

## ACCESSIBILITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN STATE ADMINISTRATIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: WHAT CIVIL SERVANTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS HAVE TO SAY?

FEBRUARY 2023



B | T | D The Balkan Trust  
for Democracy  
A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND



This Project is financed  
by the European Union

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Accessibility is considered a priority in a modern-day state administration. As an important precondition for achieving broader societal goals of social inclusion and welfare, accessibility has also become a clear-cut administration issue. Rising demands for accessible administrations - services, building, workplaces – but also for more equitable opportunities for getting jobs, including civil service employment, result from the fast-paced socio-economic and technological changes, which in turn require to accommodate as many needs of the population as possible. The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak is only one, but largely important example of how suddenly such needs for fast adaptations occur.

On their EU accession path, the countries in the Western Balkan region must demonstrate that basic accessibility principles are sufficiently secured, as part of a broader, but fundamental public administration reform. According to international assessments that measure the compliance with such principles, the work is far from done – the legislative and policy frameworks are in place, the digital services accelerated, but mechanisms for improving the accessibility of services are weak across the region.<sup>1</sup> The results of the surveys of civil servants and civil society organisations (CSO) implemented by the WeBER initiative, analysed in this brief, tell a similar story of weak guarantees for accessibility of state administrations.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, their reflections on the opportunities for accessing civil service jobs, workplaces, facilities, and services, indicate that those most vulnerable have fewer chances and struggle the most.

Measuring perceptions has its limitations, from sampling errors, bias, to difficulties in capturing nuances. Also, survey results are largely affected by respondents' motivation and availability to participate. As such, they should be interpreted with caution and used as a stimulus for further research. However, civil servants and CSOs are among the key actors from whom to obtain feedback regarding the application of the accessibility principle in practice. This is due to their respective roles as service and information providers to the public, in case of the former, and active participants in public affairs, especially as voluntary service providers to different population categories, in case of the latter. Perception data alone cannot be used to remedy policy implementation but can additionally help to spotlight potential gaps. If legal and policy mechanisms largely fail to achieve their intended purpose, which is to allow unrestricted access to administration, it results not only in a waste of resources but also in the deprivation of different societal groups of their fundamental rights.

## CIVIL SERVANTS ON EQUALITY IN THEIR ADMINISTRATIONS

Most surveyed civil servants in the region are confident there are no barriers for entering civil service on the ground of sex. Majority believes that in the recruitment process for civil service jobs, men and women are treated equally (60% of agreement), as opposed to 18% who disagree. In four administrations, agreement among respondents is around the regional average of 60%. Civil servants in Serbia are the most positive on the issue (71%), while their colleagues in BiH

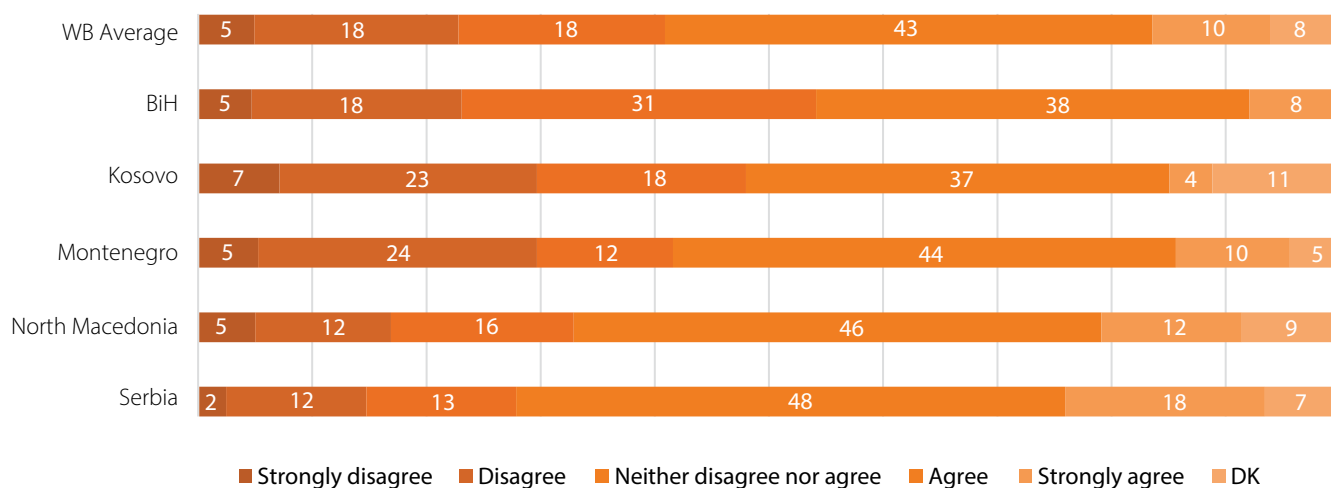
1 OECD/SIGMA, Summaries of Monitoring Reports Western Balkans, Service Delivery, February 2022, p. 8-10. available at: <https://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Summaries-Monitoring-Reports-2021-Service-Delivery.pdf> (last accessed on 22 February 2023)

2 Surveys of civil servants and CSOs across the Western Balkans were implemented using an online surveying tool between April and August 2022. Surveys were administered through an anonymous, online questionnaire. The data collection method included CASI (computer-assisted self-interviewing).

expressed agreement below the regional average (49%). These findings suggest that the predominant recruitment practices in the region ensure equal treatment of men and women, although the opinions of the minority which disagrees merits further research and deeper insight.

Surveyed civil servants express divided attitudes when asked to reflect on equality of representation of men and women in civil service. Majority of surveyed civil servants across the region agreed that there is equal representation in practice (53%, see Chart 1). Serbia saw the highest level of agreement, with two-thirds of respondents confirming that equality is ensured (66%). The highest proportion of disagreement (30%), and at the same time the lowest agreement (41%), was recorded in Kosovo. Evidently, despite the slim region-wide majority that agreed, the prevailing impression in some countries of the Western Balkans is that there is no equal representation of women and men.

**Chart 1. Civil servants' opinion on the statement - In practice, there is an equal representation of men and women in the civil service, to the extent possible<sup>3</sup>**



Note: All results are rounded to the nearest integer. Due to rounding, percentages may not always appear to add up to 100%. N = 2242 and refers to the total number of respondents in the WB. Survey of civil servants was not implemented in Albania.

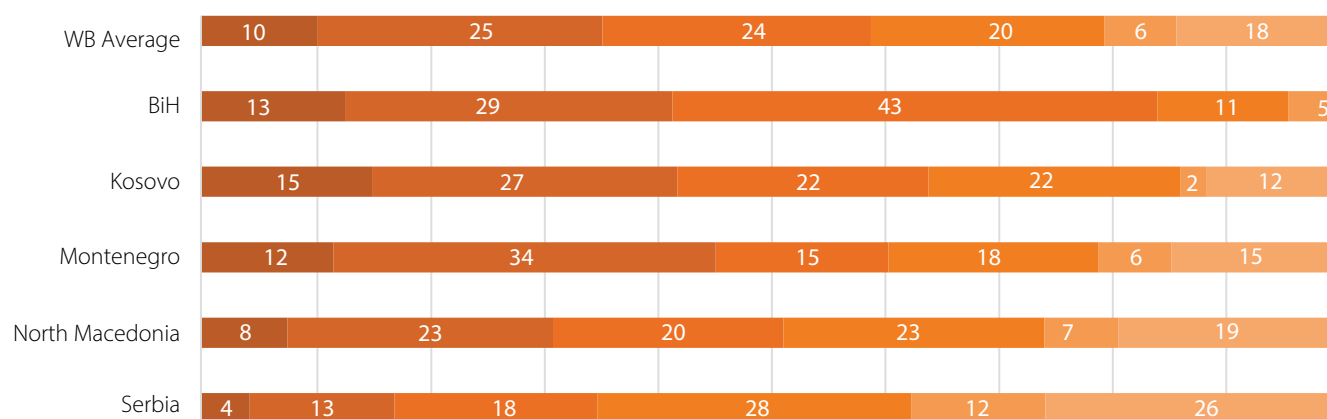
Perceptions are rather positive when respondents were asked to give an opinion if people from ethnic minority groups have equal opportunities to get employed as civil servants. On average, there was 53% of agreement in the region, as opposed to 20% of disagreement. The most positive were Montenegrin and North Macedonian respondents (63%, and 62% of agreement respectively), closely followed by the ones in Serbia (61%). Despite the existence of rules on ensuring representation of different communities in the civil service in BiH and in Kosovo, the share of agreement was below the regional average, but as opposed to BiH (27%), it is still relatively high in the case of Kosovo (51%).<sup>4</sup> This can also suggest that in civil service systems where such requirements exist, employees are more observant and alert to notice discrepancies in implementation. Nevertheless, further question that could arise from these results is whether perceptions of minority groups would differ from those of civil servants, and if yes, in what direction. Also, it would be particularly interesting to contrast perceptions of civil servants and minority communities in countries where no mandatory rules exist for equalising representation in the civil service.

On the other hand, dissent is plainly visible when it comes to chances of people with disabilities for getting civil service jobs. On average, roughly a quarter of civil servants agrees (26%) that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to access civil service employment while the disagreement prevails (35%). Serbian respondents are once again the most optimistic (40% agreement), and those in BiH the least (16% agreement). On this issue, share of “don’t know/no opinion” amounts to almost a fifth all responses in the WB (18%), and even goes up to a quarter in Serbia (26%). At the same time, the average share of those taking neutral positions (“neither disagree nor agree”) is around a quarter in the region as well (24%). Large shares of those who are undecided, or unwilling to express an opinion, coupled with a significant portion with those in disagreement, strongly suggests there is a low level of awareness of this issue, but also indicate that people with disabilities are deprived of access to ordinary civil service posts in practice.

3 For BiH, the survey of civil servants did not display “Don’t know/No opinion” response category due to technical issue in survey implementation.

4 In BiH, according to the Article 2 of the Law on Civil Service in BiH Institutions, civil service structure has to resemble national structure in the country, by latest population census data. In Kosovo, according to Article 9 of the Law No. 06/L-114 on Public Officials (Judgement no. KO203/19, Published: 13.07.2020, find at Judgements, Constitutional Court), at least 10% of job positions in all categories of public officials (including civil servants) should be reserved for members of non-majority communities.

**Chart 2. Civil servants' opinion on the statement - People with disabilities have equal opportunities to get employed as civil servants**



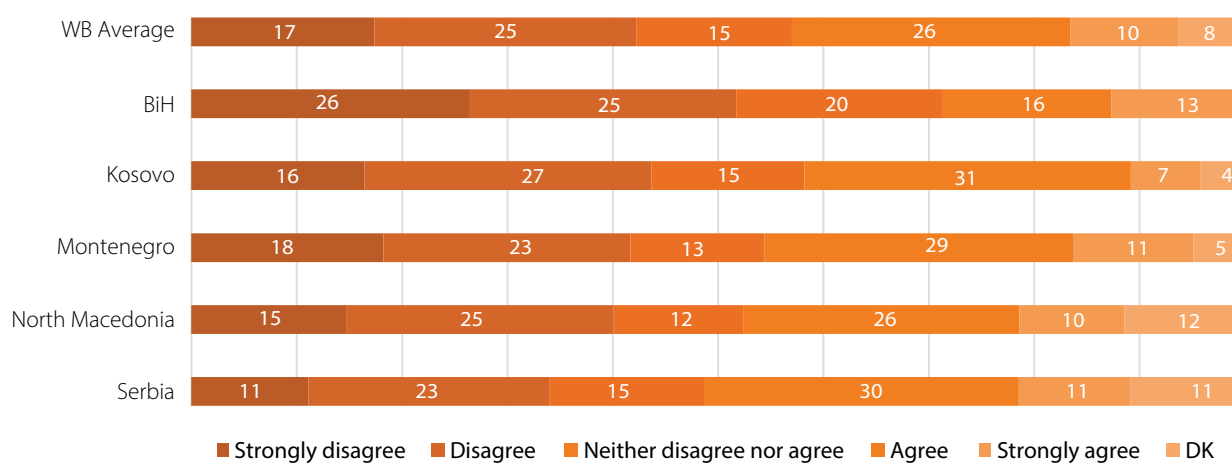
Note: All results are rounded to the nearest integer. Due to rounding, percentages may not always appear to add up to 100%. N = 2241 and refers to the total number of respondents in the WB. Survey of civil servants was not implemented in Albania.

## HOW CIVIL SERVANTS PERCEIVE ACCESSIBILITY OF ADMINISTRATIONS FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

When it comes accessibility of state administrations' premises and workplaces, civil servants in the region are unconvinced that they are easily accessible for persons with disabilities. First, when asked to reflect on the statement *My institution is an accessible workplace for persons with disabilities*,<sup>5</sup> average agreement stands at one third of respondents sharp (33%), with the share of those who disagree amounting to nearly a half (45%). Country shares do not vary greatly, with civil servants in BiH being the most determined that their workplaces are inaccessible (52% of disagreement). Considering that civil servants are well acquainted with the working conditions in their offices, their attitudes can be considered as expert opinions that indicate the shortcomings and needs for improvements in regard to accessibility.

Second, civil servants are only slightly more positive in relation to accessibility of their offices to external parties with disabilities.<sup>6</sup> On average, slightly over a third (36%) agrees that visitors with disabilities can easily access their premises, while 42% feels the opposite (Chart 3 below). Perception in BiH is again comparatively more negative, with over half of respondents expressing disagreement (51%). Everything considered, civil servants' opinions, embedded in their work experience, paint a rather divided picture on the question of accessibility of state administration for those who need to get in contact with it.

**Chart 3. Civil servants' opinion on the statement - My institution allows access to external parties with disabilities**



Note: All results are rounded to the nearest integer. Due to rounding, percentages may not always appear to add up to 100%. N = 2238 and refers to the total number of respondents in the WB. Survey of civil servants was not implemented in Albania.

5 With accessible entrances, ramps, well-dimensioned corridors and elevators, platform lifts for free vertical access between different levels, railings and handrails, sufficiently spacious rest rooms with all fixtures and fittings within easy reach etc.

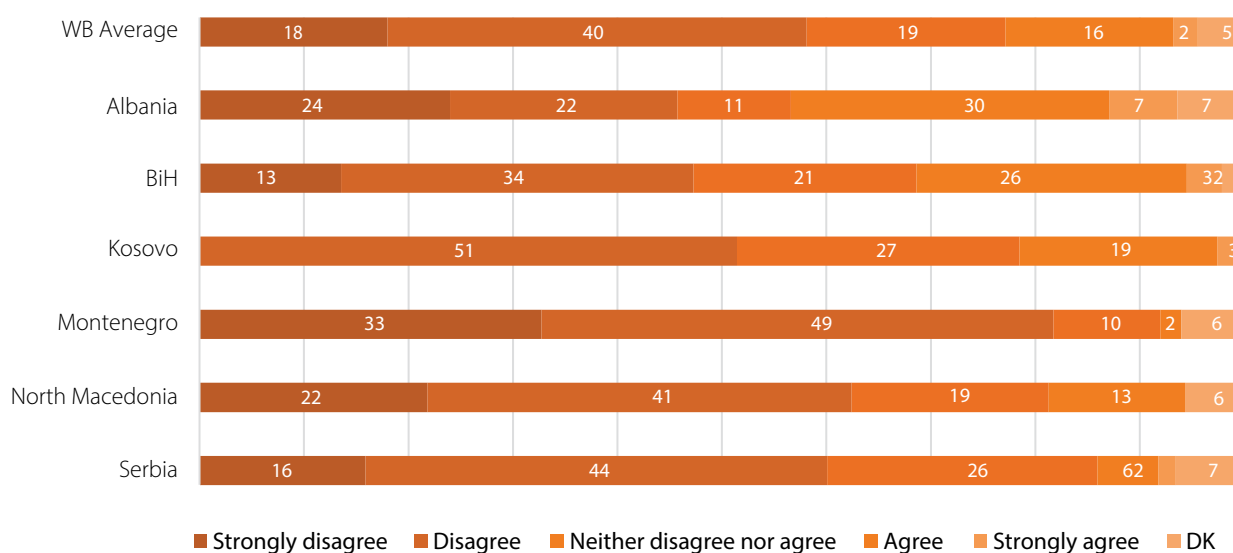
6 With accessible vestibules, lobbies, and office entrances).

## ACCESSIBILITY OF ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES – A VIEW FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

Furthermore, the question of accessibility of state administration is multi-faceted and goes beyond access to actual workplaces and premises. It includes also the issue of accessibility of services widely offered to citizens, and obtained either traditionally at the counter desks or digitally. CSOs play an important societal role in each country of the WB by raising awareness of the needs of vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, and by helping those in need to receive necessary services and information. The latest polling of CSOs in the region, however, informs that they perceive administrations as largely out of reach for vulnerable groups, which makes a huge departure from the moderately negative perceptions of civil servants.

Namely, CSOs in the region question the adequacy of territorial distribution of administrative service providers in their countries. On average, only 18% of respondents agree that service providers are distributed in such a way that all citizens have easy access. Apart from Albania, and to the extent BiH (with 37%, and 29% of agreement respectively), civil society's opinion in the rest of the region paints a rather bleak picture on the matter, with organisations in Montenegro, for instance, being almost in unison that territorial access is denied (82% of disagreement, with merely 2% of agreement). As physical diffusion of service providers is among the basic conditions for state administration's accessibility, such a firm expression of distrust by CSOs on equitable territorial distribution suggests existence of severe problems with the basic access to services for all.

**Chart 4. Civil society actors' opinion on the statement - Across the territories of the country, administrative service providers are adequately distributed in such a way that all citizens have easy access**

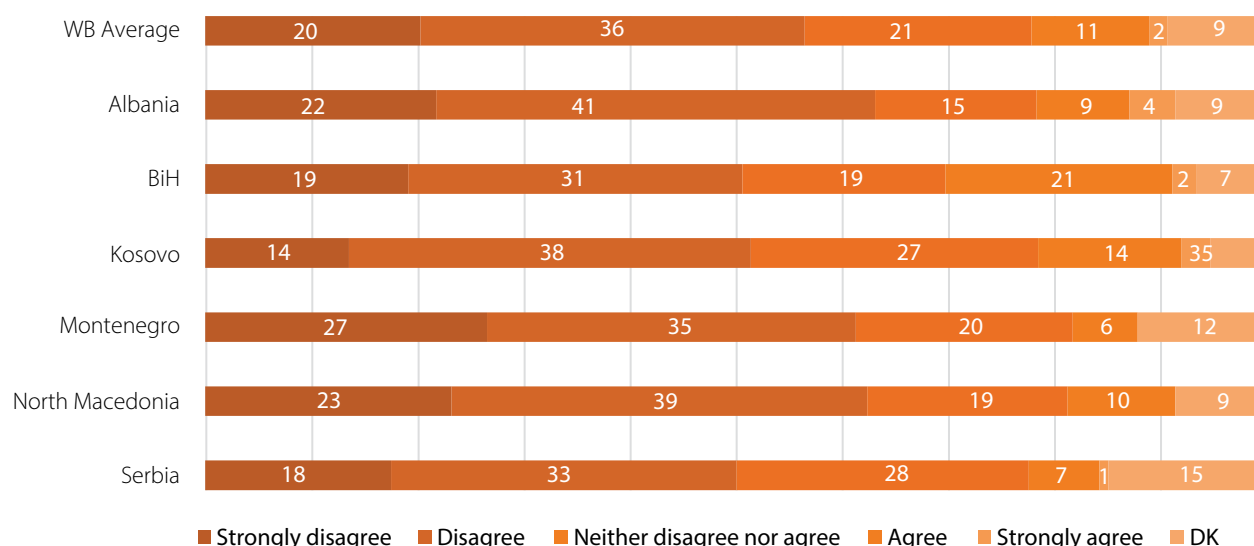


Note: All results are rounded to the nearest integer. Due to rounding, percentages may not always appear to add up to 100%. N = 410 and refers to the total number of CSO respondents in the WB.

Lack of adequate territorial distribution of public service providers can partially be addressed through a choice of channel, i.e. existence of seamless and easily accessible online services. Yet, when asked whether they agree that administrative services can be obtained both in-person and electronically, there is considerable divergence in opinions between those who agree (31%) and disagree (41%). The high share of those who remained in the middle (24% "neither disagree nor agree"), with country variations from 12% to 30%, suggests that although some services do provide an alternative to physical access, this is insufficient to replace the lack of territorial accessibility of services.

That, said, electronic channels for accessing administrative services are considered easily accessible for vulnerable groups by no more than 13% of surveyed civil society actors (Chart 5). The only exception to such an unfavourable perception in the region is BiH, although those who perceive e-services as accessible amounts to less than a quarter (23%). In the focus groups, civil society actors in the region have confirmed that there are barriers to accessibility of services online, for instance, for those digitally illiterate, and due to lack of online accessibility tools for people with different impairments. Moreover, there was a considerable proportion of survey participants who were undecided – 21% region-wide, which could also indicate that many civil society representatives did not focus on experience of vulnerable groups in using electronic channels in practice.

**Chart 5. Civil society actors' opinion on the statement - E-channels for accessing administrative services are easily accessible for vulnerable groups**



Note: All results are rounded to the nearest integer. Due to rounding, percentages may not always appear to add up to 100%. N = 410 and refers to the total number of CSO respondents in the WB.

Inexistence of adequate support and communication with persons belonging to different groups with vulnerabilities is another problem which diminishes the overall accessibility of public services. CSOs' opinions point to this problem, as only 12% of them believe that the staff working on administrative service delivery is trained to interact with vulnerable groups, as opposed to 56% who disagree that civil servants are fit for this purpose. CSOs in BiH are somewhat more positive, with 23% of agreement. Yet, in all administrations, including BiH, the disagreement makes for 50% or more of responses. In support of the validity of CSOs' perceptions, the OECD/SIGMA notes that "central guidance or training capacities [...] on how to improve access to public service users with special needs" are lacking.<sup>7</sup> Lack of training and sensibilisation of civil servants for interaction with customers with disability, coupled with the physical obstacles analysed previously, result in a rather dire environment for service provision to those most in need.

## HOW TO ACCELERATE IMPROVEMENTS IN ACCESSIBILITY OF STATE ADMINISTRATIONS AND ITS SERVICES?

Increasing demands for accessibility come as a necessity to accommodate the needs of different societal groups, including people with disabilities, when accessing basic administrative services and information. Besides domestic drives, governments in the Western Balkans found themselves amid external pressures to transform administrative procedures and services too, such as the EU accession conditionalities. According to available external assessments, administrations in the region have come a long way in making service delivery more citizen centred. However, the outlook does not seem too promising when it comes to accessibility of state administrations and its services, and WeBER opinion polls of civil servants and CSOs, conducted in 2022, substantiate such concerns.

As mentioned earlier, perceptions are not sufficient to define the direction for policy changes. However, they can be indicative of real-life experiences and opinions of civil servants and CSOs can help illuminate areas for immediate as well as long term improvements:

- For the start, due attention should be devoted to removing as much obstacles as possible for equal access to civil service jobs. Persons with disabilities, for example, are among those who face particular hardships in accessing labour market, and besides improving overall conditions in society for increasing their activity rates, the governments should deliver when it comes opening doors of state administration, but also lead the way and set example to other sectors how to eliminate obstacles and ensure greater employment of persons with disabilities.
- Basic workplace conditions should be ensured in state administration bodies for unhampered vertical and horizontal movements, with all necessary appliances according to the accessibility standards (e.g., ramps, handrails, platforms etc.). In addition, the same standards should be observed for access of external parties with disabilities (e.g., accessible entrances of buildings, office spaces, lobbies, etc.).

<sup>7</sup> OECD/SIGMA, Summaries of Monitoring Reports Western Balkans, Service Delivery, February 2022, p. 10.

- Furthermore, provision of administrative services needs to be closely and constantly monitored as the basis for improvement of territorial as well as digital access.
- Finally, as part of their service delivery policies, administrations in the region should introduce mandatory trainings for civil service staff working on service delivery, on how to communicate with and deliver services to people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups in society.

Improvement of accessibility of public buildings and public services is a complex and costly policy measure, which takes a long time to implement. At the same time, it is a necessary measure, which affects overall quality of life and represents an important step in the creation of a modern European state and society. Yet, more than two decades since the start of public administration reforms in the region, this has not been made a priority. To achieve equal access to services for all, the governments in the region should start prioritising these measures as part of public administration reform agendas, collaborating with CSOs and the affected groups of citizens to determine problems and identify the best solutions. Once strategically defined and justified, such priorities can be supported through pre-accession assistance available for reform implementation on the EU integration path.

*This document has been produced with the financial support of the European Union, the Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade. The responsibility for content and information in this publication rests solely with the European Policy Centre (CEP) and the Think for Europe Network (TEN). Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the European Union, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade, the Balkan Trust for Democracy, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, or its partners.*

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