



# EMPOWERING OPEN GOVERNMENT

THE OGP WESTERN BALKANS MEETING 2024

14-15 November 2024, Tirana Albania

## OGP Western Balkans Meeting 2024: Key Takeaways from Tirana

### Overview

The Government of Albania hosted the OGP Western Balkans Meeting 2024 in Tirana. The event was organised by OGP in partnership with the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) and collaboration from Transparency International (TI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI). This year's gathering brought together high-level representatives of government, civil society leaders, and policy-makers from Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. The meeting provided a platform to share experiences, best practices, and the latest developments in open government initiatives across the region and beyond.

### Key Takeaways

#### 1. Political Leadership and Commitment

One of the central themes of the meeting was the critical role that political leadership plays in driving the open government agenda. Adea Pirdeni, the Minister of State for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption of Albania, called for open government to be a daily lived reality for citizens, not just a policy goal. She was joined by other political leaders: Elvir Mahmuzić, Deputy Minister of Justice from Bosnia and Herzegovina; Elbert Krasniqi, Minister of

Local Governance and Administration from Kosovo; Goran Mincev, Minister of Public Administration from North Macedonia; Jelena Žarić Kovačević, Minister of Public Administration and Self-Government from Serbia; Dragiša Janjušević, State Secretary from Montenegro. During the discussion, political leaders highlighted important aspects of their current reform agenda including:

- Albania's upcoming government wide Anti-Corruption Strategy 2024 - 2030
- Bosnia and Herzegovina's political party financing rules and conflict of interest regulation
- Kosovo's local government reforms including asset declarations, digitisation of services and connecting financial support to municipality performance
- Montenegro's ongoing access to information reforms, as well as upgrading of open data and e-participation portals
- North Macedonia's open state approach, bringing together commitments from government, parliament and judiciary
- Serbia's public participation mechanisms, including complaint mechanisms and the electronic people's initiative.

These contributions underscored the need for a renewed commitment to transparency, anti-corruption, and citizen engagement. OGP's Open Gov Challenge is one key mechanism for supporting enhanced ambition and stronger delivery that members are strongly encouraged to take part in. The next OGP Global Summit in Spain in late 2025 will be one significant opportunity to showcase these renewed efforts.

## **2. EU Accession as a Reform Driver**

The EU accession process remains a key driver for open government reforms in the Western Balkans. This was recognised throughout the discussions during the meeting and emphasised by André Rizzo, Head of the Political Section at the EU Delegation to Tirana, who highlighted the alignment between EU values and the reforms being pursued in anti-corruption, justice and access to information. This alignment also underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder dialogue to create an inclusive and accountable governance framework.

## **3. Tackling Corruption through Open Government**

Western Balkan countries have made over 100 commitments to combat corruption through OGP Action Plans. Despite these efforts, issues persist in ensuring transparency and accountability in practice; and anti-corruption was identified as a central challenge for the region. Transparency International and local civil society organizations shared their experiences and strategies for addressing corruption through open government mechanisms, such as improving public procurement transparency, beneficial ownership disclosure, and political finance reform. The discussion highlighted the importance of implementing legal frameworks that guarantee citizens' rights to access information and public participation, together with opening of high value data sets, all of which is essential to fostering accountability and trust.

This panel discussion highlighted both the progress and ongoing challenges in combating corruption through transparency, digitalization, and robust legal frameworks in the Western Balkans. While countries have made strides in implementing reforms, systemic issues like political resistance, data accessibility, and legal inconsistencies remain key obstacles to true transparency and accountability.

#### **4. Digital Transformation and Open Government**

The session explored the opportunities and challenges of digital technologies in advancing open government. Strong political will, clear legal frameworks, and institutional capacity were recognised as crucial for driving effective open government reforms. While digital tools and AI can improve governance and anti-corruption efforts, they must be implemented carefully to avoid bias and security risks, protect privacy, and ensure transparency. Efforts to digitize public services and open data must prioritize citizen engagement, digital literacy, and inclusivity, especially in regions with significant digital divides. As demonstrated in Ukraine, achieving transparency through open data must also be balanced with national security concerns, especially in conflict zones or sensitive sectors like defense and energy.

The discussion emphasized the importance of integrating ethical standards, maintaining strong oversight, and fostering collaborative approaches between governments, civil society, and international partners to ensure successful digital transformation and open government reforms.

#### **5. Civic Space and Civil Society**

A robust and enabling civic space is fundamental for open government - this is a fact that was often mentioned throughout the meeting.

The session emphasised that since 2019 there has been growing pressure on civil society organizations (CSOs) in the region, despite legal guarantees for freedoms. The gap between legal rights and practical implementation is widening, especially regarding CSO financing and state-CSO cooperation. In many countries, the process for registering CSOs is cumbersome. For example, Albania requires 105 days to register a CSO, while in Kosovo, Anti-Money Laundering (AML) laws create additional barriers. There is notable state interference in CSOs, particularly with foreign-funded organizations being stigmatized. In some countries, foreign-funded CSOs face increased scrutiny. Countries like Serbia face police brutality, detention, and intimidation against activists. There are also instances of hacking and surveillance in online civic spaces, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia. SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) are used to silence journalists and activists, with some countries like BiH starting to recognize and educate judges on SLAPPs.

The discussion underscored the role of civic space in open government. Open government cannot function effectively without a vibrant civic space. CSOs play a crucial role in monitoring government data, participating in policy-making, and advocating for transparency and accountability. The use of foreign agent laws to restrict civic space is a growing concern, with countries like BiH, Slovakia, and Bulgaria introducing or discussing such laws. These laws label

CSOs and media as foreign agents, equating them with foreign interference, and pose significant threats to civil society's autonomy. Successful open government requires fostering a collaborative atmosphere between governments, CSOs, and citizens. Civic councils and platforms that allow structured dialogue are key to achieving this.

The panel highlighted the critical importance of protecting and promoting civic space to ensure successful open government reforms. Recommendations emphasize simplifying CSO registration processes, enhancing public funding mechanisms, and creating stronger institutional frameworks for CSO-government cooperation. While some countries, like Romania, are making strides in these areas, others face setbacks due to restrictions on civil society. The overall message is clear: without a vibrant civic space, the goals of open government cannot be fully realized.

## **6. The Role of Open Parliaments**

A panel convened by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) highlighted the increasing role of open parliaments in advancing the open government agenda. The discussions focused on improving parliamentary transparency, enhancing citizen engagement, and addressing challenges in the legislative process across various Balkan countries. Participants agreed that further integration of government and parliamentary action plans, alongside enhanced public participation, could strengthen democratic oversight and accountability.

Key recommendations included adopting digital tools for citizen participation, enhancing public oversight of parliament, and continuing CSO involvement in monitoring and supporting legislative reforms. The speakers emphasized the need for legal reforms, stronger political will, and international support to ensure sustained progress in open government practices. The discussion also surfaced the need for a stronger role of parliaments in the region to support open government reforms through the relevant legislation and oversight of government initiatives, including OGP action plans.

## **Conclusion**

The OGP Western Balkans Meeting 2024 highlighted ongoing progress and shared challenges in advancing open government reforms across the region. Anti-corruption reforms, digital transformation, the protection of civic space, and the active role of parliaments were identified as key areas where progress can be made, together with the role of strong political leadership in driving these reforms. Throughout the meeting participants identified both existing and new opportunities to push forward reforms in these areas, especially through the Open Gov Challenge mechanism. The meeting also provided a valuable platform for sharing lessons learned and reinforcing the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in creating transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance systems. Collaborative regional efforts, supported by the EU and organizations like NDI, OGP, ReSPA and TI, continue to foster a culture of transparency, accountability, and civic engagement across the Western Balkans.