

EU TACSO 3 Meeting Notes

People-to-People Programme Event/Regional Event Number 159

“Contemporary Dynamics in Information Sharing” on August 8, 2023, Via Zoom, 13:00 – 15:30

Introduction

Purpose

The objective of this meeting and *What is the Change?* meeting¹ held on August 3, 2023, is to explore the impact of digital transition on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and identify strategies for civil society in the region to adapt to the changing world. These meetings aim to identify priorities related to the digital agenda and digital transition for CSOs in the region and address various aspects of digital transformation and its implications on the modus operandi of CSOs and their beneficiaries. Based on these consultation sessions, a live event will be carefully planned and organised for later during the Reporting Period 10 (July – December 2023).

Background

The widespread, rapid, and extensive development of digital service platforms, as well as debates on public data spaces and new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), affect all areas of our society. Many new ways to communicate, shop and access information online have been integrated into our daily lives and are constantly evolving. The European digital agenda for the decade 2020-2030 addresses these issues by focusing on creating secure digital spaces and services, creating a level playing field in digital markets with large platforms, and strengthening Europe’s digital sovereignty while contributing to the European goal of climate neutrality by 2050².

All the extensive digital development has effects on civil society organisations. It influences the ways in which they operate, adapt to the changing world, offer their services, advertise their activities to a wider public, record their results, publish, and present them to donors. The new era also makes everyone more vulnerable regarding data management and protection, as well as the need to prevent and combat digital violence.

The digital transformation can be observed as a train that has left the main station. During its never-ending travel, this train gives opportunity, as well as imposes the need for everyone to get on the train as soon as possible, boarding wagons with different features and services offered to make the traveling experience a platform of learning, adapting, adjusting to constant improvements, dysfunctionalities, improvements need and keeping up with changes that are not necessarily timely communicated or explained.

Relations to the EU TACSO 3 Project’s Result Areas

The “Digital Agenda Consultative Meetings are in relation to the Project’s Result Area 6: “The People to People (P2P) programme and other events are effectively designed and implemented in a participatory manner.”

¹ Meeting Notes are available upon request via dino_mujanovic@outlook.com and p2p@tacso.eu

² [Digital Agenda for Europe | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

Agenda for the 2nd Consultative Meeting - “What is the change?”

8 th of August, 2023, Tuesday	
13:00 – 13:10	<p>Welcome and introduction to the topic, with a brief overview of the agenda</p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Dino Mujanović, People-to-People Programme Manager</p>
13:10– 13:40	<p>Session I: Utilization of Digital Platforms for Information Sharing</p> <p>a. Presentation on how CSOs leverage digital platforms (websites, social media, online collaboration tools) for information sharing with stakeholders,</p> <p>b. Evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of different digital platforms in reaching and engaging target audiences,</p> <p>c. Identification and discussion of best practices and innovative approaches in utilizing digital platforms for information sharing within CSOs;</p>
13:40 – 14:20	<p>Session II: Impact of social media on CSOs and their Operating Environment</p> <p>a. Assessment of the influence of social media platforms on the visibility, reach, and advocacy efforts of CSOs,</p> <p>b. Analysis of how CSOs have utilized social media for mobilization, fundraising, and building relationships with supporters,</p> <p>c. Examination of the challenges and risks associated with social media use by CSOs, including issues related to privacy, disinformation, and online harassment;</p>
14:20– 14:40	<p>Refreshment Break</p>
14:40 – 15:10	<p>Session III: Building and Managing CSOs' Reputations in the Digital World</p> <p>a. Examination of strategies and tactics for building and managing the reputation of CSOs in the digital era,</p> <p>b. Identification of key elements of a positive online reputation and strategies to mitigate reputation risks,</p> <p>c. Presentation of case studies and examples of successful reputation management practices in the digital context;</p>
15:10 – 15:30	<p>Wrap-up and Conclusion</p> <p>a. Recap of key points discussed in each session,</p> <p>b. Q&A session to address any remaining questions or concerns,</p> <p>c. Closing remarks and next steps;</p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Dino Mujanović, People-to-People Programme Manager</p>

Meeting Notes

Opening remarks were provided by Mr. Daniele Aloisi, Task Manager with DG NEAR, and Mr. Richard Allen, Team Leader for EU TACSO 3, while the introduction to the agenda and previous meeting main points was provided by Mr. Dino Mujanović, People-to-People PM from EU TACSO 3.

Main Points from the “What is the Change?” Meeting

1. Commitment to the investment in the capacities helps to be better positioned to serve the community.
2. Technology needs to be thought of on a more strategic level, explore what are the models for CSO development, and how digital technology should be used for the improvement of CSO missions and not only for CSOs’ efficiency.
3. Need for a comprehensive understanding of digital transformation, the challenges posed by biases in AI, and the importance of promoting inclusivity and diversity in the digital era. It also highlights relevant global and regional initiatives aimed at addressing these issues.
4. The Importance of ensuring human rights is upheld in the face of digital transformation, addressing the digital skills gap in the population, and creating collaborative partnerships to navigate complex technological challenges.
5. Need for comprehensive support, accessible digital tools, and knowledge-sharing to strengthen democracy and empower CSOs in the face of challenges posed by transformative processes of digitalisation and artificial intelligence.
6. The interconnectedness between digital tools, democratic processes, the potential for a genuine democratic transition, and the need for cross-sectoral collaboration to achieve effective results in the process of digital transformation.
7. Challenges faced by smaller CSOs in adopting new technologies, the need for support and capacity-building, the mindset shift required for effective digital transition, and the importance of adaptability and learning in this process.
8. Need to approach digital transformation carefully, ensuring that advancements do not create a new gap between those who are technologically advanced and those who are not. Maintaining a balanced approach is crucial to avoid leaving certain groups of people behind in the rapidly changing digital world.
9. Challenges faced in achieving equal digital access across regions within a country, and the impact of these disparities on youth education and opportunities.

Session I: Utilisation of Digital Platforms for Information Sharing

Mr. Goshe Nikolov, Metamorphosis Foundation³, Journalist at Meta News Agency⁴

Social media works and how we find our way in the chaotic digital world. Digital platforms have become a cornerstone of nowadays communication, opening unprecedented opportunities for CSOs, amplification of CSOs’ voices, and expanding their reach. Gives truly boundless opportunities to share their mission, their projects, impact.

³ [Home - Metamorphosis](#)

⁴ [Meta.mk | Новинска Агенција](#)

Websites represent virtual hubs where it is possible to showcase organisations' values, initiatives, success stories, etc. Social media – act like megaphones that enable engagement directly with the targeted audience, groups, supporters, donors, and stakeholders in real-time. Online Forums also represent the space for dialogue and exchange of ideas between people of similar interests. However, securing funding for the creation and upkeep of their websites poses a challenge for CSOs.

This is not enough as it is important to have a digital communication strategy aligned with the goals of the CSO and the needs of the target audience. It needs to begin with a deep understanding of the audience – who they are, what they care about, and how they engage with digital media. When one gets this knowledge, then can create messages and content that may resonate with their interests and aspirations, create genuine connections and build a community of supporters.

What is the best time to post on social media? Depends on the goals of the post, the targeted audience, social media platform the CSO is using. The first step is determining demographics and online behaviour and when they are online. It differs if they are youth, working people, young adults, elderly, or coming from rural or urban areas. This all helps to tailor the approach. A universal approach to the social media platforms is not working, as something that works well on Instagram, might not work well on Twitter and Tic Toc. There is a need to leverage the use of platforms to be able to deliver the message effectively. Understanding the platform is essential in order to optimise the content and maximise the impact. Different social medial platforms have different peak usage times.

Metamorphosis found out that Facebook is mostly used on working days from 9 AM to 3 PM and that Wednesdays are particularly effective for content posting. Metamorphosis posts between noon and 3 PM as it was found as the optimum time for both Metamorphosis and their audience. On Instagram, the optimum time is during the lunch hours and after 7 PM. It has been identified as important to follow a consistent posting schedule. On Facebook, Metamorphosis reshare their posts also in affiliated groups, such as FB groups of CSOs dealing with Youth, Human Rights, etc. This has resulted in a higher reach to people.

Improvements are needed in information flows on social media platforms. Metamorphosis works on the improvement of their activities on LinkedIn and the optimum schedule for posting on this platform.

When it comes to adapting Metamorphosis to Digital Changes, there are three media outlets, Meta News Agency⁵, PORTALB⁶ with news in the Albanian language, and also Vistinomer⁷ that is dealing with facts checking. These are the main channels Metamorphosis uses and they help timely delivery of messages.

It was identified that the younger generations do not get their news through more traditional channels such as TV, and newspapers, as before. Metamorphosis uses to present content to young people - via Instagram and Tic Toc using Video News Shows. They are posted on Thursday evenings in youth-friendly language, keeping the targeted audience informed, with messages delivered in the format they watch.

Dissemination of content needs to be followed carefully due to pitfalls such as fast-spreading disinformation and fake news. They represent a threat to the credibility of the content owner. It is important to stay alert, provide and preserve accurate information, as well as combat disinformation sharing. It also may lead to the misinterpretation of actions, as some Metamorphosis staff was in some situations in the past when they were in certain media presented as people who remove content from

⁵ [Meta.mk | Новинска Агенција](#)

⁶ [Magedoni – Portalb](#)

⁷ [Truthmeter – Holds you accountable!](#)

the Internet. Following this exposure, they were victims of hate speech and threats online, with their identities exposed publicly and referenced in a negative context. Some of the fellow journalists received threats in person and in media, as well.

This gave Metamorphosis an incentive to combat disinformation even more, submitting the request for denial of fake news to the media in North Macedonia. Some of the media published the Metamorphosis's denial. Also, a lawsuit was filed against the person and media who published the fake news, as the misinformation led to threats against the Metamorphosis staff members.

Social media platforms are where disinformation spreads the most. The case described was three years ago and still has effects on Metamorphosis. The well-developed communication strategy to deal with unpredicted situations and manage risks is a base for combating disinformation and fake news. Freedom of speech also practiced on social media, may often be a misinterpreted concept, as everyone may say whatever they want. This represents the root of the manipulation of facts and misuse by malicious actors.

The main point is that social media empowers CSOs, enabling effective engagement, mission sharing, and audience connection; digital strategies must align with target preferences and schedules while addressing disinformation challenges.

Mr. Miloš Janković, Catalyst Balkans⁸

As stated by Goshe Nikolov, it is important to build a network of supporters in the digital world. Believe there are two main challenges that CSOs deal with today. One of them is how we communicate in general, how CSOs publish their posts, and how they are toned, and voiced out. Some tend to share stories and news in digital space in the same writing style as they prepare reports to donors. This format might be completely inadequate for their constituencies and their supporters, particularly those who do not have in-depth knowledge of the topic, the terminology used, acronyms, etc., in comparison to those who work on the project itself, work in other CSOs or are in donor agencies and read their reports written in required format and language.

The second would be a strategic and tactical challenge on how CSOs are using digital platforms, as it is not just to decide which platform to use and what messages to send. It is actually how CSOs are combining the use of those platforms in something called a "supporter funnel".

Do CSOs and their staff have enough capacities and understanding of how to strategically develop supporter funnels and how to develop the journey for their supporters?

The entrance to that funnel is through social media or Google or Facebook advertisements. There is a need to understand the difference between Google and Facebook advertising and the difference between intent and interruption marketing. The main difference between Google and Facebook marketing is intent. Instagram and Facebook are for most people digital spaces where they go with the intention to see their friends' feeds, and pictures, or inform of things of their personal interest.

Google is a space where people go to search some specific information. The journey for CSOs on these platforms is different. On Facebook, when CSOs want to get attention and attract people to their content, the tactics used need to differentiate from all those other many actors who use Facebook as a platform to interrupt Facebook viewers and sell to them their products/services.

Through Google Adds, a supporter funnel might be easier to create. CSOs in the region are not even aware that they can be on Google as first under search. In Serbia, a few years ago was a situation when some rights coming from the Labour law related to maternity leave were attempted to be abolished,

⁸ [Catalyst Balkans Home - Catalyst Balkans](#)

the group named “Mame su zakon⁹” used Google Advertisement as a primary platform to create a supporter funnel. CSOs need to understand how to through the platform and reach a stranger to become their supporter, by being more strategic and open to learning new skills.

Catalyst Balkans is helping in the digital promotion of CSOs. Many CSOs are not well-presented online, or not at all. Catalyst Balkans is also working with global companies to make improvements. There are possibilities, but there is a need to have a more strategic approach or learn.

The main point is that CSOs face challenges in effectively communicating and using digital platforms, requiring a strategic approach to engage supporters through techniques like supporter funnels, differentiating between intent and interruption marketing on platforms like Google and Facebook, and benefiting from organisations who may help them improve online presence and self-promotion.

Session II: Impact of Social Media on CSOs and their Operating Environment

Mr. Miloš Janković, Catalyst Balkans

The most important channel for Catalyst’s communication is its Newsletter. Organisations sometimes tend to disregard it and think of that as a form of spamming. However, it is a smart way to provide valuable information to constituencies. Through campaigns, and when we speak of community fundraising and getting donations, media campaigns are much more efficient than social media. Social media are important through the raising awareness phase, but alteration happens through the Newsletter and information provided on the website. Thanks to the large e-mailing list, the newsletter is sent to the non-profit sector and the donors. The feedback from the non-profit sector on Newsletter is that through that they get familiar with the whole region and can better consider what would be the area they would support or work on.

These are all the ways to cultivate and develop a supporter funnel and all CSOs must identify what would be the best timing for the publishing of their content, as one approach might work well for one particular CSO, while others need to develop strategically own mechanisms to reach their goals.

The main point is that the Newsletter plays a crucial role in cultivating a supporter funnel and helping CSOs raise awareness and make a meaningful impact through strategic content publication timing.

Ms. Mila Josifovska Danilovska, Metamorphosis

Asked if there were other CSOs present if they had ever been in a situation under attack through social media, and how they dealt with that. Looking for a more effective approach in dealing with these attacks. There is a difference between harassment based on comments on work and the appearance of CSO staff and their affiliates happening online, with malicious contacts made through their family members.

Metamorphosis also aligned their efforts with the President’s cabinet to combat disinformation. It is important to have allies to support you. Otherwise, each of us as civil activists or CSOs will be attacked at one point and can be under attack. It is important to create partnerships to support you to battle through this way of disinformation and fake news sharing.

The main point is to effectively address attacks and disinformation on social media by seeking allies, creating partnerships, and aligning efforts with relevant stakeholders, to combat malicious online activities and protect their reputation and mission.

⁹ [Home - Mame su zakon](#)

Session III: Building and Managing CSOs' Reputations in the Digital World

Mr. Miloš Janković, Catalyst Balkans

Catalyst is focusing on proactive transparency and rebranding civil society as a whole. It is the first time that I used at the meeting the term “civil society” instead of the “non-profit sector”, as in media and public speaking “non-profit or non-governmental” often was perceived with a negative connotation. To make a rebranding of CSOs, it is needed to be proactively transparent. It does not mean that we should make all our regular reporting public. It is important to present our annual reports, showing the impact of work and explain that in easy-to-read and commonly understandable language.

When running to respond to crowd-funding campaigns for different organisations on www.donacije.rs portal. The questions we get are “Why you do not volunteer?”, and “Why do not get governmental support?”. CSOs should constantly educate people and explain how the civil society sector works. That it is normal to have people employed in the sector and that if CSOs would all be volunteering, would not have an impact. It is important to have professionals working on impact.

There are still organisations that share their financial reports only with donors, or financial institutions if it is required. They might be afraid to disclose the information on who is funding them, and for what kind of activity. It is important to educate the wider public on CSOs’ activities in order to build up a positive sentiment in the public on CSOs. For instance, in Kosovo, there is a positive sentiment on work on CSOs, while in Serbia it is not. CSOs are often considered as foreign paid entities in a negative meaning. Changing the narrative is something that brings to CSOs positive results.

Once there is a created community of supporters, the need to defend yourself will decrease. If someone or some group attacks you on social media, your supporters will express their thoughts and protect you. This will be the indicator that the job on the cultivation of the supporter funnel/network of allies was done well, thanks to the appropriate communication strategy and work around that.

The negative comments on the post should not be responded to with contra attack, but by providing an explanation with the aim of educating the audience and changing their perceptions. These comments are usually coming because of ignorance. The recommendation is to try to have an open conversation.

The Main Point focuses on proactive transparency and rebranding of the civil society sector, presenting annual reports and impact in accessible language, educating the community about the role of CSOs and countering negative perceptions, building a community of supporters to provide defence against attacks, and responding to negative comments with education and open conversation rather than confrontation.

Ms. Marija Armenski, EU TACSO 3¹⁰ Country Coordinator for North Macedonia

It is quite difficult to respond is when you have for years negative sentiment against the sector. The sector was observed as selling country values, and a bad image is created. Analysis what is the trust of citizens in the CSO sector, is quite low, despite efforts to change perception and educate. What is for us next to do in this situation considering this analysis? Strategies need to be developed. It can be easier for big organisations, while at the same time quite challenging for small organisations, as they do not have the skills or trained people to deal with the negative sentiment. Are there some positive experiences?

¹⁰ [Home - Tacso](#)

The main point is that addressing the enduring negative sentiment and distrust directed toward the civil society sector proves to be a formidable task, despite ongoing endeavours to alter perceptions and enhance public education. It remains particularly difficult for smaller CSOs to prioritise effective communication and allocate resources for dedicated and trained personnel, especially in situations where sustainability is a pressing concern.

Ms. Aleksandra Gligorović, EU TACSO 3 Country Coordinator for Montenegro, stated that civil society organisations are often attacked in Montenegro. During 30 years of political parties governing the country, some CSOs were considered “partners” of their political opponents who are now in power. Now the situation is changed, as the perception is that political parties in power, dislike criticism coming from those CSOs they favoured before. There is an opportunity with online tools to reach citizens and affect their thinking. As mentioned, the youth does not get the news from traditional channels and there is the practice now that they are reached through videos via social media platforms. Direct communication via online media can be considered a tool to influence the opinions of the community. Three decades ago, there was also the spreading of disinformation and fake news, and those were controlled and disseminated by the mainstream media. Today, there is also a lot of disinformation shared, too, and we are now in a position to control some of that.

It remains difficult to rebrand and create a positive image for CSOs, as community members to a certain extent might not understand what CSOs’ role is, as well as do not know the elements making civil society. What is the difference between unions, associations, international organisations, etc? The perception is that all of them are often considered with no differences between them.

The perception is that CSOs should do their work for free or for a low amount of money, i.e., a psychologist working for the civil sector should be paid less than one working in the public school or in the business sector. It is unknown how this perception is made – is it by CSOs themselves or by the limitation of funding? There are examples when small grants that are awarded to small CSOs do not foresee or approve honoraria for hiring experts. Also, it comes when volunteering is in place, with expectations that there is no associated cost for volunteering, such as meals, transportation to the location where volunteering work is happening, materials needed, etc.

The community needs to be constantly educated. The re-branding and branding of CSOs can be improved using digital tools to access the wider public. The development of a communication strategy is important for all CSOs. As said earlier, some of them do not have resources or knowledge and need support to learn how to present their activities and how to publish them to the wider public.

The main point is that civil society organizations (CSOs) in Montenegro often face attacks due to shifting political dynamics, and while online tools offer opportunities to reach citizens and shape opinions, challenges remain in rebranding and creating a positive image for CSOs. The community's understanding of CSOs' roles and distinctions between different types of organizations is limited, and there is a perception that CSOs should operate with limited funding and resources. Education of the community, effective communication strategies, and the use of digital tools are crucial for improving the perception and visibility of CSOs.

Mr. Miloš Janković, Catalyst Balkans

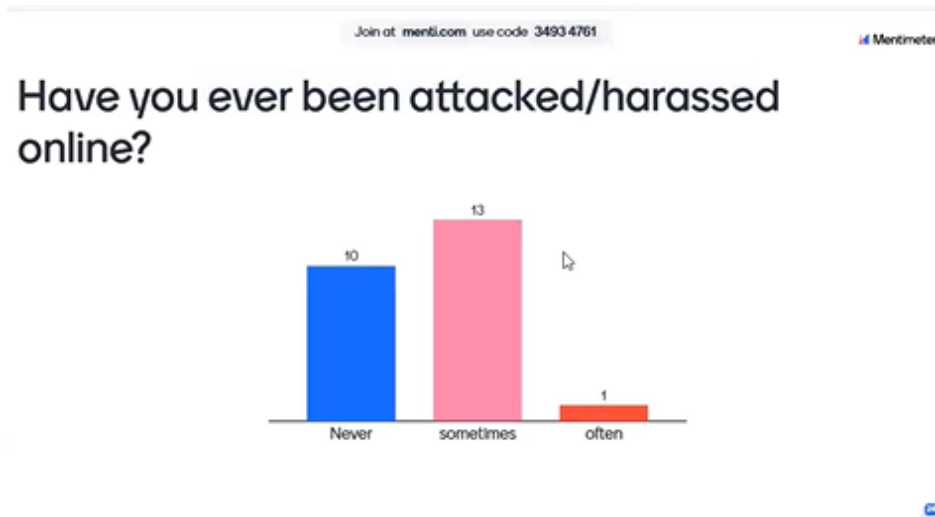
It is important to build positive narratives in campaigns, with optimism presented in them.

People-to-people or peer-to-peer communication is having a great impact on fundraising campaigns, where people talk to other people and elaborate on their understanding and why would be important to support certain causes. There are also positive experiences using social media influencers to support the work of CSOs and helping rebrand the sector and educate the public is one of the potential paths in the future.



The main point is that peer-to-peer communication and leveraging social media influencers have a significant impact on fundraising campaigns for CSOs, enhancing understanding, support, and rebranding efforts within the sector, while also holding potential for future educational and promotional initiatives.

During the meeting, Mr. Richard Allen, the EU TACSO 3 Team Leader ran the menti.com survey among meeting participants to get a picture of how many of the participants have ever been attacked/harassed online. Among 24 who responded, 1 often and 13 sometimes faced the attacks/harassment, while 10 haven't been exposed to that yet. Graph below.



Recommendations and Potential Next Steps

Based on the notes from the sessions, there are some recommendations and potential next steps for CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) that can be considered:

Session I: Utilization of Digital Platforms for Information Sharing

1. Development of a Comprehensive Digital Communication Strategy: CSOs should create a well-defined strategy for their digital communication efforts. This includes understanding the target audience, tailoring messages to their interests, and selecting appropriate platforms for engagement.
2. Platform-Specific Approach: Recognize that different social media platforms have distinct user behaviours and peak usage times. CSOs should adapt their content and posting schedules accordingly to maximize impact on each platform.
3. Consistent Posting Schedule: Establish a consistent posting schedule on social media platforms to keep the audience engaged and informed. Use analytics to identify optimal posting times.
4. Influence Affiliated Groups: Sharing content in relevant affiliated groups can significantly increase reach and engagement. Identify and participate in groups related to the CSO's mission for broader exposure.
5. Combat Disinformation: Develop a strategy to combat disinformation and fake news. Monitor online conversations, and promptly address false claims, in a way to engage in constructive dialogue to offer accurate information.

6. **Work with Allies:** Collaborate with like-minded organisations and allies to counter disinformation campaigns. Building a network of support can help amplify accurate information and protect against attacks.
7. **Educate and Engage:** Focus on educating the public about CSOs' activities and impact. Use easy-to-understand language to explain the sector's role and value to society.

Session II: Impact of Social Media on CSOs and Their Operating Environment

1. **Newsletters:** Utilise newsletters as a powerful communication tool for engaging with supporters and donors. Share valuable information and impact stories to cultivate a durable connection.
2. **Media Campaigns:** Consider media campaigns for fundraising and community engagement. While social media is essential for the awareness phase, newsletters, and media campaigns can drive deeper engagement and donations.
3. **Develop Supporter Funnels:** Understand supporter journeys on different platforms and create strategic funnels to engage potential supporters.
4. **Community Building:** Create a community of supporters who can defend the CSO against attacks. Positive interactions and open conversations can help change perceptions and mitigate negative sentiment.

Session III: Building and Managing CSOs' Reputations in the Digital World

1. **Proactive Transparency:** Embrace proactive transparency by sharing annual reports and explaining the impact of CSOs' work in accessible language. This can help build trust and improve public perception.
2. **Rebranding:** Focus on rebranding the civil society sector to counter negative connotations. Use positive narratives and stories to showcase the positive impact of CSOs.
3. **Education and Advocacy:** Continuously educate the public about the role and importance of CSOs. Address misconceptions and advocate for fair compensation for professionals within the sector.
4. **Peer-to-Peer Communication:** Leverage peer-to-peer communication and social media influencers to amplify the CSO's message and engage a wider audience.
5. **Resilience Against Attacks:** Develop strategies to handle online attacks and harassment effectively. Respond with explanations and education rather than aggressive counterattacks.
6. **Collaboration and Networking:** Establish partnerships with other organizations and allies to collectively combat disinformation and protect against online attacks.
7. **Skill Development:** Offer training and support for CSOs, especially smaller ones, to improve their digital communication skills and effectively manage their online presence.

These recommendations, if considered, should be tailored to the specific goals, resources, and audience of each CSO. Adapting and implementing a comprehensive digital communication strategy may help CSOs effectively share their mission, engage supporters, and counter challenges in the digital world.

Sources for further information

[Balkan Barometer](#) | [Welcome \(rcc.int\)](#)