn-out and monitoring the elections. This model was later emulated in the ‘colour revolutions’ that took place in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan where Serbian activists were directly involved in training and supporting local organisations.

It is interesting to note that the political approach to democracy promotion was not entirely phased out following the overthrow of Milošević. Marlene Spoerri’s research shows how this type of assistance was reintroduced in 2004 in response to the electoral success of the nationalist parties which were deemed to be anti-democratic.¹¹ The American and German political foundations were at the forefront of this renewed effort at bolstering the performance of the pro-democratic parties. According to Spoerri, donors sponsored the creation of a database with the location, voting habits, and socio-economic profiles of voters across Serbia which allowed for targeted Go-Out-To-Vote campaigns to increase turnout of those voters supporting ‘democratic parties’.¹² While this effectively amounted to overt political involvement, donors sought to avoid accusations of political interference by channelling their assistance to ostensibly non-partisan CSOs. Spoerri argues that these practices were in fact counter-productive as they increased political polarisation, eroded public confidence in recipient parties, and created a dependency on donors among recipients instead of developing their capacities.¹³

Nevertheless, the bulk of foreign assistance in the 2000s fitted in the “developmental approach” to democracy promotion. In the early 2000s, donors’ priorities shifted from “top down” restructuring and democratization to efforts to develop participation, active cooperation, deliberation and reciprocal trust.¹⁴ In this context, civil society development became a key tool for promoting citizen participation and widening the representation of interests. This essentially consisted in the multiplication of civil society organisations, the building of their administrative capacities, and the promotion of civic engagement at the local level. USAID, which was the most important donor in the region at the time, implemented several major programmes that sought to encourage civic engagement and create a demand for democracy from the “ground up”.¹⁵ The idea was to foster democracy by engaging citizens in the design and implementation of development projects at the local level. These programmes were theoretically underpinned by the notion of social capital popularised by Robert Putnam in the 1990s.¹⁶ The concept of social capital, which emphasised the role of civic engagement in institutional performance and socio-economic development, became extremely popular among policy-makers and practitioners as it provided them with practical tools for measuring the impact of their programmes.¹⁷

USAID’s Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA) programme was emblematic of this approach. This programme consisted in creating community boards that deliberated and contributed to decision making on the design and implementation of local development projects in municipalities across Serbia. CRDA thus coupled socio-economic development with democracy-building, with a strong emphasis on the latter. The programme did not envisage the completion of projects as an end goal nor did it pay much attention to sustainability – the main thrust was on civic mobilization and ethnic tolerance.¹⁸ At the time, this was one of the largest US investments in post-conflict democracy promotion: CRDA was a \$200 million program working in 325 communities throughout Serbia over 5 years. The programme was subsequently replicated in Iraq and Central Asia.¹⁹

As one of the most important democracy assistance programmes in the Western Balkans, CRDA was subject to substantial analysis and criticism from practitioners and academics. The programme was indeed heavily criticised for attempting to circumvent local governmental and non-governmental structures. Instead of engaging with local CSOs, the programme was entirely implemented by American organisations which

relied heavily on international staff and had limited knowledge of the local context.²⁰ As a result, local stakeholders had little ownership over the design and implementation of the program. Even those American implementing agencies that embraced partnerships with local organisations and devolved ownership to local stakeholders were excluded from participating in the programme.²¹ CRDA was also criticised for failing to accommodate local constructions of power by attempting to circumvent established political structures (such as the *Mesne Zajednice*), which proved counter-productive for the implementation of the programme activities.²² This reflects a broader tendency among donors at the time to look at civil society building in isolation from political and institutional developments, a policy which was subsequently reversed as discussed below.

B. The 'Good Governance' Agenda

As the WB countries engaged in the process of EU integration, the EU became the most important and influential donor in the region in the second half of the 2000s. The process of EU integration provided a framework for the overall development of these countries as well as for the agenda of the remaining bilateral and multilateral donors in the region. In this context, the focus of international assistance has shifted from democracy-promotion to building 'good governance' in which CSOs play a key role by contributing to policy-making, monitoring the activities of the state and pressuring the government to carry out reforms.

Good governance can be broadly defined as the governing mechanisms which do not exclusively rest on the authority of the government.²³ In practice, this involves a de-centralised form of decision-making in which policies are developed and implemented by the government in cooperation with the private sector and civil society. The concept of good governance evolved from the field of public policy which sought to de-politicize the management of public affairs in the 1970s. These developments were closely related to the increasing prominence of neo-liberal policies which sought to isolate some aspects of economic policy-making from the political sphere. The rationale behind this thinking was that politics constitutes a source of inefficiency in the management of public affairs and that some spheres of decision-making should be left in the hands of experts/ technocrats. This led to the devolution of certain areas of policy-making to independent institutions that are isolated from the electoral process.

The notion of good governance became increasingly popular among academics and policy-makers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was underpinned by the idea that democracy cannot rely exclusively on electoral cycles in between which decision-making is simply left in the hands of policy-makers that are too remote from their constituents in order to be able to bring decisions on their own. Instead, policy-making should draw on a variety of public and private actors including the private sector and civil society. Echoing the call of social capital, proponents of good governance argue that civic engagement is key for articulating different interests in society and feeding into the policy-making process. In practice, good governance involved the opening of the policy-making process to private interests embodied in business and civic associations which effectively produced a shift in the balance of power in society from governments and the public sector to private individuals and groups.²⁴

Civil society assistance plays three key functions in the good governance project as envisioned by international donors and implementing agencies. First of all, it acts as a constraint on the power of the state. Civil society assistance is thus envisaged as a mechanism for developing a system of checks and balances and a means to counter-balance the power of elected politicians. This is reflected by the fact that a significant share of civil society assistance is devoted to watchdog CSOs whose work essentially consists in monitoring the activities of the state. Donors also provide substantial support for CSOs that contribute to the advancement of liberal principles in society (i.e. minority rights, non-discrimination, etc...) which is seen as a key element for addressing the imperfections of democracy and reducing the possibility of authoritarian resurgence.

Second, international donors support civil society to provide services in lieu of the state and the market, to facilitate citizen action, and to improve the content and implementation of policy. The latter function is particularly prominent in the building of good governance, which involves cooperation between government and civil society in policy-making processes. In this context, professional CSOs and think tanks with policy knowledge and expertise play an important "behind the scenes" role in the formulation of new policies. According to Fagan, the EU intervention in the WB is essentially geared towards creating an epistemic community of compliant experts willing and able to assist in EU policy development.²⁵ Instead of being a means to promote democracy, Fagan argues that civil society assistance is a mechanism for building the political and institutional

capacity of states through the creation of sustainable partnerships between CSOs and government.

Finally, some authors argue that civil society assistance is a means for transforming associational life by cultivating certain attitudes and virtues that are important for liberal social life.²⁶ Accordingly, aid is structured in such a way as to support a particular kind of associations which are bound by common interests and which have the skills necessary to function in the market economy and engage with the formal structures of the state. Illiberal organisations and traditional forms of associations are generally excluded from donor programmes, although donors sometimes engage with them in order to reform them. According to Sampson, much of the Western development projects in the WB seek to replace interpersonal ties of loyalty based on kinship, family relations, social circles, etc. with a Western model of loyalty to an institution and its principles.²⁷ Similarly, Vetta argues that the reform of the welfare-state system in Serbia involves changing the mentalities, attitudes and behaviour of people through a shift from a “communist” work ethos to a “market-oriented mentality”.²⁸ In light of this, the international intervention in the WB has been referred to as a form of “benevolent colonialism” which seeks to provide a climate of security and stability in the Balkans through the remoulding of local institutions and practices.²⁹

The shift in donor approach from democracy promotion to building good governance has had important implications for civil society in the Western Balkans. While civil society development was a priority in the context of democracy promotion, this is no longer the case. Within the good governance framework, civil society assistance is first and foremost instrumental in delivering policy development and implementation. In this context, donor intervention has been criticised for having generated the NGO-isation of civil society in the WB. NGO-isation refers to the shift from social movements based on activism to technocratic and professionalised organisations as the dominant form of collective action.³⁰ Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are highly bureaucratized organisations with developed administrative capacities fitted for implementing projects financed by international donors. They are deemed to be donor-dependent and donor-driven insofar as their work largely depends on the agenda of the donors. As a result, NGOs have been criticised for being detached from grass-root activism which undermines their legitimacy and diminishes their capacity to address the needs of the local communities.³¹ Donor intervention in the WB has been further

criticised for having led to the creation of hierarchies within civil society. According to Stubbs, the last years saw the emergence of a dichotomy between the professionalised “meta-NGOs” that “exhibit a superiority and end up ‘governing’ other NGOs and smaller community-based initiatives”.³² In this context, civil society assistance has been criticised for benefiting a small core of professional organisations characterised by a transnational “elite culture” that engender change only rarely and at a superficial level. Furthermore, critics have suggested that donor intervention has failed to create a “third sector” with formal types of organisations that would be distinct of the state and politics as envisaged by the principles of good governance. In practice, research shows that the boundaries between government and civil society are porous as a result of the migration of personnel between CSOs and state administration.³³ Civil society effectively serves as an incubator for political leadership which undermines the principles of formalised political change and the legitimacy of CSOs. Vetta thus argues that, in Serbia, the empowerment of NGOs has enlarged the landscape of political life instead of leading to the emergence of a third sector.³⁴

2. Donor Strategies and Practices in Civil Society Assistance

Nowadays, foreign assistance in the WB is primarily geared at supporting the region’s integration in the EU. This applies both to EU and non-EU donors. Although the WB is no longer considered to be a crisis zone, many donors have maintained presence in the region in order to assist these countries on their path to EU accession, which they see as a powerful tool for development. Jonathan Francis thus suggested that the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) has chosen to stay in the region because they feel that

a big push now and in the next few years can make a big difference and create a big return on investment in terms of these countries becoming EU members, strengthening the EU more generally, and stabilising the region.³⁵

As a result, donor presence in the region is tied with the EU integration agenda and the more a country is perceived to be closer to EU accession, the less donors there are. Donors have thus almost entirely withdrawn from Montenegro and they have substantially scaled back their activities

in Macedonia because they expected Macedonia to start the accession negotiations in 2008. On the other hand, there is still a considerable donor presence in Serbia, and especially in Bosnia and Kosovo which are still perceived as potential crisis zones by some donors.

A. Aid Planning and Delivery

The fact that foreign assistance in the Balkans is primarily driven by a political agenda (EU integration) has important implications on how aid is planned and delivered. In most developing countries, Western countries deliver their aid through their development agencies. However, in the Western Balkans, foreign assistance is often administered by local embassies or representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the donor states. According to Jonathan Francis from SIDA, donor strategies in the region are more driven by a foreign policy agenda than a development perspective:

Globally there's a whole bunch of sort of aid effectiveness principles. Like best practice. And those principles and that aid effectiveness idea doesn't really exist here in this region that much because there are not many donors here. And the countries that are active here are often not represented by their donors. Like the British, DFID is no longer here, so the people who represent the UK here are people from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who don't necessarily know about aid effectiveness and best practice. That's quite common, a lot of the embassies have kind of small project funds, but they don't know about donor aid effectiveness and donors. (...) Their funding is sort of more guided by foreign policy thinking people rather than development experts.³⁶

The aid effectiveness principles mentioned here refer to the Paris Declaration which stipulates that donors should align behind the objectives identified by recipient countries and that they should coordinate their activities on the ground. In principle, donors in the region concur with the idea that recipients should play the main role in the planning and implementation of aid. Stefano Calabretta from the EU Delegation in Albania thus argues that, ideally, the EU intervention should be limited to budgetary support: the recipient governments would identify the priorities and implement the projects themselves.³⁷ However, while the EU is able to channel its aid through budgetary support in some developing countries,

this is not the case in the WB as it is considered that there is too much corruption and not enough capacities for managing aid.

In practice, the modalities of aid planning vary considerably between donors in terms of levels of input from headquarters and local offices, consultation with local stakeholders (government and CSOs) and consultation with other donors. Some donor programmes are entirely defined by the headquarters as part of global or regional programmes. On the other hand, some donors have strong local offices which identify priorities and develop strategies that are then sent for approval to the headquarters. In most cases, however, aid planning is a process of negotiation between donor headquarters and local offices and between donors and local stakeholders. While multilateral and bilateral donors generally consult with recipient governments when planning their assistance, consultations with civil society are usually limited, informal and unsystematic. Donors usually have their 'pool' of partner or beneficiary CSOs whom they ask for feedback on an ad hoc basis. As a result, civil society representatives have very little say in the planning of aid.

The same applies for the coordination of aid. In principle, donor coordination should be organised by the government of the recipient country who would set the agenda of foreign assistance and steer the activities of the donors. In practice, governments in the region have achieved limited degrees of success in terms of coordinating donors as they lack capacity for planning and coordinating aid. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that there is an inherent tension between the increasing desire of governments to have ownership over aid planning and donor wanting to pursue their own agendas.³⁸ As a result, most of the coordination takes place in informal meetings among donors. These meetings are organised on thematic issues and they generally do not involve local stakeholders. So instead of donors planning and aligning activities with the government and with each others, this essentially consists in donors exchanging information in order to avoid duplication.

B. The Role of Civil Society

Most of the aid allocated to the region is dedicated to state-building, which here refers to building the capacity of the administration, agencies, ministries and municipalities to be able to comply with the EU Acquis, directives and regulations. According to Torgny Svenungsson, the Head of Swedish Development Cooperation in Serbia, SIDA's intervention is about

“building up an administration that is actually capable of taking on the EU membership in the future”.³⁹ As a result, civil society assistance is seen by most donors as complementary to the broader government assistance programmes. While in the early 2000s, donors pursued civil society development as an end in itself, this is no longer the case. Nowadays, most donors see CSOs as partners in the implementation of their projects or the pursuit of specific goals.

In this context, the role of civil society in donor programmes amply varies from case to case. Overall, the bulk of civil society assistance goes to watchdog and advocacy organisations which play a key role in monitoring and pressuring the government. For instance, over the past years, many donors have focused their assistance on watchdog organisations tackling corruption and holding the government accountable for their actions. A significant share of funding is also going to rights-based advocacy groups promoting liberal change in society and representing the interests of minorities and vulnerable groups. As part of the “good governance” agenda, donors dedicate significant resources to building partnerships between government and civil society, notably by assisting think tanks and organisations with expertise in specific fields to take part in policy-making and law-making processes. In some countries, such as Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, supporting democratic processes through CSOs is still high on the donors’ agenda. Finally, although service provision is no longer a priority of civil society assistance, some donors still resort to CSOs to provide services when the state does not have the capacity to provide these services.⁴⁰

C. Modalities of Civil Society Assistance

The relationship between donors and civil society is very much informed by how assistance is channelled to CSOs. The way in which civil society assistance is delivered determines the level of ownership that local actors have in the development and implementation of projects, and the *modus operandi* of most CSOs. This section provides an overview of the two most common types of civil society assistance in the WB and an analysis of donors’ reasons for prioritising one modality over the other.

Project grant-making:

Project grant-making is the most widespread modality of assistance to civil society. It consists in donors issuing grants to CSOs for short to medium-term projects (usually up to 2 years). These grants are generally issued through Calls for Proposals (CfP): donors identify priorities and objectives they want to see achieved and CSOs apply with projects that seek to attain these objectives. The methods of granting vary considerably between donors in terms of procedure and in terms of the level of CSO ownership in the development of projects.

The level of cooperation between donors and CSOs in the development of projects varies from case to case. Some donors issue “blind calls” for which the priorities and criteria are entirely defined by the donors. In this case, CSOs apply with fully developed projects that fit into these pre-defined priorities. Others cooperate with, or provide assistance to, CSOs in the development of projects. This usually takes place either through informal communication between donors and CSOs before a formal application for funding has been made or through donor assistance in the development of those projects which have been shortlisted. In some cases, donors send a request for application from a closed list of CSOs. For example, the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society (KFOS) usually makes restricted calls for proposals.⁴¹ It first invites a selection of CSOs to participate in workshops on specific issues. During these workshops, CSO representatives from the region are invited to present examples of successful projects. KFOS then hires coaches to help CSOs develop their projects before opening a formal CfP. The Dutch embassy in Albania also resorts to this procedure because their capacities are not high and they prefer to work with stable CSOs.⁴²

Donors have a preference for project grant-making because this allows them to provide funding to a broad range of CSOs. This is seen as having a bigger impact than providing long-term funding to a limited number of CSOs. This rationale is advanced by Svetlana Djukić, the Civil Society Task Manager at the EUD in Belgrade, in the following terms:

We now have projects for up to 18 months. Our resources are limited to 100,000 euros. I do not see the point of an extension of the period of implementation of the projects to 48 months if you have limited resources. So, we have €2m per year for the whole of Serbia. Which means that, on average, 20 organizations can get funding. Another method would be to help five organizations, and no one else, so that they have their operating

costs and institutional costs covered for, let's say, the next 4 years. And this is now a question of strategic choice – what is better? So we have opted for this mechanism of giving up to 18 months for specific project activities within the scope of the resources that are available to us. We do not provide €300-400,000 grants so that they could have long term [support]. And I do not know what would be the benefit of giving long-term [assistance]. (...) I essentially do not see what this would make better for civil society. I mean, I would love to hear it because I often hear it.⁴³

Another reason for the popularity of project grant-making is that this mode of assistance gives donors a lot of flexibility in terms of defining priorities and substantial control in the implementation of projects. There is a perception among donors that it is much easier to carry out monitoring and evaluation for projects than to assess to what extent CSOs have fulfilled their annual plans (see below). Besides, project grant-making allows donors to fund short-term initiatives tackling specific issues. Many donors consider that this is a key dimension of CSO activities, which is why even those donors that prioritise other modalities of assistance often include a project grant-making dimension in their programmes.

Nevertheless, many donors would concede that this form of assistance has led to the development of “donor-driven” civil society. Since most of the time CSOs have little ownership in the definition of priorities, they end up as implementing agencies pursuing donors' agendas. As a result, CSOs are devoid of their substance and they are cut off from their constituents. For these reasons, some donors have resorted to institutional support for CSOs.

Institutional grant-making:

Institutional grants consist in providing CSOs with multi-year budget support for the implementation of their long-term strategic plans and objectives. Instead of applying for funding with projects that seek to meet priorities set by donors, CSOs get financial assistance on the basis of their annual plans. In principle, donors select beneficiaries on the basis of whether they support an organisation's vision and mission. CSOs thus have full ownership in the identification of priorities and the implementation of projects.

Very few donors provide this type of assistance in the WB. This is exclusively done by the Swiss Cooperation Offices (SCO) in Macedonia

and Kosovo, SIDA in Kosovo, and the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade which covers Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. The SCO office in Macedonia highlighted institutional support as their main approach to civil society assistance. In the first phase of the project *Civica Mobilitas*, which is one of the biggest civil society programmes in Macedonia, two-thirds of the grants disbursed by the SCO were institutional grants and one-third were project grants. The institutional grants cover 50 per cent of the recipient CSO's annual budget for a three-year perspective. The renewal of the support each year is conditioned upon the CSO implementing its annual programme.⁴⁴

It is important to emphasise that those donors who provide institutional grants also provide project grants because some CSO activities are time-limited and specific to a certain context. Luan Shllaku from KFOS argues that it is unprofessional to pre-define the amount of institutional vs. project funding.⁴⁵ In his view, the point is to use both instruments to reach some goals. Visare Gorani Gashi from the SIDA office in Kosovo also considers that donors should resort to both project- and institutional grants because these two instruments serve different purposes. In her view, while institutional grants allow CSOs to get some liberty and stability, project grants are necessary for supporting ad hoc, goal-oriented initiatives.⁴⁶

The main rationale for supporting CSOs with institutional grants is that this allows organisations to develop and implement their own ideas and projects instead of being donor-driven. For Jonathan Francis from SIDA in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the main argument for core funding is that "it allows an organisation to be true to its own mission and mandate".⁴⁷ Supposedly, this type of assistance allows CSOs address the needs of their communities and establish strong links with their constituencies. This is one of the main reasons why the SCO in Macedonia opted for this type of support:

We would like to see civil society, all NGOs, working for their constituencies; that [CSOs] have a basis rooted in Macedonia and work for the citizens – to work for the citizens and not mainly work for the donors. This is the ideal.⁴⁸

Besides giving ownership to CSOs, institutional grants also give them more long-term security, which allows organisations to have more creativity in their work. The Norwegian embassy in Belgrade opted for this type of support because it allows CSOs to work on long-term goals. According to Roger Jorgensen, "the energy of reaching those goals can

be reduced by overly focusing on project activities in a short term".⁴⁹ The SCO in Macedonia also opted for institutional support in order to stimulate more creativity and give organisations a bit of security. They are aware that with project funding, CSOs spend most of their time applying for projects and reporting, which leaves them with little space for quality work. Institutional funding is thus deemed to reduce transaction costs, it gives CSOs much more time so that they could effectively use the grants.⁵⁰

There is, nonetheless, a lot of reluctance to giving institutional funding among donors in the WB. The typical argument against this type of assistance is that it leads to inertia, inefficiency and waste of funds. This conviction is based on the view that institutional funding allocated by the state authorities has led to the emergence and maintenance of organisations that are completely inactive or inefficient. According to Džemal Hodžić from the EUD in Sarajevo, organisations should not be funded just to exist. In his view, it is much more efficient to fund targeted projects that will deliver tangible results:

Here's a trivial example: there are often wartime associations in each municipality, and not one but five. They all receive grants from the municipal budget. It is mostly for offices, phone, personal assistants, etc... There are no project activities and, if there are any, these are some celebrations, some commemorations, and that's it. However, if the money was redirected to provide professional training for war disabled or demobilised, unemployed, former soldiers, this would create the conditions for their employment. For example, you have a hundred demobilized combatants, all of whom are unemployed. Out of this money, you take 10 of them and provide them with training and perhaps even some equipment that they need, for example, for greenhouse vegetable production. Those 10 [veterans] generate their own income, they cease to be unemployed, they are no longer a problem. You have this problem of 100 reduced by 10. This is an efficient use of resources. But to give them operating grants only to exist, that is not very efficient nor, let's say, desirable at the present time when there is not enough money.⁵¹

Some donors consider that the time of institutional funding has passed. This view was prevalent among Open Society Foundation representatives who consider that institutional grants essentially serve for the creation and broadening of CSOs. Luan Shllaku thus argues that there is no point in giving grants for the mushrooming of CSOs in 2014.⁵² Instead, he considers that it is now time to identify what needs to be changed in society and

support those organisations which can do the job. Many donors also consider that institutional grants make CSOs even more donor-dependent than project-grants and that this type of assistance would make it very difficult for them to monitor and evaluate the work of CSOs.

D. Donor Views on Civil Society in the WB

While donor views on civil society vary considerably between countries and among donors, there are nonetheless common issues raised by donors across the region. Unsurprisingly, these issues are in line with the criticisms associated with the NGO-isation of civil society discussed above: donor-dependency and lack of legitimacy.

The most common criticism donors across the region direct at civil society is that many CSOs are donor-driven. Accordingly, many organisations in the region are “empty shells” in the sense that they do not have their own agendas but that they are exclusively implementing donors’ programmes. In the view of many donors, these organisations do not constitute genuine civil society because they are not oriented towards tackling societal problems and addressing the needs of their communities. These are institutionalised organisations which “pay a lot of attention to management, administration and reporting instead of doing something concrete”.⁵³ Allegedly, many of these organisations are opportunistically formed to implement specific foreign-funded projects and they often cease to exist once the projects end.

Paradoxically, donors are generally aware that their practices have contributed to generating donor-driven civil society. Jadranka Jelinčić from the Fund for an Open Society in Serbia thus argues that there is an inherent tension between the changing priorities of the donors and the need of CSOs to specialise in a specific field and address the needs of the community:

The extent to which a donor can resort to institutional funding depends on the ability of civil society to project their own development and plan their activities in a period of time. Because if you have someone who absolutely does not know what his priorities are, then why give him money if you do not know what he wants to achieve in a certain period of time. So it is very important that civil society organizations have a projection of their own activities, their goals, their engagement, but I also know that this is very difficult to do because you also depend on the priorities of the donors, and

not all donors tend to adapt their strategies to what civil society claims to be a priority. So this is a tough positional battle for civil society and this is undoubtedly a significant obstacle for the sustainability of civil society.⁵⁴

Civil society actors are thus caught in a vice. Since they have little influence on donor priorities which are frequently changing, CSOs cannot plan their long-term development and grow into independent actors in society. Instead, many organisations often change their fields of activity in function of the needs of the donors. Selma Sijerčić from USAID in BiH argues that donors have made CSOs donor-dependent by making them work on one-year projects in different fields, which inhibited the long-term strategic development of CSOs and the building of contacts between CSOs and local constituencies:

You have a project for a year, you complete it and you are over, you took the money and you are done. You did not work on the long-term and on cooperation. It is essential to think strategically. If an organization works on public procurement, do not put it in charge of projects for the protection of human rights. [...] They then do everything and nothing because they have no money, [they] have no other options. They have not oriented themselves towards local sources of funding. They forgot the citizens, [they forgot] to include the citizens. We now have a problem with civil society.⁵⁵

The detachment of civil society organisations from the local population is a major source of concern for donors who generally recognise that their intervention has led to the emergence of a “two track” civil society in the region. On the one hand, there are the established and professionalised organisations that are somewhere in between activism and the state and that are the main beneficiaries of foreign assistance. On the other, there are the grass-root organisations that are deemed to be the healthier part of civil society because they are genuinely oriented towards their communities. The latter ones generally do not have access to donor funding because they do not have the capacity to apply for and manage donor grants.

The perceived lack of legitimacy among their beneficiaries is a major source of concern for donors. Civil society’s disengagement from local communities is seen as a consequence of the professionalization and institutionalization of many organizations, and them being more oriented towards donors than towards the needs of the citizenry. Vladan Avramović from the UK embassy in Belgrade thus argues that CSOs have become

professional in relation to donors and in terms of fundraising and unprofessional in terms of identifying the needs of the citizens, mobilising their support and transforming their hardships in political messages addressed to the authorities.⁵⁶

The issue of legitimacy is all the more sensitive as politicians in the WB often attack CSOs by questioning whose interest they represent. When they criticise governments or politicians, civil society activists are often discredited for being “foreign henchmen”. Donors are sensitive to this as they believe that their beneficiaries should be rooted in local society. Selma Sijerčić thus suggested that CSOs have to be accountable to someone if they want to represent the public interest:

We do not get membership NGOs. If you represent the public interest, then you have to be accountable to someone. Who are you to think that something is in the public interest? Whom did you ask? I always say, if you were to go out to the streets, how many people would stand behind you? How much support do you have in the population? They have to start working on it, and as the donor budgets have started to decrease, they must consolidate and professionalize themselves.⁵⁷

While this statement echoes a common criticism of civil society, the idea that civil society organisations need to be representative is not a matter of consensus among donors and civil society activists. For CSO activists, civil society is not there to represent the population, but to advocate on specific issues. One activist from Bosnia summed up this view in the following terms:

If I have haemorrhoids and three other people have haemorrhoids, I have the right to create an organization and advocate the solving of this issue, the provision of medicines, healthcare, etc. My legitimacy derives from how many people I can gather and what I advocate. Do I now have to wait until I bring together 100,000 people in order to start treating my haemorrhoids?⁵⁸

According to this view, CSOs derive their legitimacy from the issues they advocate rather than the number of people they represent. Civil society is thus about the articulation and advancement of specific interests, views and needs associated with particular social groups regardless of their size. However, the capacity of different groups to articulate their

needs and advocate for their interests differs substantially in function of their social background and their position in society. Social groups do not have the same resources, capacities and opportunities to push for their interests. By its nature, the foreign assistance has benefited a small group of elite, urban, liberally-oriented organisations which have thus acquired a disproportionate influence in society. Whether or not this has been beneficial to advancing the objectives purported by international donors is open to question.

This has notably been questioned in relation to the LGBT issue. The advancement of LGBT rights has been at the top of the donor agenda over the past years. This is a key issue for Western donors because it embodies the protection and advancement of individual rights that are at the centre of the European system of values. Every year, LGBT organisations in the region intend to organise gay prides which provokes a fierce reaction among conservative circles and right-wing groups that would do anything they can to prevent the parades from taking place. Usually, the gay prides in the region are either cancelled because of security concerns or they result in riots orchestrated by right-wing organisations and football hooligans. The extent to which foreign assistance has benefited the advancement of LGBT rights in the region is highly questionable, as suggested by a high-level donor representative who chose to remain anonymous:

OK this is getting a bit intellectual right but on the LGBT issue in Montenegro there are three groups of people, right? There are the fanatical conservative rights who are definitely clear that they hate the LGBT population. There are then the urban liberal groupings of human rights actors and others who are primarily orientating themselves in a way that gets them resources from the international community. In between these two groups you have the majority of people who probably don't feel that strongly about LGBT. A lot of them would say "you know I don't mind these people but why do they have to have parades" and these type of arguments. Some would be more to the right, some more to the left but the only way you can transform the LGBT agenda in Montenegro is if that liberal group can communicate strategically with that mass in a language that they can understand. But they can't do that because the liberal group are as alien as the extremist hooligan right group. The reason for that is the whole structure of the LGBT discussion in Montenegro is now shaped by outsiders who are as alien to ordinary people as are the blood-stained fascistic far right, you know? The only way that social change happens, if you look at Martin Luther King or if you look at LGBT in my society or in other ways, is if it is organic within that community. So you may say how

else will they get money but my question then is but does it then have an impact? If it doesn't have an impact it doesn't matter whether they have money or not. (...) I think we need to reverse the whole conversation on its head because civil society needs to be grafted upon local culture and local ways of doing things if it is going to really progress.⁵⁹

This quote embodies the deep contradiction between donor intervention and the development of a rooted, community-oriented and sustainable civil society. Western donors implemented in the WB are intending to instil a system of norms and values that developed organically over decades in their own societies. While these norms and values are shared by segments of the highly-educated, urban, population in the WB, they are new and, in some cases, alien to most ordinary people. In this context, civil society assistance is an instrument for promoting the adoption of "European" norms, attitudes and modes of governance on the ground. Through this intervention, donors attempt to influence and steer social and political developments in WB states. As implementers of donors' agendas, foreign funded CSOs are necessarily more oriented to their funders than the needs of their constituents.⁶⁰ The fact that most of these organisations are donor-driven and detached from the local communities is therefore simply the consequence of their position as intermediaries between international donors and local communities.

Conclusion

Foreign assistance in the Western Balkans has mostly been conceptualised as a tool for promoting democracy and building good governance. This analysis of civil society assistance, which is an important component of foreign aid in the region, puts into question the existing interpretation of the nature and purpose of donor intervention.

The analysis presented above suggests that there is a discrepancy between the purported objective of building good governance and donor practices on the ground. While they seek to build "good governance" in which CSOs would have an active role in policy-making, in practice, donors mainly use CSOs as local intermediaries for the implementation of their own agendas. Local CSOs are generally not involved in the planning of foreign aid and they have little ownership in the design of projects that they implement on behalf of donors. The fact that most of the assistance is

delivered through short-term project grants rather than institutional funding suggests that donors have little interest in civil society development in terms of developing the long-term capacities of CSOs to plan and pursue their activities independently.

These findings corroborate the view put forward by some donor representatives that most donors in the WB do not have a developmental perspective. Their objectives in the region are essentially defined in terms of assisting the WB states on their path to EU accession. This involves enacting, steering and accelerating social developments in order to promote the adoption of liberal or “European” norms, attitudes and modes of governance in the Balkans. While these norms and values developed over decades in Western countries, they need to be hastily enacted in the WB in order to allow for the region’s integration in the EU. For this purpose, donors resort to liberally-minded CSOs which can contribute to the advancement of their agendas on the ground. From the donors’ perspective, a project-based civil society that can rapidly respond to their ever-changing needs is an ideal instrument for pursuing their mission. The donor approach to civil society assistance has thus substantially contributed, if not generated, the emergence of a donor-driven NGO scene detached from the local communities. As one donor representative put it: ‘many CSOs are still wandering, but we could not have done our work without them.’⁶¹

NOTES

- ¹ In the remainder of the paper, I use “donor” to refer to both donor organizations that provide grants for civil society and implementing agencies (such as the UNDP and OSCE) that are not donors per se but engage with civil society in financial and non-financial ways.
- ² ‘Aid from rich countries falls for second year in a row, says OECD’, *The Guardian*, 3 Apr. 2013.
- ³ ‘The big aid debate: rich countries consider foreign aid overhaul’, *The Guardian*, 6 Nov. 2013.
- ⁴ This project was carried out within the scope of an EU funded project entitled ‘Civil Society Acquis – Strengthening the Advocacy and Monitoring Potential and Capacities of Civil Society Organisations’ (EuropeAid/132438/C/ACT/Multi 2012 / 306-577).
- ⁵ Huliaras, Asteris (2011) “Foreign aid to the Balkans (1990-2010): the dynamics of the ‘silent’ human security agenda”, *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea studies*, 11(4), 423.
- ⁶ Howard, Ivana. *Mistakes Donors Make: Civil Society and Democracy Assistance in the Balkans*. (Belgrade: Heartefact Fund, 2011), 31.
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- ⁸ Carothers, Thomas (2009) “Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Developmental?” *Journal of Democracy*, 20(1), 5-19.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ¹⁰ Carothers, Thomas (2001) “Ousting Foreign Strongmen: Lessons from Serbia”, *Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief* 1(5): 2.
- ¹¹ Spoerri, Marlene (2010) “Crossing the line: partisan party assistance in post-Milošević Serbia”, *Democratization*, 17(6), 1108–1131.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 1118-1119.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 1124.
- ¹⁴ Brown, Keith (ed.) *Transacting Transition: The Micropolitics of Democracy Assistance in the Former Yugoslavia* (Bloomfield CT : Kumarian Press, 2006), 9-10.
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47 Personal interview with Luan Shllaku.
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50 Personal interview with Katharina Stocker and Ibrahim Mehmeti.
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in Sarajevo, on 11 Dec. 2013.
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US Department of State/INL funded "Criminal Justice Civil Society Program",
on 21 Oct. 2013.
- 54 Personal interview with Jadranka Jelinčić, Director of the Fund for an Open
Society in Serbia, 5 Nov. 2013.
- 55 Personal interview with Selma Sijerčić, Project Management Specialist at
USAID in Bosnia-Herzegovina, on 12 Dec.
- 56 Personal interview with Vladan Avramović, Political Officer at the UK
Embassy in Belgrade, on 15 Oct. 2013.
- 57 Personal interview with Selma Sijerčić.
- 58 Personal interview with Milan Mrdja, Program Manager at the Center for
the Promotion of Civil Society (CPCD), on 16 Dec. 2013.
- 59 Anonymous interview.
- 60 This does not however mean that NGOs are simple executors on behalf of
foreign donors. Most NGO activists share the norms, values and objectives
pursued by foreign donors, and they often have a certain influence in the
implementation of projects on the ground.
- 61 Anonymous interview.