

## SMART Balkans Regional Conference 2023

### Peace and prosperity in the Western Balkans:

What is threatening the region and how to advance the opportunities?

The conference is addressing the **Specific Objective 2** of the SMART Balkans project that works towards ***Developed strong regional partnerships between civil society organizations from the region of the Western Balkans themselves and with their EU counterparts and public authorities.*** The project envisages limited number of the regional projects which include CSOs from 6 WB countries, but the potential for stronger regional cooperation is planned to be utilized through exchanges during regional conferences and study tours and the regional talks. This will result in progress in forming cooperative relations between CSOs in the region and using regional experiences, know-how and examples for joint advocacy of solutions to the government and government institutions in the fields of policy and social planning, as well as governing.

### Background

Western Balkans citizens **are not satisfied** with the way things are going in their region, the biggest dissatisfaction in the economies of the region being recorded by the RCC Securimeter, are among respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia while most satisfied being the residents of Albania and Kosovo. Dissatisfaction is increasing, not decreasing. However, they **feel secure**, majority agreeing that Western Balkans region is a secure place to live in, but as far as security in the town they live in, and immediate neighbourhood they live in, respondents of Western Balkans are pessimists about the future, mostly in Macedonia and Serbia. To this end, the Securimeter identifies the following three main factors for insecurity in Western Balkans: **Crime, organized crime**, drugs and human trafficking, violence or vandalism; **Misuse of firearms** and arms trafficking; and **Possibility of an armed conflict** between ethnic groups or political instability in the WB region. A few new possible challenges to internal security were suggested for the first time in the 2023 Securimeter survey: the probability of armed conflicts between ethnic groups or separatist political ideologies; and Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and other types of ethnic based discrimination and ethnonationalism.

Corruption is wide spread and while citizens are aware **where to report corruption**, almost half of the Western Balkan respondents decide **not to report a case** of corruption because they believe that “reporting it would be pointless because those responsible will not be punished. Western Balkan citizens, according to Securimeter do not believe the investigators, prosecutors and the juridical system have dealt well with **previous corruptive practices**, neither that the **high-level corruption cases** are pursued sufficiently. The ability of democratic systems to withstand instability depends in great part on the absence of corruption. Informal ties between political and

economic elites in the Western Balkans have enabled political parties to capture institutions through patronage, cronyism, and clientelism (Daskalovski 2017; Kraske 2017; Bartlett 2020; Taseva 2020; Resimić 2022).

**Femicide**, gender motivated killing of a woman, is the most extreme manifestation of violence against women, which happens often as a result of utterly malfunctioning institutions for prevention and protection from gender-based violence. While all countries in the region ratified Istanbul convention and are slowly aligning their legislation with it, in Western Balkans domestic violence continues to **disproportionately affect women** and family-related homicide is the most common form of femicide in the region, and the misuse of firearms in domestic violence is common (SEESAC, 2019). **Firearm incidents in the context of domestic violence were the cause of the highest number of firearm-related deaths in 2020**, outnumbering those reported in all other types of incidents, including criminal context, public disputes, and undetermined shootings. In the same year, 92% of all women killed with firearms in SEE were killed in the context of domestic violence, with 65% killed by intimate partners. **No men were killed with firearms by their intimate partners** in the same period. (SEESAC, 2020)

These are regional problems and the solutions to these problems must be regional or can be regionally diffused if successful in one of the countries of the region. To this end, the role of civil society is to detect, study the problems and devise possible solutions and advocate for their adoption. The forthcoming SMART Balkans conference will aim to provide platform for brainstorming regional solutions, or identifying models that are functioning well in some of the countries in the region and developing strategy for diffusing such solutions to problems in countries where these are needed through the agency of civil society.

With this approach the SMART Balkans Regional conference and the project will address the lack of coordination and cooperation between the CSOs in the region by creating platform for exchanges, devising solutions to regional problems, creating a powerful advocacy coalitions and partnerships. This is in line with the findings on CSOs needs determined with the TACSO's "Live and kicking – mapping and needs assessment of the regional networks and projects funded within CSF in the Western Balkans and Turkey" report.