



SECURITY MATTERS

Civil society oversight of security: The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Editorial

A constant balancing act

As the slightly disorderly office pictures on the front page indicate, the theme of this Security Matters newsletter is civil society. In the narrowest definition of civil society, we think about non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that advocate for policy changes and think tanks that advise governments to do things differently. These institutions are part of a broader civil society that encompasses many foundations, from charities to local sport clubs or from labour unions to the church. In essence, every type of 'organisation' in which citizens come together outside governance and business. In fact, the family can also be regarded as a form of civil society. Here we will focus on the narrow description of the policy-focused civil society. Often, challenges to those types of civil society organisations (CSOs) are specific to the country where they operate. However, there are several general challenges that are encountered by CSOs worldwide, such as, for example, the way that CSOs deal with their (in)dependence and the approach they have in terms of audience.

Every NGO or think tank pays attention to its (in)dependence. In some cases, think tanks are linked to a ministry or political party, and must balance such ties with navigating their own course. In most cases, CSOs seek to be as independent from government and businesses as possible. This is challenging, as most organisations depend on grants and project-based funding. Donors might seek to influence the work of their grantees by using projects to raise their own visibility or by directing the outcomes of research. NGOs have to play a careful balancing act if they want to be independent while they remain dependent on donor funding. In mature democracies, donor-recipient relations work fairly well, but are under pressure as the division between governance, business and civil society becomes increasingly blurred. In transitional democracies or hybrid regimes, civil society is often funded by external donors, prompting governments in some countries to devise laws against 'foreign agents' and warn their citizens of the 'dangers' of these influences.

Another challenge is their approach. Many civil society organisations that seek to influence policy are often not that grounded in civilian life. CSOs are poorly equipped (or funded) to reach out to the average citizen. CSOs are often detached from public sentiment and more focused on their long-term missions and topics of interest, with a limited target group normally comprised of policymakers, civil servants, other civil society actors, or specific groups of civilians (students for instance). Policy-oriented civil society is thus not the primary mouthpiece of citizens to reach policymakers; usually, political parties and media are more effective tools for citizens to reach policymakers (besides protests and pressure groups). In mature democracies, the number of policy-oriented NGOs is quite small, while there are relatively many think tanks. In transitional democracies or hybrid regimes, it is the other way around, as there are few funds available for think tank research and much more (external) resources for hands-on projects. Moreover, in these countries NGOs often fill a gap in terms of monitoring, as regulatory agencies (public health agency or national education council, for example) are not independent or poorly functioning.

This Security Matters newsletter discusses these balancing acts, with a specific focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where we started the Bosnia and Herzegovina Building Inclusive Oversight of Security (BIHOS) project. Benjamin Plevljak of the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) dives into BiH's civil society and security sector oversight. Three interviews follow on security sector oversight and civil society: Majda Halilović of Atlantic Initiative (AI) emphasises gender aspects; Nermina Kulogljja-Zolj of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) highlights the role of media; and Dusko Vejnović of the European Defendology Center (EDC) explains the link to the academic world. Furthermore, CESS director Merijn Hartog provides an update on BIHOS research and training plans, while CESS intern Wouter van der Horst explains about his research on the 1995 Dayton Agreement and his recent work at CESS. We hope that you enjoy the read and take the opportunity to wish you a Merry Christmas and a safe and loving 2024!

Jos Boonstra, senior researcher, CESS

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Commentary

The anaemia of civil society involvement in BiH's security oversight

How stable and strong is civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Is it capable to address security sector oversight issues? With an estimated 25,000 associations and foundations, one would think 'yes'. Most CSOs, however, are sports and recreational associations, while others work on specific social issues. Surprisingly, very few CSOs impact public policy and even fewer are active on security matters.

There are two very important reasons to advocate for an active role by civil society in BiH's governance and democracy. First, corruption is widespread in BiH. The country ranked 110 out of 180 in Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, the worst among Western Balkan countries, all of which deal with a high level of corruption. CSOs, together with investigative journalists, are key in uncovering fraud, nepotism and corruption; this is an important role that many CSOs haven't assumed, with positive results.

The second, related, problem lies in the political culture of BiH that is resistant to democratic reform. Politicians are the way they are, and it is naive to expect any spontaneous and mass catharsis. As things stand, BiH's governance system provides little incentive to politicians to become active in reform and work to benefit the average citizen. Civil society should help push politics in the right direction. However, so far results have been meagre as BiH's politics are entrenched in the status quo, and CSOs have little capacity to change the order of things. Change would require bolder and more creative pressure by CSOs that act on behalf of a citizenry that, until now, seems ambivalent about politics as people do not seem to know 'how to live a democracy'.

So, is democratic oversight of the security sector a too ambitious task for civil society? Under these circumstances, it is. There are hardly any active CSOs dealing with security. This is a challenging area. On the one hand, one needs to have general knowledge of governance and procedures, while, on the other hand, one needs to have specific expertise on the security sector institutions and their tasks. The security sector is, by nature, more closed than other public sectors, and this is especially evident in transition countries. Patience and energy are needed to obtain progress – to be both constructive and critical at the same time towards the government, while seeking to build a constructive relationship. The Centre for Security Studies (CSS) has sought to do this over the past two decades.

Another civil society challenge in dealing with security sector governance in BiH is the limited attention that the donor community reserves for these matters and the subsequent scarcity of funds. Here, civil society also has a task to advocate for the importance of governance reform in the security sector among both local BiH and international audiences. It is disappointing to see that, for instance, only few CSOs attend the open sessions of the Joint Committee on Defence and Security of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly.

The BIHOS project is highly significant as it highlights the importance of democratic and inclusive oversight of the security sector. From my perspective, encouraging the development of a culture of oversight through trainings for young professionals is of particular importance. This is why I express my gratitude to the foreign ministry of The Netherlands, as the BIHOS donor, for supporting our efforts to learn how to live a democracy. Until that happens, I would agree with the opinion of the former High Representative for BiH, Paddy Ashdown, who stated in an interview with The Guardian in 2005 that 'the greatest failure is that, although we have created institutions, we have not created a civil society'. This is long overdue.

Benjamin Plevljak, Secretary General, Centre for Security Studies, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Interview

Gender, security, and civil society

Majda Halilović, Research Manager, Atlantic Initiative, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Can you tell us a bit about Atlantic Initiative?

The Atlantic Initiative was founded in 2009 by a diverse group of university professors, journalists, and researchers. Over the years, we have transformed into an organisation recognised for our impactful research initiatives, adept training development and delivery, and constructive interactions with institutions spanning all levels of governance in BiH. Our strength lies in the diversity of our educational backgrounds and extensive collective experience, allowing us to approach our work with a multidisciplinary perspective that seamlessly integrates academic rigor with practical knowledge. Programmatically, our focus encompasses two areas: first, preventing violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism; and second, promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women. Our commitment to instigating positive change has facilitated the development of constructive relationships with various stakeholders and institutions throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, our regional engagement extends to collaborative research projects, and contributing to a more informed and secure society.

In your opinion, what role does civil society have in security sector governance in BiH?

Civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of security sector governance. One avenue for meaningful engagement is through research initiatives focused on security issues, allowing civil society organisations to investigate and communicate findings to relevant institutions. Our primary responsibility lies in identifying and shedding light on underexplored topics, offering perspectives that can fortify the security sector's ability to respond effectively to evolving challenges. For instance, the research conducted by the Atlantic Initiative on violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism identified strong gender dynamics that are particularly relevant to the security sector's response to both victims and perpetrators of these phenomena. Additionally, we find that providing high-quality training represents another avenue for collaboration. When organisations possess the capacity to deliver such training, the security sector often welcomes these opportunities. Our organisation has forged meaningful collaborations with the security sector, introducing new perspectives and knowledge that have been successfully integrated into their operations.

Furthermore, numerous opportunities exist for civil society to actively engage with local communities, understand their security concerns and needs, and explore viable solutions to address them. Moreover, there is an ongoing necessity to advocate for transparent and accountable security policies and practices, as well as to raise public awareness regarding security issues.

AI has done substantial work on gender issues. How can the role of women be strengthened in security sector governance?

Our journey towards integrating gender perspectives into the security sector began with a ground-breaking Gender and Security Needs Assessment conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2011. This assessment served as a foundation for our subsequent initiatives. Over the years, the Atlantic Initiative has made significant contributions to enhancing the criminal justice response to gender-based violence and improving access to justice and support for survivors. Establishing a gender-responsive security sector necessitates not only the representation of women, but also their active involvement in decision-making processes. The evolving landscape of security in BiH reflects a growing understanding of the imperative to engage with gender issues through comprehensive gender analysis and mainstreaming.

The complexity of gender dynamics permeates almost every facet of security-related activities, and there is a growing appreciation for knowledge that will contribute to a deeper understanding of this matter. Achieving a truly gender-responsive security sector in BiH requires continuously promoting women's representation and decision-making authority within the sector, along with meaningful inclusion of gender-sensitive policies and practices.

Interview

Media, security, and civil society

Nermina Kulogljja-Zolj, Investigative Journalist, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), Bosnia and Herzegovina

Can you tell us a bit about the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network?

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a media non-governmental organisation. It is specialised in monitoring and reporting of trials on war crimes, corruption, and terrorism. Since its establishment in 2005, BIRN BiH has been informing the public about prosecution of war crimes by state and local courts in BiH, as well as by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and later the Mechanism for International Criminal Courts (IMCC).

In your opinion, what role does journalism have in security sector governance in BiH?

At BIRN, we regularly devote attention to security sector matters. In 2015, we started a project dedicated to monitoring and reporting cases of organised crime, corruption, and terrorism. Since then, a number of analyses, research papers, and documentaries have been published on corruption affairs, unprocessed crimes, and trips to foreign battlefields, for which the BIRN team has been recognised by international organisations.

BIRN BiH journalists also point to the spread of extremist right-wing groups across the region, revealing trends that spill over into BiH, and warning of the negative consequences of narratives used by such movements.

For this, BIRN journalists and editors are recognised by the public as experts in the field and are a frequent source of information on this topic, but also on foreign influence in BiH, especially regarding Russia following the start of the invasion of Ukraine, as well as on other topics.

How does journalism relate to civil society activities in BiH? Is it part of civil society, a partner, or otherwise?

Journalism in BiH plays a rather large role when we talk about security matters. Very often, after a story is published, some topics become part of the debate, of reports and of the agenda of politicians and government representatives. Journalistic stories often encourage changes in laws and strategic plans, and point to hitherto unnoticed developments in society. BIRN BiH is like a non-governmental organisation and in many aspects works together with other NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Our activities are mostly journalistic, but some of them include activism. For example, following one of our campaigns, the State's Prosecution Office started publishing indictments in January 2022. In addition, BIRN BiH has also cooperated with many victims' associations and various non-governmental organisations.

Interview

Academia, security, and civil society

Dusko Vejnović, President, European Defendology Center (EDC); and Professor, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Can you tell us a bit about the European Defendology Center?

We were founded in 1997. The European Defendology Center has the status of a non-governmental, non-profit and scientific-research organisation. Over the years, we have sought to build and expand our professional and scientific network on a national and European basis. EDC regularly publishes books and articles, and it is known for its Defendology magazine. The research and publications are closely linked to scientific and public debates and exchanges. We have also sought to make an in-depth contribution to knowledge on safety and protection, and more broadly on defence and security. This body of knowledge and its subsequent network are to the benefit of the people, and we will remain investing in it.

How do you regard parliamentary oversight of security? Can civil society play a supporting role?

Parliamentary control of the security sector should take place in accordance with the constitution and the law. It is the Constitution that provides the most important legal basis for parliamentary oversight of the security sector. If there is no adequate and constant control, there will be non-compliance with laws and by-laws, which again enters the boundaries of the arbitrariness of the authorities dealing with security issues. It is important to point out that these bodies, in addition to being at the service of the state, also take care of the safety of their citizens. Authorities dealing with the security sector, such as the police and the army, can lead to the destabilisation of the state itself. The control should not lead to a violation of the fundamental elements of the state.

Parliamentary oversight of the security sector depends on the jurisdiction of parliament in relation to the government and the security services. In this context, competencies mean the capacity to influence government options and behaviour according to the collective will of the people expressed in parliament. It also refers to the capacity to supervise the implementation of strategies, laws, decisions and budget execution, as approved by the parliament. These powers originate not only from the constitution and laws, but also from the rules of parliamentary procedure and common practices. Control over the security sector is indeed not exercised through parliament alone. Non-governmental organisations, the media, and the broader public should also be involved. Here we seek to make our contribution.

EDC closely liaises with the academic community. What are the advantages of think tanks and NGOs working together with universities?

We are well connected with the academic community, mostly through personal ties with academics at universities and colleges. Academics in BiH offer a great contribution to EDC in the organisation of training courses, seminars, roundtables, and the publication of research, including the Defendology journal. In BIHOS, we also strive to have professors and teachers on board in promoting inclusive oversight of the security sector in BiH through training and research. In that sense, EDC and BIHOS partners, CESS and CSS, function as a bridge to bring academic and policy communities together.

Article

The BIHOS project – From assessment to implementation

At the start of most CESS projects, we carefully assess how our intervention can best be designed. This foremost applies to the topics that we will take up in training and research, but it also relates to which target groups we address and what training techniques we deploy. In our new BIHOS project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is no different.

In the ‘start-up and assessment’ phase of the project, we organised a planning meeting with BiH partners in Groningen, we undertook assessment missions to Sarajevo and Banja Luka, we organised four subsequent expert labs in BiH with members of parliament, senior officials, and civil society leaders, and eventually brought our findings together in a needs’ assessment report.

In the needs assessment, we outline the need for developing ‘three C’s’ of oversight. BiH oversight actors do not have the capacity to meet their oversight expectations; there is a shortage of cooperation among different actors and institutions; and there is an overall lack of a critical culture of holding the government to account on defence and security policy.

In our talks with BiH MPs, officials and CSO actors, we learned that there are several general topics of importance in BiH relating to oversight. In a general sense, there is a need to address the notion of inclusive oversight by bringing different oversight actors together around joint objectives. Another need that will be addressed in the BIHOS training

curriculum relates to parliamentary management and procedures, including the practice of post-legislative scrutiny. Moreover, attention will also be devoted to the knowledge position of parliament (how parliamentary staff can help MPs to become better informed).

We also found that there are several security topics that are of particular importance in the BiH context. At the state level, a strengthening of intelligence oversight is long overdue. Linked to this, we also learned that oversight is sometimes hindered by an over-classification of information that would not need to be secret. Cybersecurity is another topic that will be addressed in BIHOS, as it generates a lot of interest among oversight actors. Lastly, we will address gender in security sector governance, as the security sector, including oversight provisions, remains heavily male-dominated.

We have now started the 'capacity building and research' phase. Training courses have already been carried out at the state level with the Parliament of BiH; at the entity level in Sarajevo with the Federation Parliament as well as the Canton of Sarajevo, as well as a course in Banja Luka that welcomed oversight actors from parliament and other institutions. Whereas the interest is high and implementation is on track, we still have to wait to see if our assessment was accurate and if the matters addressed can be sustained in terms of security oversight in BiH.

Merijn Hartog, Director, CESS, The Netherlands

Article

Debating Dayton

As a 22-year-old scholar studying the Bosnian War and having worked on a master's thesis dedicated to a discourse analysis of the Dayton Agreement that ended the devastating war in BiH, the BIHOS project is of special interest to me. In my thesis, I researched the influence of the 'Balkanist' discourse throughout the internationally-brokered diplomatic process that intended to resolve the conflict. I did so by referring to the enlightening works of Bulgarian scholar Maria Todorova, which I would warmly recommend. By engaging in a thorough historical assessment of Balkan history through the eyes of the West, she concluded that the Balkans and its peoples have been systematically and continually portrayed as barbaric, war-prone, and uncivilised. Much alike to Orientalism, Balkanism therefore constitutes a stereotypical discursive formation that locates the Balkans in an adverse juxtaposition to the West-European 'superior' Self.

Without going too much into detail about the theoretical framework of my thesis, about which I can rattle on endlessly, the conclusion of my thesis was a critical one. First, it concluded that there were Balkanist influences throughout the Dayton process, such as a particular Western rhetoric concerning identity and ethnicity and supposed moral superiority.

But, perhaps of more importance to the BIHOS project, it shed light on the consequence of the Dayton Agreement to have cemented the ethnic divide in the country. It also shed light on the intrinsicity of the agreement to install a complex and intricate political structure that invites for political deadlock, and a continued international involvement as signified by the felt urgency to install a High Representative.

Yet, also, it was optimistic: in the end, the Dayton agreement ensured peace and stability. The obviously paramount dedication of the agreement to resolve the war came at a cost: it installed a structure that is difficult to either live by or change. Now, almost thirty years later, we stand in a moment of time in which the importance of overcoming this political strenuousness is more evident than ever. Secessionist sentiment and mutual distrust seem to be at an all-time high. In that regard, BIHOS hopefully helps BiH to take a step in the right direction. By trying to overcome these problematic essences of BiH's fragmented political architecture, we hope to enter an era of reconciliation and cooperation.

I started my internship at CESS in early September, and they granted me the exciting opportunity to travel with them to Sarajevo in late November. It is quite the cliché to state that 'I have learned so much' during the trip, but honestly – I absolutely did. As part of the research component of BIHOS, Jos Boonstra and I visited several embassies to identify exactly what the international community's perception is regarding parliamentary oversight of the security sector in BiH. This was not only interesting purely because I had the opportunity to visit these embassies and speak with experienced diplomatic staff, but it was even more intriguing to hear the sometimes-divergent opinions of the different countries on this matter, and, given my academic background, I found it extremely valuable to gain an even more thorough understanding of BiH's political affairs in situ.

I hope to further deepen my understanding of the history, culture, and complex political landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the future, as it is a topic that has my continued interest. Furthermore, since my internship at CESS came to end at the end of November, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the CESS team and its partners and associates for a very pleasant and valuable time.

Wouter van der Horst, intern at CESS, The Netherlands

CESS News

Mourning and celebrations at CESS

In December last year, Peter Volten passed away. Peter established the Centre for European Security Studies in 1993 in Groningen, where he also took up the position of professor of International Relations at the University of Groningen. Peter was a staunch supporter of European unity and strong transatlantic ties, contributing to peace and security in Europe by reaching out to people that had suffered under authoritarian rule. A mission that remains more urgent than ever today. Peter was the director of CESS from its establishment until 2005, when he became Chair of the Board. Our series of policy briefs is now affectionately named after him.

On a happy note, CESS celebrated its 30th birthday. On 14 July, we were honoured to welcome many former staff members, board members, associates, fellows, and interns at our office to celebrate and share good memories. Digging up old anecdotes and forging new ties continued at café De Keyzer (well known to all that have worked at CESS), where we all enjoyed a delicious catering from Groningen's Ukrainian restaurant.

Latest Publications

CESS (www.cess.org)

Between a rock and a hard place: Security sector oversight in Armenia

CESS Volten Brief, No. 9, October 2023 (also available in Armenian)

Jos Boonstra and Beatrijs Visser

After the 2018 Velvet revolution, and amidst the continuous turmoil following the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia seeks to reform its security sector. It does so with modest help from international donors. Democratic control of security and its reform is largely ignored. What can be done to turn this process around?

'I still trust the Russian media more'. Narratives and perception of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan

EUCAM Policy Brief, No. 38, June 2023 (also available in Kyrgyz and Russian)

Rashid Gabdulhakov

Russian propaganda is dominating the media landscape in Kyrgyzstan, stirring anti-Western sentiment, promoting Russian narratives about its war in Ukraine, and emphasising Kyrgyzstan's dependence on Russia. This policy brief outlines the scope of Russian propaganda, discusses its narrative, and assesses how it is perceived by the Kyrgyz people. It urges action by the Kyrgyz authorities, donors, journalists, civil society, and researchers.

The European Union and Central Asia: Bridging the digital divide

EUCAM commentary, No. 53, July 2023

Alouddin Komilov

Digital transformation has become a major international development topic. In November 2022, the EU launched a Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity in Central Asia. Whereas the initiative presents an opportunity to bridge the digital divide between Europe and Central Asia, there are also risks, particularly related to the diverging interests of other external actors and the region's poor governance performance.

Mission impossible: The Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate in Central Asia

EUCAM commentary, No. 54, July 2023

Shyngys Zipatolla

In November 2022, the EU launched a Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate. Central Asia's environmental problems, amidst challenging economic and political contexts, raise doubts over Brussels' capacity to have a positive impact on such broad areas with only a limited budget at its disposal. Instead, the EU should focus on a few specific tangible projects that are realistic, while ensuring that Central Asian partners continue to regard Europe as a neutral and innovative partner.

About BIHOS – Bosnia and Herzegovina Building Inclusive Oversight of Security

BIHOS seeks to strengthen democratic governance and inclusive oversight of the security sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the state, entity, and canton levels. By investing in capacities through providing tools, skills, and techniques to oversight actors; fostering cooperation among parliaments, civil society organisations, and other oversight actors; and by promoting a culture of oversight that is critical and constructive, BIHOS contributes to better informed, more effective, and inclusive oversight of the security sector in BiH.

BIHOS is implemented through intertwined capacity-building and research components. The former includes tailor-made training courses and trajectories, as well as peer-to-peer consultations, training-of-trainers' courses, and study visits. The latter consists of a needs' assessment exercise, a sequence of expert labs, and a functional analysis, presented in a series of publications. The project is implemented by CESS from The Netherlands, in cooperation with the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) and the European Defendology Center (EDC) from BiH. BIHOS is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance security, development, democracy and human rights by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges. CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

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