



Institute
for Democracy
and Mediation



Thinking
Governance

ANNUAL
REPORT
2024

Our Vision: Inform, Develop, and Motivate for a democratic and prosperous society. IDM provides expertise, policy analysis, applied research, and capacity building for key societal actors to drive reforms and engage in evidencebased policy processes.

Our Mission: Our mission is to advance societal capacities, generate and provide knowledge, skills, and expertise for inclusive policy-making and evidence-based alternatives to bolster democracy and sustainable development.

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In the cover: On November 14th, IDM celebrated 25 years with a commemorative reception that brought together current and former staff, civil society colleagues, institutional representatives, faith leaders, and donors.

Letter from the Executive Director



Dear reader,

As we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation in November 2024, we marked more than the passage of time — we honored a legacy of commitment, growth, and enduring impact. Throughout these years, IDM has evolved — learning, adapting, and expanding its work in step with the needs and aspirations and hopes of the society it serves.

Since its founding, IDM has grown into a trusted voice and a driving force for positive change. Over a quarter century, we have built meaningful partnerships across public institutions, civil society, and the private sector. Our work has spanned a broad spectrum of critical areas from good governance, anti-corruption, and civic engagement to decentralization, security, and European and regional affairs. These efforts reflect a shared commitment to public responsibility, open dialogue, and policy grounded in research.

We have always believed that how we work matters just as much as what we do. IDM's independence and integrity have kept us grounded in people's concerns, rights, and needs. The principles we have stood by, transparency, ethical conduct, collaboration, and civic duty, continue to shape our daily work and the culture we have built within the organization. These values not only define our organization but also guide our vision for the future.

We commemorated this important anniversary during a time of uncertainty and complexity in Albania and beyond. The space to engage, question, and contribute is under pressure, and new challenges are emerging. We acknowledge these challenges as a call to sharpen our

focus and to engage with even greater thoughtfulness and creativity. At IDM, we are prepared and determined to meet these challenges with resilience, adaptability, and innovation. We believe that adversity can also be an opportunity to reaffirm our purpose and deepen our impact.

Looking ahead to 2025 and beyond, IDM will continue to expand its development priorities and explore new partnerships. Alongside our ongoing work with civil society, we see a growing need to engage more closely with the private sector. We believe that stronger relationships between public interest organizations and private actors can help shape a more responsible and forward-looking society.

For me and my colleagues, 2025 represents an anteroom to the next decade of dedication and service. One that invites us to carry forward what we have learned, to remain open to change, and to stay committed to work towards an Albania where freedom is cherished, democracy is upheld, and the rule of law prevails.

With sincere gratitude to all who have walked this path with us,

Sotirag Hroni

Executive Director

Institute for Democracy and Mediation

2024 Year in Review

The staff of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) implemented **17 projects** throughout 2024.

Our work was supported by a total annual budget of **€1,913,057.66** from donor organizations, of which 31% was allocated as subgrants to 36 civil society organizations through the BAT-Civil Society, SMART Balkans, and WeBER 3.0 projects.

In 2024, IDM produced **32 publications**, including research studies, monitoring reports, policy briefs, guidelines, training modules, integrity plans and blogs..

IDM organized a total of **91 in-person and online events**, comprising 42 trainings and workshops, 17 roundtables, 11 briefings, 10 conferences, 8 information sessions, 1 study visit, 1 awareness-raising campaign, and 1 National Youth Debate.

These events gathered **2,828 participants**, with approximately **65.36% being women**. Our primary audiences included civil society organizations, central and local government institutions, youth, and academia, along with participation from international organizations, media, and the private sector.

Throughout the year, IDM was featured **140 times in international, national, and local media**, including 28 appearances on television through interviews, video features, and live streams, as well as 112 written pieces, such as articles, blogs, and publications.

Publications

In 2024, IDM released **32 publications** aimed at various audiences, such as government representatives, non-governmental organizations, young people, educational institutions, and other stakeholders involved in policy matters. These publications aim to inform, provoke critical reflection, and drive institutional and societal change by offering in-depth policy analysis, practical tools, public opinion insights, and expert perspectives on governance, integrity, public participation, security, and socio-political challenges in Albania.

Study Reports

- > *Integrity and decision-making factors that affect the behavior of public administration employees* – Adela Danaj, Mimoza Agolli, Iliada Korçari
- > *Group loyalty and unethical behavior: an analysis of the tolerance of corruption in the public administration* – Adela Danaj, Mimoza Agolli, Iliada Korçari
- > *The culture of silence: identifying factors that influence the willingness to report corruption cases in the public administration* – Adela Danaj, Mimoza Agolli, Iliada Korçari
- > *National Integrity System Assessment | Albania 2023* – Alban Dafa, Blerjana Bino, Daniel Prroni, Erjon Muharremaj, Iliada Korçari, Nysjola Dhoga, Ola Xama
- > *Assessing the experiences and potentials for the functioning of Local Public Safety Councils* – Armela Xhaho

Monitoring Report

- > *Public consultation in Albania – The Illusion of Inclusion. A long distance between transparency and participation in government consultations* – Megi Reçi, Diori Angjeli
- > *Integrity Index Assessment for the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data: Assessment Report* – Eralda (Methasani) Çani, Andrea Mazelliu
- > *Integrity Index Assessment for the Ministry of Health and Social Protection: Assessment Report* – Elda Zotaj, Astrit Alijaj

- > *Integrity Index Assessment for the Institute of Public Health: Assessment Report* – Ardita Shehaj, Erisa Proko
- > *Integrity Index Assessment for the High Council of Prosecution: Assessment Report* – Bojana Hajdini, Rozarta Dodaj

Survey Reports

- > *Trust in Governance 2023 | Annual Public Opinion Poll in Albania* - Blerina Metanj (Subashi), Besjana Kuçi, Diori Angjeli
- > *The 2024 Assessment of Violent Extremism in Albania* - Sara Kelmendi, Romario Shehu

Policy Briefs

- > *Recommendations from Citizens' Panel Participants on the Development of Rural and Mountain Tourism*
- > *Recommendations from Citizens' Panel Participants on Disability Issues*
- > *The challenges of pre-university education in the peripheral rural areas of Albania* – Gerda Sula
- > *Recommendations for curbing irregular immigration flows* – Ilir Gëdeshi, Armela Xhaho
- > *Social problems in rural and suburban areas in Albania* – Evelina Azizaj

Research Paper

- > *Safeguarding digital democracy: the evolving role of non-public actors in Albania* – Megi Reçi, Sara Kelmendi

Public Institutions' Integrity Plans and Guidelines

- > *Integrity Plan of the Parliament of Albania*
- > *Integrity Plan of the Tax Administration (2024–2027)*
- > *Manual of Ethics and Integrity & related regulatory acts of the Department of Public Administration*
- > *Guidelines for the Integrity Risk Assessment Process in Local Self-Government Units*

Methodologies

- > *Monitoring Methodology for Public Consultation at the Central Government Level* – Nadia Rusi, Megi Reçi
- > *Integrity Index of Public Institutions* – Boris Divjak, Mimosa Agolli

Blogs

- > *“Privatization” of public procurement or renouncing public accountability?* – Redi Ametllari
- > *Reclaiming governance from Western Balkan hybrid regimes: A renewed strategy for think tank development* – Gjergji Vurmo
- > *EU Report on Albania 2024: And just like that, another EU report came and went...* – Daniel Prroni
- > *Tirana and Brussels start accession negotiations – Not accelerated, but hopefully transformative ones* – Gjergji Vurmo
- > *Navigating Constitutional Concerns in the Unregulated Online Landscape in Albania* – Megi Reçi
- > *The Government's Law-Making Agenda for 2024: (The missing) principles and priorities* – Gjergji Vurmo
- > *The criminalisation of adultery* – Rovenia Sulstarova
- > *Belgium at the helm of the EU Council – What should the Western Balkans expect?* – Daniel Prroni

2024 Projects

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Start End

Programme areas

Governance

Throughout 2024, IDM's Governance Program significantly advanced public sector integrity, transparency, and accountability in Albania through multiple targeted initiatives. Under the project "Serving Democracy and Citizens through Improved Public Integrity," supported by SIDA, achievements included the development and formal approval of integrity and ethics instruments across key institutions. Notably, Integrity Plans and Codes of Ethics were successfully established for the General Directorate of Taxes (GDT) and the Parliamentary Administration, promoting ethical conduct, accountability, and improved administrative effectiveness.

A pioneering social experiment involving 70 public administration employees explored integrity, silence culture, and corruption reporting practices. Research outcomes highlighted the critical impact of internal loyalty on corruption tolerance and significant barriers due to distrust in internal reporting mechanisms.

Technical assistance provided to the Department of Public Administration (DoPA) involved developing a comprehensive manual addressing integrity rules, ethics, disciplinary measures, and enforcement mechanisms, aligning with key EU and GRECO standards. Additionally, a study tour to the Netherlands and a



Training of Trainers session ensured sustainable capacity building among public administration employees. Collaboration with Albania's Supreme State Audit Institution (ALSAI) led to the creation of a methodological tool integrating integrity assessments into performance audits. This significantly boosted ALSAI's oversight capabilities and enhanced public financial governance.

IDM, in collaboration with Transparency International, developed and refined the Civic Monitoring Instrument (CiMOF). Enhanced through expert consultations and civil society training, CiMOF facilitated external monitoring of integrity plan implementation in several public institutions, including the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and the High Prosecutorial Council. Additionally, as part of the BAT project, IDM supported 21 civil society and journalist-led initiatives addressing budget transparency challenges.

A flagship achievement was the joint publication of the National Integrity System (NIS) Assessment with Transparency International. This comprehensive analysis provided strategic recommendations to guide national anti-corruption efforts aligned with Albania's EU integration goals. Findings were prominently presented at the International Anticorruption Conference in Vilnius.



Under the regional WeBER 3.0 initiative, IDM carried out national monitoring of Public Administration Reform (PAR). This initiative provided detailed evaluations across multiple areas, such as service delivery, digitalization, policy coordination, organizational

management, public financial management, and procurement. IDM facilitated extensive collaborations and advocacy meetings with state institutions, producing actionable recommendations for improving governance practices.

Looking forward to 2030, IDM envisions transforming the Governance Program to proactively address emerging governance challenges driven by integrity building in both public and private sectors, increased citizen engagement, and evolving integrity standards. The program will further enhance its focus on innovative integrity tools, adaptive governance mechanisms, and inclusive participation, positioning Albania as a sustainable country to face the challenges in the fight against corruption successfully.

Security

In 2024 Albania adopted a new Law on the Albanian State Police (82/2024), a new strategy on national security (14/2024), and a regulation on the composition, organization and functioning of Local Public Safety Councils and the National Council for Community Safety (DCM). Organized crime remained a major security concern, operating at both national and international levels, infiltrating law enforcement and judicial institutions, and increasingly expanding its activities into diverse business sectors. Although violent extremism is not a major issue in Albania, the dynamic landscape of violent extremism continues to create challenges in the country that require continuous attention. Unlike previous years, the country was not a target



of high-level cyber-attacks throughout 2024, but the country needs to continue its efforts to develop and improve state capabilities for defending against hybrid threats.

Correspondingly, the Security Program continued its efforts to improve security sector governance, strengthen community resilience and local safety mechanisms, and provide research and expertise on contemporary security challenges. IDM presented the findings of the fourth national assessment of violent extremism conducted over the past decade, which offers insights into the evolving landscape of violent extremism in Albania. The assessment informs decision-makers and improves the capacities of P/CVE stakeholders by offering a body of knowledge that identifies emerging trends and helps shape policies, programmes and institutional measures to address this phenomenon and strengthen community resilience.

As part of its efforts to improve security sector governance in 2024, IDM implemented the action “Assessing Institutional Vulnerabilities and Resilience Mechanisms within the Military and Police Ranks in Albania”, aiming to contribute to a safer and more resilient Albania by systematically examining the structural vulnerabilities and resilience mechanisms within the Albanian Armed Forces and State Police—particularly during recruitment, service, and post-duty phases—to mitigate the risk of involvement in violent extremism and organized crime.

For several years, IDM has paid significant attention to enhance multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches to security





issues by advocating for shared responsibility and closer cooperation in the context of public safety. In July 2024, IDM organized a consultative forum on the draft decision of the Council of Ministers regarding LPSCs with all relevant actors.

The forum provided an

inclusive consultation space on key issues with the draft decision, including (i) its non-compliance with constitutional provisions on decentralization and local autonomy, (ii) Duality of competences, requiring clarity on the roles of the prefect and the mayor in local public safety matters, and (iii) Lack of specific rules for the organization and functioning of LPSCs. Following this forum, IDM submitted all these recommendations to the relevant authorities, who incorporated several key suggestions into the final version of the draft decision, which was later adopted by the Council of Ministers.

During the consultation process on the law "On the State Police," IDM submitted a set of recommendations to the Ministry of the Interior and presented them at a hearing of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security. These focused on key issues such as procedures for the appointment, dismissal, and removal of the General Director of the State Police, the performance evaluation of police structures, and mechanisms for cooperation with local self-government units.

In the coming period, IDM's security program will expand its research, advocacy, and capacity-building efforts, while strengthening multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches to

security with a focus on community resilience. Central to IDM's SSG agenda will be building synergies with security sector institutions to advance people-centred approaches. Through advocacy, these innovative practices aim to improve legislation governing local law enforcement. IDM will continue promoting a multi-stakeholder approach to enhance public safety and resilience, and will deepen cooperation with the parliamentary committee on national security—particularly to strengthen oversight and democratic control of the security sector. Special emphasis will be placed on improving public consultations, post-legislative scrutiny, and parliamentary oversight of the intelligence community.

Civic space

In 2024, Albania witnessed significant developments with the continued erosion of democratic pillars and increasing challenges on civil society. In the context of a hybrid regime, where government control over public information and discourse remains strong, media freedoms further deteriorated, and civic space continued to shrink. Critical voices faced harassment and targeting both online and offline, while democratic checks and balances were weak. Public consultations were often superficial, reducing transparency, and complicating efforts to advocate for accountability and human rights.

Despite these challenges, civic actors remained resilient, mobilizing and supporting citizens around key issues such as healthcare,





quality of education, pensions, environmental protection, corruption, media freedom, and cultural heritage preservation. They also remain vital providers of social services, particularly for marginalized communities. Civil society notably led legal battles against controversial

government projects, including hydroelectric power plants, and drove campaigns on gender-based violence, minority rights, student rights, abuse of state resources, government interference in academic freedom, and the protection of asylum seekers.

Importantly, CSOs faced financial challenges due to donor pullbacks, a global shift toward the far right and more conservative political priorities. At the same time, public apathy and high distrust in institutions made it increasingly difficult to mobilize citizens.

In response, the IDM Civic Space program responded by supporting CSO resilience through funding, policy research, and training. It also fostered a multistakeholder coalition to advocate for a safer online environment, focusing on issues like digital surveillance and censorship, and harmonization with EU digital acquis. The program worked to ensure more participatory governance by monitoring public consultations of over 50 laws and policies.

A crucial lesson from 2024 has been the importance of solidarity and adaptability. Despite significant setbacks, collaboration within civil society - both nationally and globally - has been key

in sustaining democratic values. This will continue to guide the program, emphasizing coalition-building and strategic advocacy to confront threats to democratic governance and civic engagement.

Looking ahead to 2030, the program will continue to adapt its strategy, focusing on building a sustainable, resilient civil society capable of withstanding adversity. Key priorities include advocating for legal reforms that support participatory governance and human rights, enhancing CSOs' ability to navigate both traditional and digital spaces, and fostering sustainability and stronger coalitions between CSOs, media, activists and grassroots communities. The program envisions a future where civic actors and citizens, particularly marginalized ones, have a stronger voice in the decisions that shape their lives and society.

EU & the Balkans

In 2024, the EU's enlargement policy gained new momentum, delivering its first major breakthroughs. Albania officially began accession talks, opening negotiations on two key clusters: the first cluster on fundamentals and the sixth cluster on external relations. At the same time, the European Union launched the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans—an ambitious financial instrument designed to accelerate economic convergence and drive forward fundamental reforms in candidate countries.

Both Albania and the EU have set a clear timeline for progress, aiming to conclude accession negotiations by 2027, with the





ultimate goal of Albania becoming an EU member by 2030. This rapid progress represents a striking departure from previous years, where enlargement remained largely stalled. The shift has not only reinvigorated the process but has also reshaped the broader discourse on EU

enlargement, demonstrating that political will can override inertia and drive forward long-awaited developments.

However, this acceleration appears to have been mainly propelled by political will rather than technical readiness. Despite the optimism surrounding Albania's progress, the latest EU report indicates that the country remains underprepared for membership, with key reforms falling short of EU standards. Eventually, political commitments and technical requirements must converge to ensure that progress is both meaningful and sustainable.

To overcome this gap, a comprehensive and inclusive approach is now more critical than ever. Alongside government institutions and EU bodies, other stakeholders—civil society, independent experts, and the broader public—must be actively engaged in the process. Their involvement guarantees that reforms are not only implemented but also deeply rooted, strengthening democratic resilience and institutional stability in the long run. The challenge ahead is not just to maintain the pace of enlargement but to ensure that Albania's path to EU membership is built on a solid foundation and efforts lead to lasting change.

In this evolving landscape, IDM remained firmly engaged in supporting and influencing these processes by shaping policy discussions and proposing solutions to key challenges. It launched a new regional project on supporting the Growth Plan implementation and engaged national stakeholders in this new initiative. IDM remained a key voice in policy dialogue spaces, offering expert analysis, insights, and recommendations on accelerating enlargement, harnessing the new political drive behind EU integration, and advancing essential reforms. IDM sustained its proactive involvement in national structures, advocating for greater transparency in the integration process. Furthermore, IDM remained an active contributor to public discourse, sharing insights through media appearances, analysing key developments in blog posts, and working closely with regional partners.

Our audience in 2024

Who attended our events this year?

Educational institutions and Students **43.4%** Government Institutions **22.9%** Civil society **21.8%** International organizations and foreign representations **3.6%** Media **2.0%** Private sector **0.8%**

What did our digital audience look like in 2024?

Online outreach



1, 423 followers, **+83 compared to 2024**,
Total Impressions of the X account during 2024: **35.197**



9, 692 Followers, 9042 Page Likes, **+538 compared to 2023**,
204.3 K - Total Reach
Our Facebook followers are **62.4 % Women**, **37.6% Men**.
Additionally, **57.3% of followers** are within the **18-34 age group**.



1966 followers, **+675 compared to 2023**
47.546 Reach, **+12. 472 compared to 2023**
315,318 views in 2024
7038 content interactions



135,235 Impressions
2,340 Total followers



15,429 visitors during 2024

Most of our audience resides in Albania, but IDM also has a substantial following in Kosovo, Germany, Italy, the United States, North Macedonia, United Kingdom, Greece, Belgium and Serbia.

Media mentions

In 2024 the Institute of Democracy and Mediation staff, events, and publications were mentioned 140 times in international, national, and local news outlets, with around 28 appearances on TV through interviews, videos, live streaming, and 112 articles, blogs, and publications.

IDM appeared in the following broadcast media: Le Monde, European Western Balkan, VoA, Panorama, A2CNN, Reporter. al, Citizens Channel, Syri, News24, CNA, MCN. Relevant print and online news outlets including Top Channel, Tv Klan, Balkan Web, Gazeta Epoka e Re, Gazeta Shqiptare, Lapsi.al, Dosja, Kosova Press, Vox News, Politiko, etc.



Flagships



Think Tanks in the Time of Hybrid Regimes – Challenges to Impact, Integrity, and Independence



The Tirana Think Tank Forum (TTF) 2024 represented a strategic leap forward for the think tank sector in the Western Balkans, serving as a vital platform for renewal, collaboration, and resilience. Against the backdrop of deepening hybrid regimes, democratic backsliding, and rising populism, TTF brought together over 100 participants and 30 panellists from the region and the EU in a dynamic, three-day exchange that reaffirmed the critical role of think tanks in upholding democratic governance and evidence-based policymaking.

The forum was structured into closed-door and public sessions, enabling both candid peer-to-peer learning and open dialogue with a broader audience of stakeholders.

These discussions facilitated a focused and honest exploration of key sectoral challenges—such as shrinking civic space, limited access to government data, staff retention, and the need for organizational resilience in politically constrained environments. A particular achievement was the collaborative generation of strategic proposals under the “Agenda 2030 for Think Tanks,” which offered practical recommendations to reinforce integrity, independence, and impact.

TTF 2024 not only revived the spirit of earlier regional peer exchange mechanisms but also expanded their ambition. Building

on the legacy of initiatives such as the EFB’s Think and Link program and the DGAP TRAIN Fellowship, the forum reasserted the value of regional knowledge ecosystems and mentorship as cornerstones of institutional development. It provided an essential venue for fostering trust and solidarity among organizations facing similar pressures and underscored the importance of shared learning in a time of limited democratic space.

The forum also recognized that think tanks are indispensable actors in the EU integration process. As several Western Balkan countries face a critical window for accession—some with clear 2030 targets—TTF emphasized the urgent need for strong, credible, and high-integrity policy actors who can contribute to the design and implementation of transformative reforms. It highlighted the growing demand for localized expertise and strategic foresight as conditions for both domestic policy credibility and alignment with EU norms.

In a region where civic activism is often restricted and traditional democratic institutions lack trust, think tanks offer a unique value proposition: bridging knowledge and decision-making, advocating for citizen-driven reforms, and challenging narratives grounded in disinformation and populism. TTF 2024 reaffirmed this role and positioned the think tank community as a vital pillar of democratic renewal.

In conclusion, the Tirana Think Tank Forum 2024 laid the groundwork for a new phase in regional think tank development—one grounded in cooperation, evidence, and long-term strategic vision. It reinforced the need to invest in policy research capacities, enable resilient institutions, and cultivate a regional network capable of defending democratic norms while pushing for inclusive and effective governance.

Citizens' Panels: A New Way to Engage in Parliamentary Processes



Citizens' Panels—an innovative form of deliberative democracy—are increasingly used at national levels and within the European Union to involve the public more directly in policymaking. These panels convene a representative sample of randomly selected citizens to deliberate on pressing societal issues.

From October 17 to 19, 2024, 90 randomly selected citizens from across Albania gathered in Tirana to discuss key challenges and priorities related to rural and mountain tourism, disability inclusion, and potential actions to address them. Their discussions were guided by around 20 field experts and over 10 trained moderators. The process was implemented by IDM with the support

of Involve UK, a leading organization in the field of deliberative practice.

How Were Citizens Selected?

Participants were recruited through an open call for expressions of interest, followed by random selection. Applicants completed a short form and were contacted via phone and email. To ensure diversity and representativeness, selection was based on several socio-demographic factors, including gender, age, education, geographic location, and occupation.

The Deliberative Process

The Citizens' Panels followed a three-step approach:

1. Understanding the Issue – Participants heard from experts in relevant fields.
2. Deliberation – Participants discussed the issues, weighing different perspectives and arguments.
3. Recommendation – Participants developed concrete recommendations and priorities for action.

Deliberations took place in both parallel working groups and plenary sessions. A facilitation team ensured inclusive and balanced discussions. Based on these conversations, participants developed detailed recommendations for Members of Parliament and relevant ministries.

Each panel produced ten recommendations per topic, intended to inform draft legislation and guide the work of parliamentary standing committees. These recommendations were compiled into a report and presented during public hearings with the Commission for Productive Activities, Trade, and the Environment, the Commission for Labor, Social Affairs, and Health, and relevant line ministries.

Notably, the recommendations on rural and mountain tourism sparked targeted discussions with Members of Parliament and the Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation, due to their direct relevance to the ministry's draft law on the "Mountain Package." As a result, the public hearing aimed not only to share citizens' views but also to influence the draft law by integrating public input into its development.

A Guide for Deliberative Consultation in the Parliament of Albania will be developed to provide a framework for institutionalizing deliberative processes within parliamentary work, enabling citizens to play a more consistent and meaningful role in shaping legislation.

Schools as Hubs for Community Resilience



Since 2017, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) has successfully implemented the School as Community Center (SCC) multi-stakeholder approach that fosters collaboration between high schools, youth and local institutions, to address community challenges. Supported by the Embassy of the United States in Albania, the SCC model has expanded to 30 high schools and 25 local government units across the country.

By promoting horizontal cooperation between local institutions, SCC approach has cultivated shared responsibilities and joint actions to empower young people and community actors as agents of positive change, reinforcing social cohesion and enhancing local democracy.

Over the years, the SCC model has evolved into a national multi-stakeholder approach. Beyond traditional school actors—students, teachers, and parents—the model has increasingly engaged local government units, State Police structures, and civil society organizations. Many municipalities have taken proactive steps to institutionalize the SCC approach through formal cooperation agreements with Local Education Offices, aiming to encourage youth engagement in decision-making processes, to promote youth activism and community volunteering, to strengthen resilience against violent extremism, and to enhance local democracy.

Key Activities and Achievements in 2024

- Media Literacy training: **264 young people from 37 high schools** were equipped with skills to critically assess online content, identify fake news, and combat disinformation.
- Restorative Justice training for school principals: A "Train the Trainers" program engaged **36 principals and teachers** in learning alternative conflict resolution and mediation techniques, fostering a culture of restorative justice in schools.
- Youth Participation in decision-making: **11 public hearings** on participatory youth budgeting brought together **244 students from 24 high schools** to advocate for youth-friendly policies and influence local government decisions.
- Strengthening Local Youth Councils: **74 youth members from 17 local councils** received training to enhance their roles in governance and community development.
- Transforming school spaces: High schools were supported to create vibrant areas where young people can learn new skills, nurture their talents, and develop community-driven initiatives.
- National Youth Debate: For the second consecutive year, **1,390 students from 36 high schools** participated in a national debate competition based on the American "Braver Angels" methodology. This initiative fostered critical thinking, civil discourse, and meaningful youth connections across diverse cities.
- National Conference on the SCC approach: A landmark event that gathered **246 representatives from central and local institutions**, youth groups, and civil society actors to share best practices and strengthen stakeholder synergies.

SMART Balkans in Action



During 2024, SMART Balkans successfully implemented 38 projects across Albania and Kosovo, including 11 newly signed contracts and 27 ongoing projects from previous years, disbursing over 6.5 million NOK to support these initiatives. Additionally, a new call for grants under National Interventions was launched, drawing significant interest from more than 80 civil society organizations, with at least 11 new contracts expected to be signed soon.

Key lessons from the implementation of SMART Balkans emphasize the critical importance of flexibility and inclusivity in achieving meaningful and lasting impact. Flexibility proved essential, as organizations operate in diverse contexts

and possess varying capacities, requiring tailored approaches to ensure effective implementation. The focus on empowering local organizations outside the capital cities of Tirana and Pristina highlighted the need to reach underserved regions, foster equitable development, and amplify the voices of diverse communities in governance and decision-making processes.

The project placed particular emphasis on capacity-building efforts, recognizing their essential role in enhancing the sustainability of civil society organizations. Through customized training programs, organizations improved their skills and strengthened their ability to influence public opinion, engage stakeholders effectively, and achieve their goals. These initiatives empowered organizations to address challenges independently while building a strong foundation for long-term operational growth and resilience.

Despite facing budgetary constraints, the project demonstrated resilience by adopting innovative solutions, such as providing mentoring support through consortium organizations. This approach ensured the continuation of capacity-building efforts without compromising quality, even under financial limitations.

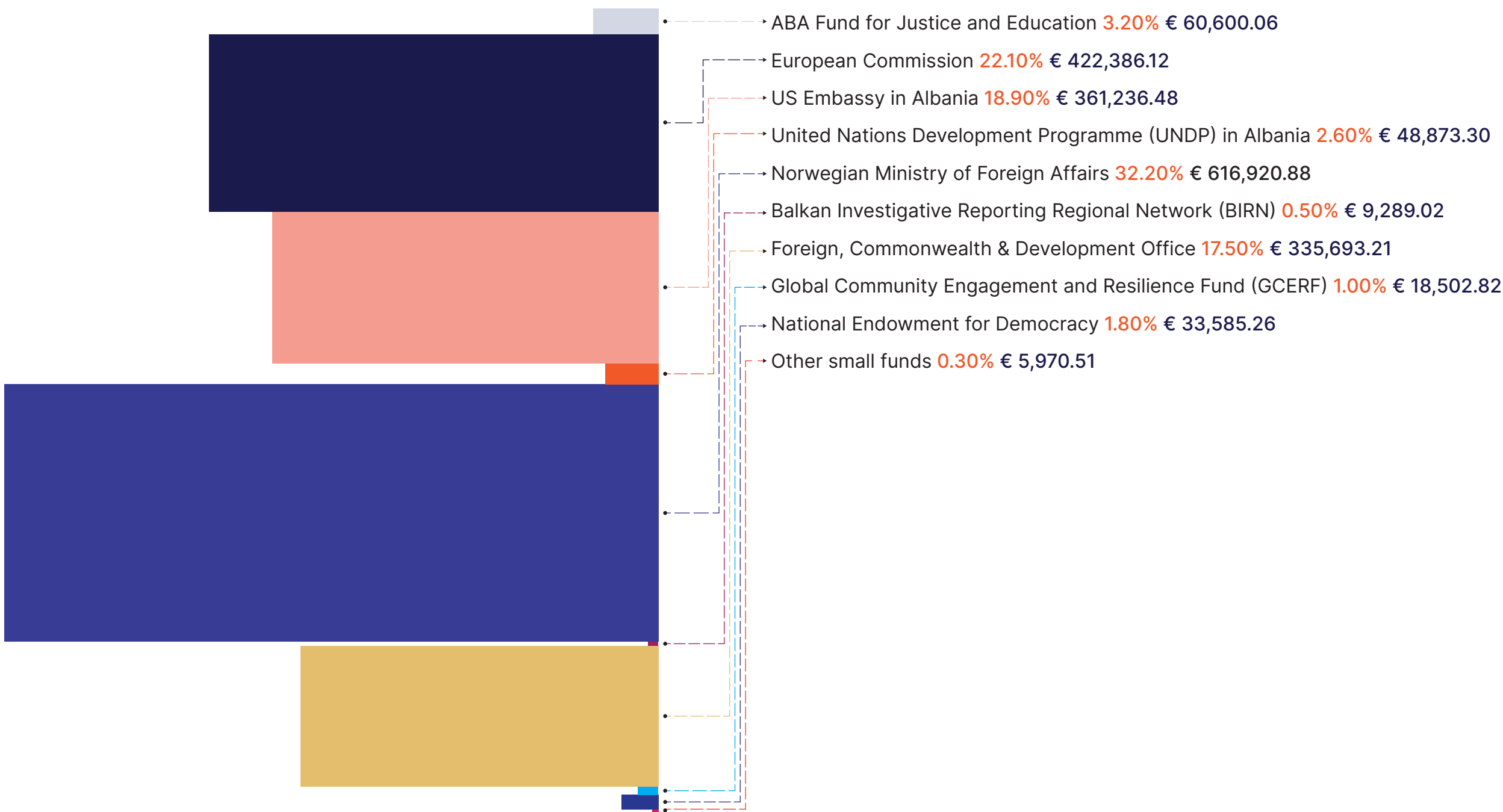
Regional collaboration was another cornerstone of the project. SMART Balkans successfully facilitated partnerships among civil society organizations across the Western Balkans, fostering mutual learning, knowledge-sharing, and collective action to address shared challenges. These collaborations reinforced the critical role of civil society in advancing governance, security, and stability across the region, creating a resilient network of actors committed to regional development goals.

SMART Balkans also prioritized community ownership and inclusion, recognizing their fundamental importance in driving meaningful and lasting change. By focusing on grassroots engagement and supporting local initiatives, the project ensured that its solutions were not only relevant but also closely aligned with the needs of beneficiaries. This community-driven approach fostered a sense of shared responsibility among local stakeholders, empowering them to take an active role in shaping and sustaining project outcomes. As a result, the project achieved meaningful and sustainable outcomes, creating a lasting impact for continued progress in the region.



smartbalkansproject.org

Funding Overview



IDM Team



SOTIRAQ HRONI
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



ILIADA KORÇARI
PROJECT COORDINATOR/
RESEARCHER



SARA KELMENDI
RESEARCHER / MEL
OFFICER



ANILA SALIANJI
PROJECT MANAGER



ELSA DAUTAJ
PROJECT OFFICER



ANA GJOKA
COMMUNICATIONS
OFFICER



GRETA MEHMETI
HR/PROCUREMENT
OFFICER



GJERGJI VURMO
SENIOR ADVISOR



ROMARIO SHEHU
PROGRAM OFFICER



ARMELA XHAHO
RESEARCHER



ENDRITA SHEHU
GRANTS OFFICER /
RESEARCHER



AURORA HALILI
PROJECT OFFICER



SHEJLA HAFIZI
ADMINISTRATIVE &
PROTOCOL OFFICER



EDLIR DACI
DRIVER & LOGISTICS



ROVENA SULSTAROVA
PROGRAM MANAGER



DANIEL PRRONI
PROGRAM MANAGER



SHEFQET SHYTI
PROJECT MANAGER



GENTA HOXHA
PROJECT MANAGER



BORA KOLA
PROJECT OFFICER



VILSON BLOSHMI
PROJECT ASSISTANT



BESJANA KUÇI
PROJECT MANAGER



MEGI REÇI
PROGRAM OFFICER



NAIM ÇABEJ
RESEARCHER



INA SHËNPLAKU
PROJECT OFFICER



FJONA DHËMBO
COMMUNICATIONS
OFFICER



DENISA SHABANI
HEAD OF FINANCE UNIT



**ANAHI MARTINEZ
MAUSSAN**
MEL MANAGER



DIORI ANGJELI
GRANTS OFFICER /
RESEARCHER



REDI AMETLLARI
RESEARCHER



GENTJAN HAJDARI
PROJECT OFFICER



SARA TUJANI
COMMUNICATIONS
OFFICER



OLGERTA PUTA
FINANCE OFFICER

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Rr. Shenasi Dishnica, Nd. 35, H.1, 1017, Tirana
T +355 4 240 0241 | info@idmalbania.org