



LAUNCHING CONFERENCE REPORT

30th April 2024, Tirana, Albania

"BOOST: Balkans for Optimising Opportunities,
Sustainability and Transformation of Civil Society"

ABOUT BOOST:

BOOST aims to foster the democratic, economic, and social development of the Western Balkans. The project will be implemented over the course of three years (30.04.2024-01.04.2027). Coordinated by ALDA and funded by Agence Française de Développement (AFD), this €3.7 million project focuses on three key pillars:

- Youth and Entrepreneurship
- Rural Development and Environment &
- Cultural Heritage and Community Development.

BOOST aims to strengthen civil society organisations (CSOs) by providing comprehensive capacity building, and financial support through a sub-granting scheme, and promoting networking among diverse stakeholders, including local authorities and universities. The project emphasises active citizenship and gender inclusion, particularly empowering young people and women to participate in societal processes.

With expected impacts such as improved CSO capacities, enhanced cooperation between civil society and public institutions, and reinforced European values of peace, democracy, and inclusion, BOOST aims to engage around 15,000 direct beneficiaries and indirectly benefit approximately 20,000 citizens. Through these efforts, BOOST seeks to create a positive, sustainable impact on the region's development.

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REPORT

The International Conference for the Launch of **BOOST: Balkans for Optimising Opportunities, Sustainability, and Transformation of Civil Society** convened in Tirana, Albania, on April 30th 2024, at the Tirana International Hotel. The conference brought together members from Western Balkans Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), alongside representatives from Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the French Embassy, local government officials and fellow ALDA colleagues.

The event gathered more than sixty participants; government officials, representatives from international and local organisations, diplomats, professors and experts from the countries in focus shared their insights on the matter.



The conference marked the official inauguration of BOOST. As well as the start of ALDA's journey to tackle issues such as those faced by our youth in civic engagement, the urgent need for greater citizen participation, the lack of female voices in leadership, and the untapped potential of rural and cultural tourism. At its core, BOOST is about empowering local communities and civil society to foster positive change.



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During the Opening Remarks, moderator Emir Coric, Vice-President of ALDA, emphasised the importance of ALDA's expertise in promoting sustainable development across the Balkan region. He expressed hope that all stakeholders would maximise opportunities and ensure sustainable development for all Balkan communities.

Among the panellists, Anuela Ristani, Deputy Mayor of Tirana in charge of International Affairs and Sustainable Development, highlighted the complexities of societal roles and the importance of transparency in governance. She noted that while transparency can lead to increased scrutiny, it ultimately strengthens participatory democracy. She called for a balance between policy implementation and community involvement to foster trust and development. She emphasised that local governance plays a crucial role in integrating EU values and ideas at the grassroots level. She advocated for regional projects and processes that facilitate EU integration and underscored the importance of sharing resources equitably to achieve common goals.

Sébastien Carreau, Head of AFD's Country Office in Tirana, outlined AFD's contributions to the region, including financing CSOs, supporting UN Sustainable Development Goals, and implementing EU Green Agenda policies. AFD has been a long-term partner in Albania, working on projects related to water supply, gender policies, energy, circular economy, waste management, and protected areas. Carreau stressed the importance of local authorities in aiding the EU integration process for Western Balkan countries.



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In the second panel, “Addressing European Challenges”, moderator Antonella Valmorbida, Secretary General of ALDA, outlined the celebration of ALDA’s 30 years of promoting local democracy and cooperation across the Balkans. She emphasised that local democracy is vital for sustainable development and that CSOs are essential partners in this process. Valmorbida called for a united approach towards the EU enlargement, recognising the Balkans as an integral part of Europe.

Marie Augouy, Programme Manager of the EU Delegation to Albania, highlighted the EU’s commitment to supporting CSOs under the IPA III framework. She emphasised the importance of partnerships and the role of CSOs in achieving long-term transformative change. Augouy encouraged regional cooperation and dialogue to enhance the effectiveness of these partnerships.



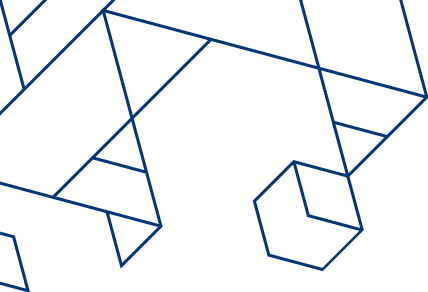


Alessandro Perelli, Vice President of ALDA, provided a historical overview of ALDA's engagement in the Western Balkans. He reiterated the strategic importance of the Balkans for Europe and emphasised the need for continuous dialogue and cooperation to support the EU integration process.

Natasa Vuckovic, Center for Democracy Foundation Belgrade, stressed the impact of the Ukraine war on the region and the importance of addressing corruption. She highlighted the critical role of CSOs in proposing alternative policies and ensuring the EU enlargement process remains transparent and inclusive.

Mr. Troccaz Renè, Special envoy for the Western Balkans of France, discussed the pragmatic interventions required to address societal issues in the Balkans. He emphasised the dual focus on macro-politics and civil society, advocating for greater involvement of CSOs in the EU integration process.

The last panel "Launching of BOOST" was moderated by Katica Janeva, Director of the branch ALDA based in Skopje & Western Balkans Coordinator. She started with an detailed presentation of the project, mentioning the objectives and activities of the project.



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She also discussed the Open Balkan Initiative and its significance as a regional effort towards EU integration and then she acknowledged that such initiatives demonstrate the region's capacity to contribute proactively to the EU integration process.

Catherine Suard, French Ambassador to Tirana, emphasised the launch of BOOST, aimed at urban and rural development to enhance tourism and cultural heritage in the Western Balkans. Her Excellency highlighted the project's role in strengthening not only French-Albanian relations but also addressing common challenges in the region.

Nicola Le Guen, Head of the Civil Society Organisations Division of AFD, stressed the importance of engaging citizens and CSOs in the EU integration process. He highlighted the project's focus on youth, environment, and cultural heritage, and stressed the need for collaborative efforts across the region.

Drini Nushi, Urban Research Institute, expressed enthusiasm for regional cooperation and its potential to address Albania's challenges. He highlighted the importance of looking beyond national borders and fostering a collaborative environment for sustainable development.

Dzenana Dedic, coordinator of LDA Mostar, underlined the shift in focus towards empowering CSOs and engaging citizens. She highlighted the long-term process of democratisation and the need for continuous efforts to educate and involve citizens in governance.



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CONCLUSION

The conference underscored the importance of regional cooperation, participatory democracy, and transparency in fostering sustainable development and EU integration in the Western Balkans. The speakers highlighted various progress and ongoing initiatives aimed at addressing local challenges, enhancing regional cooperation, and aligning with EU standards. The collective efforts of local authorities, CSOs, and international partners were deemed crucial for the successful integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and the success of BOOST.



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“This publication is supported by Agence Française de Développement. The ideas and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Agence Française de Développement.”

BOOST is coordinated by ALDA in partnership with LEADER France, Pulse SOS, Pulse Balkans, Local Democracy Agency Mostar, Local Democracy Agency Kosovo, Local Democracy Agency Nikšić, Local Democracy Agency Zavidovici, Local Democracy Agency Prijedor, Local Democracy Agency Subotica, Local Democracy Agency Central and Southern Serbia and the Urban Research Institute Albania.

BOOST is funded by Agence Française de Développement (AFD)

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