"DIGI-CORE: MAPPING CSO CAPACITIES AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT NEEDS IN ALBANIA, KOSOVO* AND NORTH MACEDONIA"

"DIGI-CORE: MAPPING CSO CAPACITIES AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT NEEDS IN ALBANIA, KOSOVO* AND NORTH MACEDONIA"

FUSHË-ARRËZ, 2025

Table of Contents

INDEX OF CHARTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CSO   Civil Society Organisation

DIGI-CORE   Digital Involvement for CSOs and Engagement of Citizens in Regional Cooperation

EU   European Union

NGO/NPO   Non-Governmental Organisation / Non-Profit Organisation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, *DIGI-CORE: Mapping CSO Capacities and Digital Engagement Needs in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia*, presents an evidence-based assessment of the role, readiness, and realities of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the face of digital transformation. As governments across the Western Balkans embrace ambitious digital reforms, CSOs are expected to contribute to transparency, citizen engagement, and inclusive governance. Yet the findings of this survey, conducted with 56 CSOs from the region, underscore that readiness is not evenly distributed, and the risks of exclusion remain high.

While many CSOs recognize the transformative potential of digital tools, a considerable number, especially smaller or community-based organizations, struggle with limited infrastructure, inconsistent access to training, and systemic barriers to policy engagement.

Less than 20% of surveyed CSOs have dedicated digital staff, and even fewer have received structured training on cybersecurity or digital rights. As digital public services expand, civil society's role as a bridge between institutions and marginalized communities becomes more urgent, but without investment, that bridge remains fragile.

The digital divide is particularly acute for CSOs working with underrepresented or rural populations. Although connectivity has improved (e.g., over 97% of households in Albania and Kosovo now have internet access- Eurostat, 2024)[1], access alone does not translate into meaningful participation. Skills, affordability, security, and awareness gaps persist. Respondents reported that online threats and disinformation also shape how safe or empowered CSOs feel operating in digital spaces.

Organizational capacity is another recurring theme. Many CSOs lack the internal systems and staff needed to adapt to fast-paced reforms. Financial sustainability remains a major challenge, as dependence on short-term projects limits strategic planning, investment in digital tools, or engagement in policy-making. Even among those actively monitoring public service delivery, few have access to open data or meaningful cooperation with institutions.

Yet, there is a strong appetite for growth. CSOs across the region identified concrete support needs, from digital literacy and secure communications training to policy advocacy coaching and regional peer exchanges. There is a desire not only to participate in digital governance, but to help shape it.

In response, the DIGI-CORE project will deliver a package of targeted capacity-building interventions, regional collaboration opportunities, and digital policy engagement pathways.

---

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/isoc_ci_it_h/default/table

These activities will be designed with the recognition that a more inclusive digital transformation requires not only infrastructure, but the active involvement and empowerment of civil society, especially those closest to marginalized communities and grassroots realities.

INTRODUCTION

In the Western Balkans, the digital transformation of governance is no longer a future ambition, it is actively shaping the present. From digital tax filing to biometric identification and e-consultations, governments across the region are transitioning key services to online platforms. This shift is fundamentally altering how citizens access public services, how policies are designed and implemented, and how accountability is pursued.

Within this rapidly evolving digital landscape, civil society organizations (CSOs) are indispensable actors. They serve as a bridge between institutions and communities, elevate the voices of marginalized groups, and monitor the transparency and effectiveness of governance. Yet, for CSOs to remain relevant and impactful, they must be integrated into, not sidelined from the digital transition.

Across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, CSOs operate in societies that are becoming increasingly digital. However, their own transformation often lags behind due to uneven support, fragmented infrastructure, and limited inclusion in policymaking. While each country has made significant strides, Albania has joined the Digital Europe Programme and digitalized over 95% of public services (European Commission, 2024)[2], Kosovo has expanded internet connectivity to nearly 98% of households (Eurostat, 2024)[3], and North Macedonia has established its multilingual National e-Services Portal (uslugi.gov.mk), CSOs in all three countries report being underrepresented in shaping the very systems that affect their work and the communities they serve.

Despite formal acknowledgments of CSOs' role in promoting democratic values, transparency, and civic participation, few are meaningfully involved in the development or oversight of digital governance policies. Participation in consultations is often ad hoc, and feedback mechanisms are rarely institutionalized. This disconnects limits civil society's ability to influence policy direction, advocate for digital inclusion, or hold institutions accountable for the quality and equity of digital services (European Commission Reports, 2024).

---

[2] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/isoc_ci_it_h/default/table

The digital divide further compounds this exclusion. While household internet access is comparatively high across the region, 97.7% in Albania, 96.4% in Kosovo, and 90.8% in North Macedonia, these figures mask deeper inequalities in broadband speed, affordability, and digital skills, especially in rural areas and among vulnerable populations (Eurostat, 2024)[4]. According to the OECD Western Balkans Competitiveness Outlook 2024, CSOs operating in these settings face disproportionate challenges in accessing secure and reliable digital infrastructure, while often lacking the cybersecurity awareness needed to protect their data and their beneficiaries (OECD, 2024)[5].

At the same time, internal organizational constraints persist. Many CSOs in the region struggle with limited staffing, insufficient digital skills, outdated IT infrastructure, and unstable funding streams. These limitations restrict their ability to engage meaningfully in digital governance, whether through advocacy, service monitoring, or public outreach. Even those with a strong track record in accountability or rights-based work often find themselves under-equipped for the technical and strategic demands of digital engagement.

This report is a response to that reality. Through survey data gathered from 56 CSOs across the three countries, and a comprehensive review of national and regional policy frameworks, the DIGI-CORE assessment maps the current capacities and challenges faced by civil society in the digital space. The aim is not only to document gaps, but to highlight opportunities for growth, and to contribute to a digital transformation that is participatory, inclusive, and firmly rooted in the lived experiences and contributions of civil society.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this assessment was designed to accurately capture the capacities, experiences, and support needs of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia in relation to digitalization and transparent governance. Conducted under the DIGI-CORE project, *Digital Inclusiveness for CSO and Citizen Engagement in Regional Cooperation*, this research aimed to generate evidence that reflects both the institutional realities and strategic aspirations of CSOs as digital actors in democratic societies.

Rather than speculating on the sector's readiness, the assessment sought to provide a grounded understanding of how equipped CSOs are to participate in digital governance and how their voices can be strengthened through tailored capacity-building interventions. Special attention was paid

---

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/isoc_ci_it_h/default/table

[5] https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/oecd-south-east-europe-regional-programme.html

to disparities in organizational infrastructure, levels of digital literacy, and access to policymaking processes, especially among organizations working with underserved communities.

A fully structured online survey was developed and administered between May and July 2025. The questionnaire was composed entirely of closed-ended questions, using a combination of:

- Multiple-choice formats

- Rating scales (e.g., Likert-type questions)

- Ranked preferences and categorical selections

The questionnaire was organized into five thematic sections, each targeting a distinct dimension of CSO engagement:

1. **General Information** – basic organizational profile including legal status, staffing levels, geographic scope, and fields of activity.

2. **Digitalization and Transparent Governance** – involvement in digital advocacy, transparency monitoring, collaboration with institutions, and use of digital tools.

3. **Organizational Capacity and Challenges** – self-assessed capacity in key areas such as digital literacy, cybersecurity, public policy analysis, and fundraising.

4. **Support Needs and Capacity-Building Preferences** – identification of training and mentoring needs, preferred delivery formats, and willingness to engage in regional networking.

5. **Future Priorities and Policy Engagement** – CSO interests in specific policy themes such as digital rights, e-governance, and combating online disinformation.

Survey dissemination was carried out via CSO networks, and direct outreach from partner organizations. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with the intention of creating a safe space for honest reflection.

A total of **56** complete responses were administered:

- **33 from Albania**

- **11 from Kosovo**

- **12 from North Macedonia**

Given the structured nature of the instrument, analysis focused on quantitative aggregation. Responses were processed using descriptive statistics to identify:

- Frequency distributions (e.g., number of CSOs using cloud storage or cybersecurity tools)

- Cross-country comparisons (e.g., differences in perceived influence over digital policy)

- Capacity gaps and thematic trends (e.g., demand for training on transparency laws or digital rights)

No open-ended or semi-structured responses were included in the instrument; therefore, qualitative or narrative coding was not applicable.

To further contextualize the findings, a complementary desk review was conducted, drawing from authoritative regional and international data sources, including:

- **UN E-Government Development Index 2024**

- **European Commission Country Reports 2024**

- **OECD Competitiveness Outlook 2024 – Western Balkans**

- **Eurostat Household Internet Access 2024**

This triangulated methodology ensured that the analysis was not only empirically robust, but also policy-relevant, grounding the survey results within the broader context of digital transformation, public sector reform, and civil society development in the Western Balkans.

Limitations of the Assessment

As with any structured survey effort, this assessment comes with a set of natural limitations. The findings rely on self-reported data, which, while valuable for capturing institutional perspectives, may reflect subjective interpretations of capacity and readiness. The structured format of the questionnaire, designed for comparability and clarity, did not allow for deeper qualitative insights into the motivations or contextual nuances behind responses. Additionally, while the outreach aimed for breadth and inclusivity, participation was voluntary and may not fully represent the most digitally disconnected or informally organized segments of civil society. These considerations do not diminish the relevance of the insights presented but rather highlight the importance of viewing them as a foundation for continued dialogue, deeper research, and more tailored support in the evolving digital landscape of the Western Balkans.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the analysis of 56 complete responses received through the DIGI-CORE CSO Needs Assessment survey, conducted between May and July 2025. The findings are organized thematically, following the structure of the questionnaire. They reflect the operational realities,

digital readiness, and strategic priorities of civil society organizations working at the intersection of civic engagement, digital transformation, and governance across the three countries.

General Information - CSO Profiles and Legal Structure

Understanding who the civil society actors are, and the environments in which they operate, is fundamental to assessing their role in digital governance. The following analysis offers a nuanced overview of the organizations that took part in the DIGI-CORE needs assessment, highlighting their country of operation, founding periods, geographical scope and legal status. This profile not only reflects the structural diversity of CSOs across Albania, Kosovo*, and North Macedonia, but also helps situate their digital engagement within broader institutional, historical, and regional dynamics.

Respondents come from all three project countries, reflecting a broad and regionally balanced landscape of civic engagement. The majority of survey participants, namely 58.9%, are based in Albania, followed by 21.4% from North Macedonia, and 19.6% from Kosovo*. This distribution offers a representative snapshot of the Western Balkan civil society environment, while also pointing to a strong interest in digital transformation and governance innovation within the Albanian CSO sector.

2. Country of operation
56 responses

- ● Albania
- ● Kosovo
- ● North Macedonia

19.6%

21.4%

58.9%
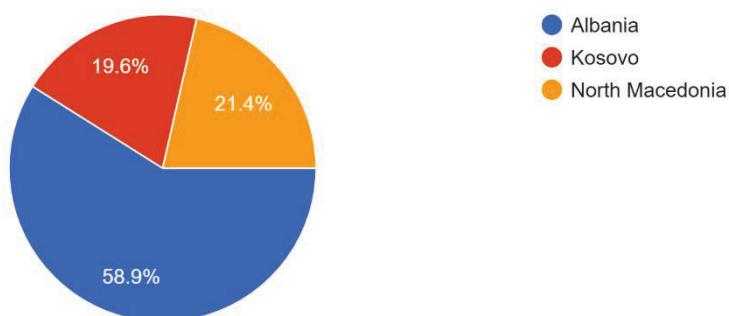
Chart 1. Distribution of Respondent CSOs by Country

CSOs in the region represent a mix of institutional maturity. Nearly half (48.2%) of the surveyed organizations were established between 2010 and 2019, a period marked by democratic consolidation and increased donor investment in civil society. A significant portion (26.8%) emerged more recently, in 2020 or later, reflecting a new wave of activism and civic organizing, often in response to digital shifts or social justice movements. Meanwhile, 17.9% were founded

in the 2000s, and 7.1% date back to before 2000, demonstrating the presence of long-standing actors with historical depth and institutional memory.

3. Year of establishment:
56 responses
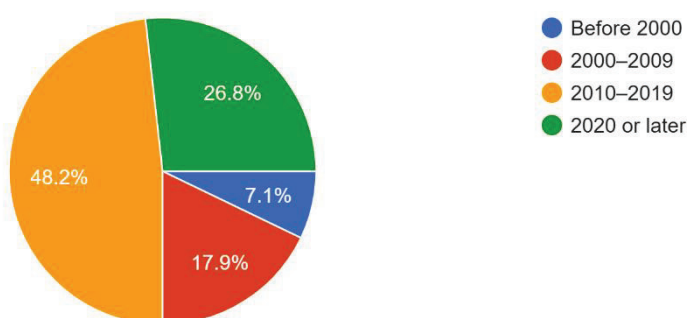
Chart 2. Year of Establishment of Respondent Organisations

Most of the civil society organizations that responded to the survey, 87.5%, are formally registered as NGOs or non-profit organizations, reflecting the widespread adoption of this legal form across the region. Alongside them, the assessment also included foundations, coalitions and networks, and a few grassroots or informal initiatives. This variety illustrates that civil society in the Western Balkans is not monolithic; it includes both long-standing institutions and more agile, community-rooted actors. While legal registration offers important advantages, such as access to funding, visibility, and participation in formal governance processes, informal and grassroots groups often bring proximity to communities and a flexible, responsive way of working that is equally vital in advancing transparency and accountability.

4. Legal status:
56 responses
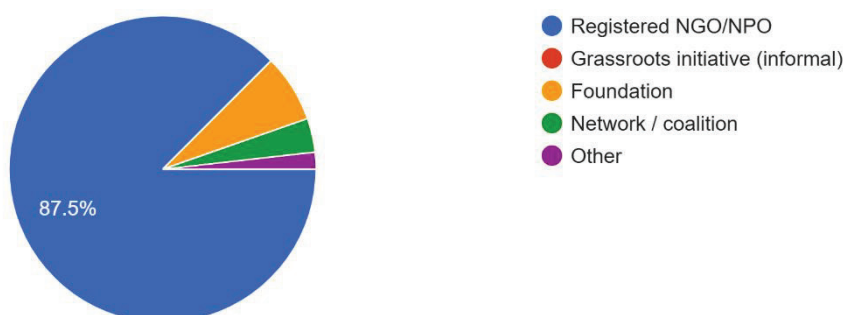
Chart 3. Legal Status and Type of Organisations

In terms of geographical reach, half of the respondents (50%) operate at the national level, actively engaging in country-wide advocacy, policy monitoring, or service provision. A nearly equal proportion of CSOs are more localized, with 19.6% working primarily at the local level, and another 19.6% focusing on regional work within their country, often connecting municipalities or sub-national jurisdictions. A smaller share (8.9%) is involved in cross-border initiatives, indicating potential for greater regional cooperation, while only a minimal number report operations at the international level.

This layered landscape shows that while many CSOs are rooted in specific local realities, a growing number are expanding their reach and ambition to influence broader policy and digital governance agendas.

5. Geographical scope of your work:
56 responses

● Local
● Regional (within the country)
● National
● Cross-border
● International
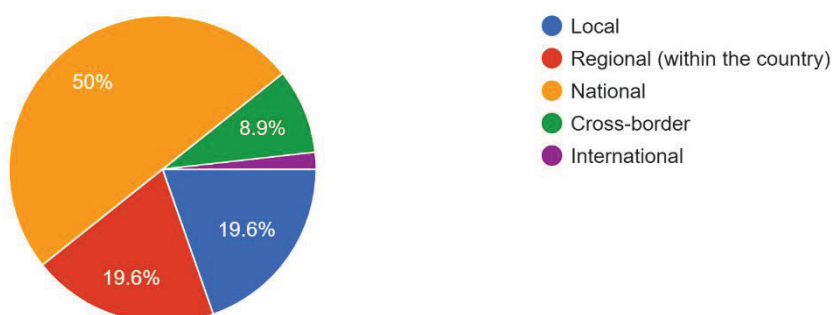
Chart 4. Geographical Scope of Work

The survey responses paint a clear picture of the lean staffing structures within most civil society organizations in the region. A substantial 73.2% of CSOs reported having only 1 to 5 paid staff, confirming that the majority of these organizations operate with compact teams responsible for a wide range of activities. An additional 12.5% reported having 6 to 10 staff members, while only 8.9% reported employing 11 to 20 people. Very few organizations, less than 5%, have staff sizes exceeding 20. This distribution reflects a sector where commitment often outweighs capacity, and where staff are routinely required to wear multiple hats across programmatic, administrative, and outreach functions. The human resource limitations faced by these organizations underscore the importance of tailored capacity-building, not just in skills but also in sustainable team structures.

6. Number of paid staff in your organization:
56 responses
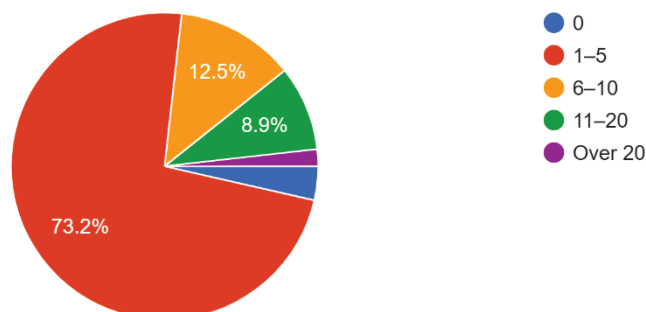
Chart 5. Number of Paid Staff

Volunteers continue to play a vital role in sustaining civil society work, particularly in areas where funding and staffing are limited. According to the data, 44.6% of organizations reported engaging between 1 and 10 volunteers annually, while 21.4% worked with 11 to 30 volunteers. Notably, 10.7% of organizations indicated that they engaged more than 50 volunteers per year, highlighting the capacity of some CSOs to mobilize large networks of civic participation. On the other hand, 17.9% of respondents reported no volunteer engagement at all, suggesting either a strategic choice to focus on professional delivery or potential barriers to attracting and retaining volunteers. This range shows that while volunteerism remains a backbone of civil society, it is not evenly distributed, and efforts to build inclusive and long-term volunteer programs may be a valuable area for support.

7. Number of active volunteers engaged annually:
56 responses
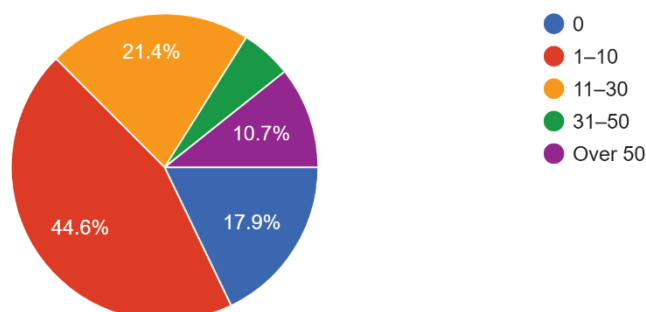
Chart 6. Number of Active Volunteers Engaged Annually

Thematic diversity is one of the defining characteristics of the surveyed organizations, with most CSOs working across multiple, often intersecting, issue areas. The most commonly cited domain was youth empowerment, reported by 69.1% of respondents, underscoring a strong regional focus on fostering civic engagement among young people. This was followed by education and capacity-building (56.4%), and human rights and democracy (40%), both of which have traditionally been pillars of civil society work in the Western Balkans. Issues such as good governance and anti-corruption (36.4%), civic participation and advocacy (34.5%), and environmental protection (32.7%) also ranked highly.

Interestingly, digital transformation and innovation and women's rights and gender equality were reported by an equal share of respondents (30.9%), suggesting growing recognition of these areas as core to modern civic agendas. Other, though less frequently cited, focus areas included social services and inclusion (23.6%), media and information literacy (21.8%), and economic development (20%). This broad thematic spread illustrates not only the multifaceted nature of civil society's role, but also the potential for intersectional approaches to digitalization and governance.

8. Main areas of work (select up to 3):

55 responses

Good governance and anti-corr…	20 (36.4%)
Digital transformation and inno…	17 (30.9%)
Youth empowerment	38 (69.1%)
Women's rights and gender eq…	17 (30.9%)
Human rights and democracy	22 (40%)
Education and capacity-building	31 (56.4%)
Environmental protection	18 (32.7%)
Social services and inclusion	13 (23.6%)
Civic participation and advocacy	19 (34.5%)
Media and information literacy	12 (21.8%)
Economic development	11 (20%)

Chart 7. Main Areas of Work

✚ Digitalization and Transparent Governance

The assessment reveals a growing but still tentative engagement of CSOs in digital governance and transparency-related initiatives. Nearly half of the organizations surveyed (46.4%) described their involvement as moderate, often playing a supportive role or participating in initiatives led by other actors. A smaller segment (14.3%) reported a high level of engagement, positioning

themselves as leaders or co-leaders of such initiatives. However, a notable 35.7% characterized their involvement as low, and a smaller group indicated no engagement at all. These figures suggest that while there is a foundation of interest and partial involvement, a significant number of CSOs are still navigating how to translate their missions into meaningful contributions within the digital governance space. Bridging this gap will likely require not only technical skills but also clearer entry points into institutional processes and stronger recognition of civil society's role in shaping digital policy.

9. How would you describe your involvement in digital governance or transparency initiatives?
56 responses
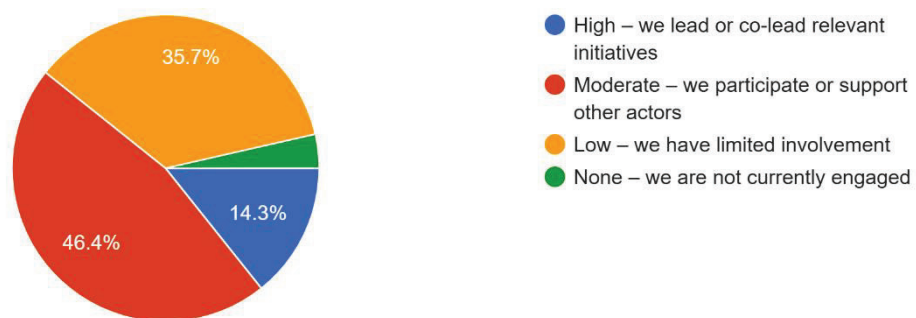
Chart 8. Level of Involvement in Digital Governance and Transparency Initiatives

When it comes to public engagement and advocacy, most organizations are relying on accessible and familiar platforms. Social media stands out as the dominant tool, used by 98.2% of respondents, a clear sign of its role as both a communication channel and a space for mobilization. Websites or blogs are maintained by 67.9%, while tools such as email newsletters (42.9%) and online petitions or surveys (37.5%) also feature prominently. Yet, more advanced instruments, such as data visualization tools (25%) and e-governance platforms (21.4%), are much less common, indicating a technological ceiling many CSOs have not yet broken through. Internally, the picture is similar: while video conferencing tools (85.7%) and cloud storage solutions (76.8%) are widely used, only a minority have adopted project management software (16.1%), digital CRM systems (19.6%), or cybersecurity tools (25%). These gaps highlight both resource and knowledge barriers that limit the transition from basic digital presence to strategic, tech-enabled advocacy and accountability.

12. What digital platforms/tools does your organization currently use for public engagement or advocacy? (Select all that apply)

56 responses

Social media (Facebook, Insta...)	55 (98.2%)
Website/blog	38 (67.9%)
E-mail newsletters	24 (42.9%)
Online petitions/surveys	21 (37.5%)
E-governance platforms	12 (21.4%)
Data visualization tools	14 (25%)
None of the above	0 (0%)
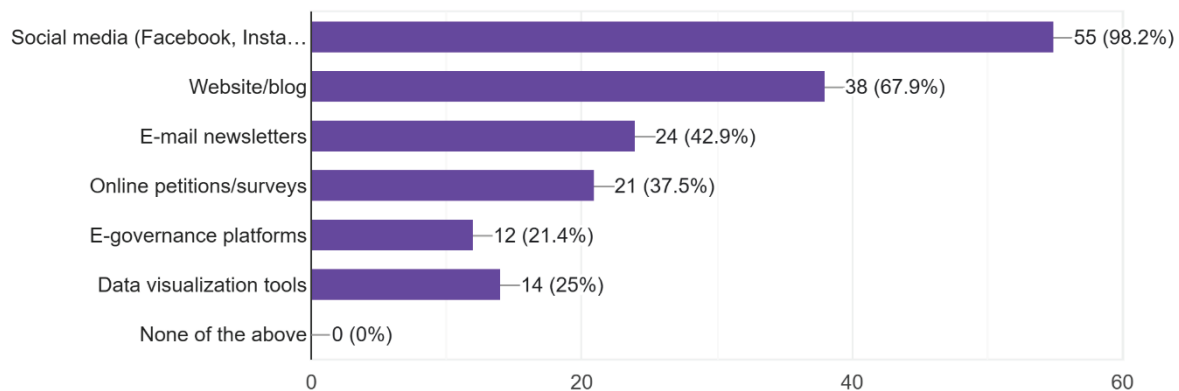
13. Has your organization implemented any of the following digital tools internally? (Select all that apply)

56 responses

Project management software (Trello, Asana, etc.)	9 (16.1%)
Cloud storage (Google Drive, Dropbox, etc.)	43 (76.8%)
Video conferencing tools (Zoom, MS Teams, etc.)	48 (85.7%)
Digital CRM/contact database	11 (19.6%)
Cybersecurity tools (e.g., antivirus, encryption)	14 (25%)
None of the above	4 (7.1%)
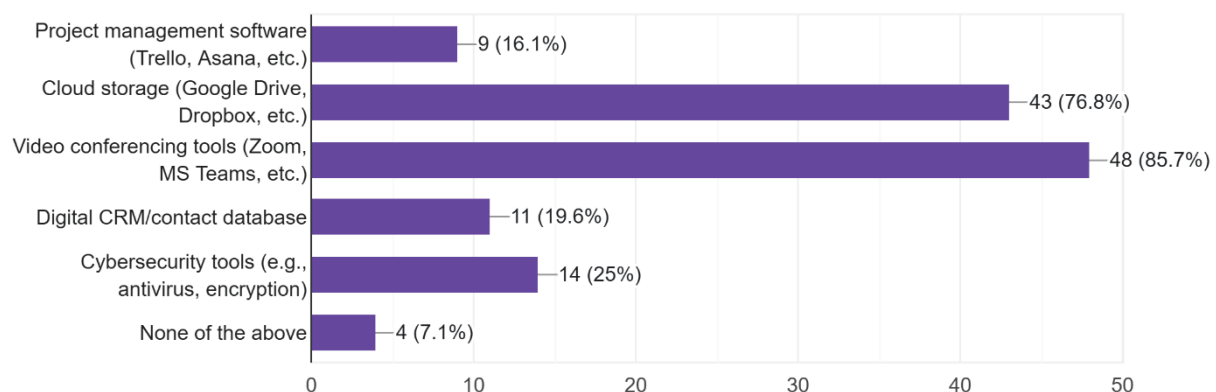
Chart 9. Types of Digital Tools Currently Used

Collaborative engagement with public institutions around digitalization and transparency appears uneven and often ad hoc. Just over half of CSOs (53.6%) report collaborating occasionally, indicating a pattern of sporadic dialogue rather than structured partnership. Meanwhile, 17.9% collaborate frequently, showing that a smaller group of organizations has established more consistent institutional relationships. An equal share (17.9%) noted that collaboration occurs only rarely, and 10.7% stated they never engage public institutions on these topics. These findings suggest a persistent disconnect between civil society and state actors when it comes to co-

creating or monitoring digital reforms. While the willingness to collaborate clearly exists, more intentional mechanisms are needed to ensure that CSOs are not merely passive observers but trusted partners in shaping digital governance agendas.

11. Do you collaborate with public institutions on digitalization or transparency?
56 responses

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

17.9%
10.7%
53.6%
17.9%
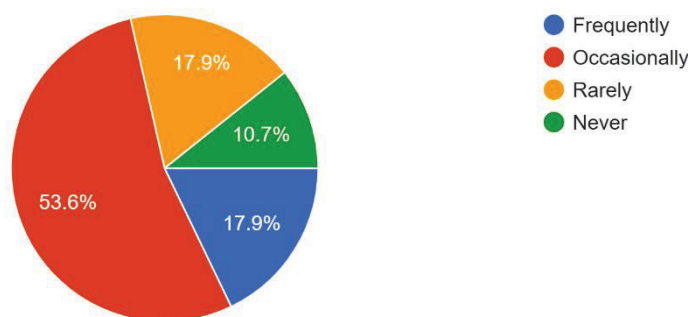
Chart 10. Level of Collaboration with Local and National Institutions

⨁ Organizational Capacity and Challenges

When asked to assess their internal capacities, most civil society organizations rated themselves modestly across key operational areas. Respondents expressed relatively strong confidence in their digital literacy and data collection and analysis skills, with both areas scoring predominantly at level 4 on a 5-point scale. Similarly, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) also received a solid average rating, reflecting a growing familiarity with project accountability standards. However, when it comes to policy analysis and online advocacy, scores were more evenly split between levels 3 and 4, suggesting that while many organizations are somewhat equipped in these domains, there is still significant room for strengthening their strategic communication and policy influence. Cybersecurity awareness and fundraising/donor engagement, both rated predominantly at level 3, were among the areas where confidence appears lower, highlighting pressing gaps in long-term sustainability and safe digital operations that require targeted support.

14. Rate your organization's capacity in the following areas (1 = very low; 5 = very high):
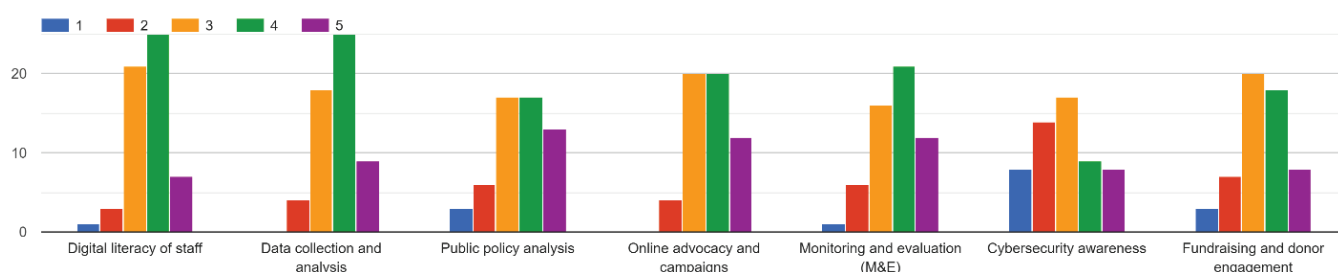
Chart 11. Self-Assessed Organisational Capacities (by area)

The challenges that CSOs face in digitalization and transparency are complex and multifaceted, intertwining financial, structural, and societal barriers. By far the most frequently cited challenge was limited financial resources, selected by 67.9% of respondents, underscoring the financial precarity that constrains investment in new technologies or capacity development. In parallel, difficulty accessing or interpreting open data (reported by 62.5%) and lack of access to decision-makers (44.6%) reflect systemic hurdles that prevent organizations from fully engaging in evidence-based advocacy or influencing institutional processes. Other prominent challenges included poor digital infrastructure (30.4%), low public trust in institutions (28.6%), and weak legal enforcement (26.8%), pointing to broader governance and trust deficits that inhibit civic engagement. The human element remains central: lack of staff knowledge and skills (26.8%) and low citizen digital literacy (19.6%) reinforce the need for comprehensive digital inclusion strategies that equip both CSOs and their communities to participate meaningfully in the digital public sphere.

15. What are the main challenges you face in digitalization or promoting transparent governance? (Select up to 4)
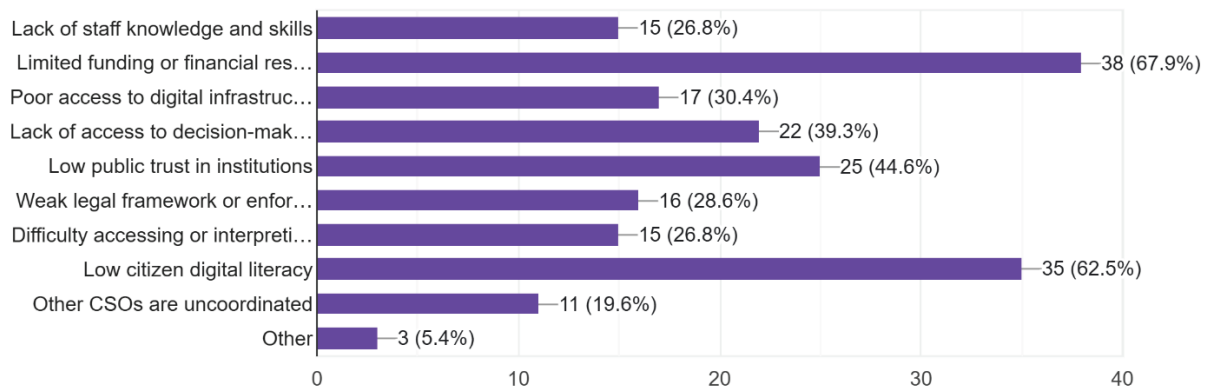
56 responses

Challenge	Count (%)
Lack of staff knowledge and skills	15 (26.8%)
Limited funding or financial res…	38 (67.9%)
Poor access to digital infrastruc…	17 (30.4%)
Lack of access to decision-mak…	22 (39.3%)
Low public trust in institutions	25 (44.6%)
Weak legal framework or enfor…	16 (28.6%)
Difficulty accessing or interpreti…	15 (26.8%)
Low citizen digital literacy	35 (62.5%)
Other CSOs are uncoordinated	11 (19.6%)
Other	3 (5.4%)

Chart 12. Key Challenges Faced in Digitalisation and Transparency Work

While civil society is increasingly active in digital and transparency spaces, its perceived influence on national digital policy remains limited. A majority of respondents (55.4%) rated their sector's impact as moderate, indicating some level of engagement but without consistent or transformative influence. Nearly one-third (30.4%) characterized civil society's role as weak, and only 10.7% viewed it as strong. A small number felt their influence was very weak, a sobering reflection of the ongoing disconnect between civic initiatives and institutional decision-making processes. These figures suggest that although CSOs are motivated and engaged, they often operate on the margins of formal policy conversations. Strengthening mechanisms for consultation, co-creation, and joint monitoring could help elevate their role from reactive stakeholders to proactive shapers of digital governance. Trust-building between institutions and civil society, alongside capacity-building within the sector itself, will be critical to closing this gap.

16. How would you assess civil society's overall influence on digital policy or transparency in your country?
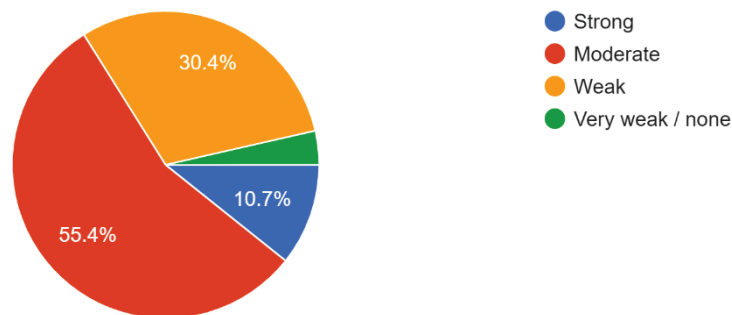
56 responses

- Strong
- Moderate
- Weak
- Very weak / none

30.4%

10.7%

55.4%

Chart 13. Perceived Influence of Civil Society on Digital Policy

Support Needs and Capacity-Building Preferences

Civil society organizations in the region voiced a strong and diverse set of support needs, reflecting the multidimensional challenges they face in navigating digital transformation and governance engagement. The top priority was fundraising and sustainability models, cited by 64.3% of respondents, highlighting a critical demand for long-term financial planning and diversified resource mobilization. Nearly 54% emphasized the need for technical training on digital tools and platforms, underlining a gap between digital ambition and technical know-how. Other frequently requested areas included digital security and data protection (46.4%) and strategic communication and public speaking (37.5%), pointing to a need for both protective measures and outward-facing advocacy skills. Notably, regional exchange and networking (37.5%) also emerged as a valued form of support, emphasizing the importance of peer learning across borders. These responses reflect not only a hunger for skill development but also a recognition that effective digital engagement requires structural, strategic, and relational capabilities

17. What kind of support would benefit your organization the most? (select up to 3)

56 responses

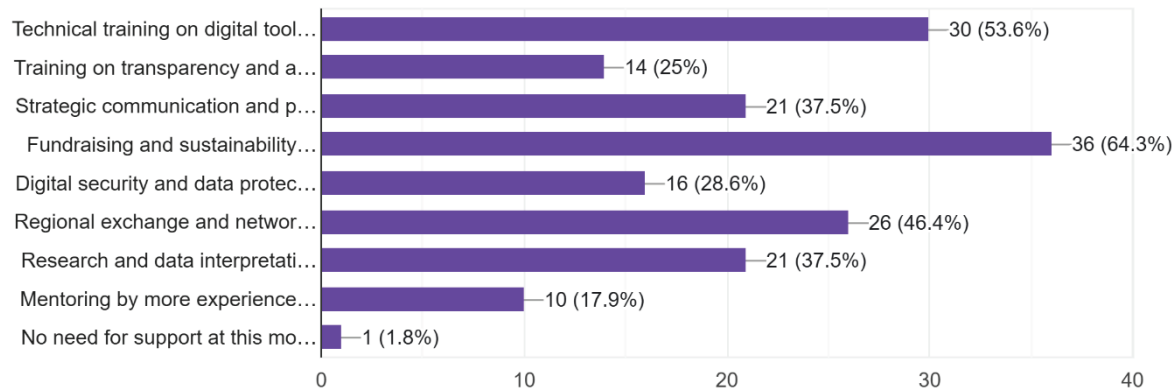| Category	Value
Technical training on digital tool…	30 (53.6%)
Training on transparency and a…	14 (25%)
Strategic communication and p…	21 (37.5%)
Fundraising and sustainability…	36 (64.3%)
Digital security and data protec…	16 (28.6%)
Regional exchange and networ…	26 (46.4%)
Research and data interpretati…	21 (37.5%)
Mentoring by more experience…	10 (17.9%)
No need for support at this mo…	1 (1.8%)

Chart 14. Types of Support Needed by CSOs

When it comes to how CSOs wish to receive capacity-building support, preferences lean toward flexibility and accessibility. The hybrid format, combining in-person and online elements, was the top choice (42.9%), suggesting that many organizations value the benefits of face-to-face interaction but also require the convenience of virtual engagement. Traditional in-person workshops still hold strong appeal, selected by 30.4%, especially for building trust and collaboration among participants. Meanwhile, live online sessions (17.9%) and self-paced online learning (8.9%) were less popular, perhaps due to concerns about internet reliability, screen fatigue, or limited time for self-directed study. These preferences underscore the importance of designing training modalities that are not only technically feasible but also responsive to how people best absorb and apply knowledge in context.
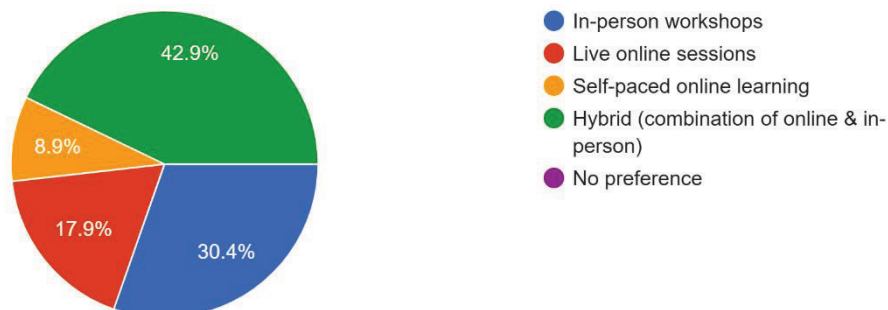
18. Preferred training format:
56 responses

Legend:
- In-person workshops
- Live online sessions
- Self-paced online learning
- Hybrid (combination of online & in-person)
- No preference

Pie chart values: 42.9%, 30.4%, 17.9%, 8.9%

Chart 15. Preferred Training Formats

In terms of frequency, there is a clear appetite for consistent, ongoing learning rather than one-off interventions. The most common preference was quarterly training (32.1%), followed by every two months (23.2%), suggesting a strong interest in sustained engagement that allows for reflection, application, and growth over time. Monthly training was selected by a smaller group (16.1%), which may reflect bandwidth limitations among smaller CSOs. At the other end of the spectrum, 19.6% prefer occasional, on-demand training, and 8.9% favored sessions twice a year, indicating that for some, predictability and time constraints shape learning preferences. These insights can guide the design of modular, adaptable training calendars that balance consistency with flexibility, particularly for overstretched teams.
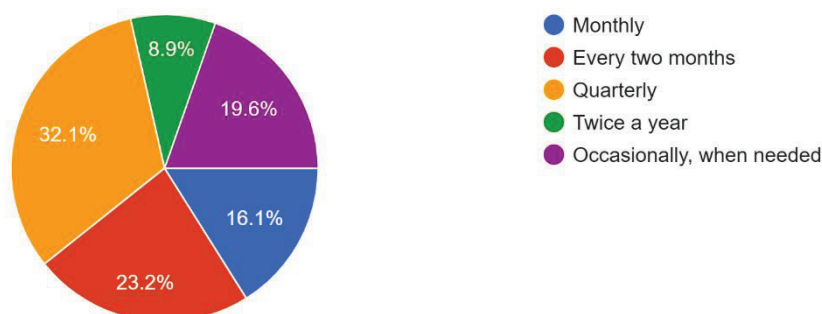
19. Preferred training frequency:
56 responses

Legend:
- Monthly
- Every two months
- Quarterly
- Twice a year
- Occasionally, when needed

Pie chart values: 8.9%, 32.1%, 19.6%, 16.1%, 23.2%

Chart 16. Preferred Training Frequency

Encouragingly, most CSOs appear technically ready to participate in digital learning environments. 85.7% of respondents confirmed that they have access to reliable internet and digital devices, a foundational requirement for any meaningful digital engagement. However, 14.3% noted partial access, meaning that they either share devices or experience unstable connections, an important caveat that cannot be overlooked. These limitations, while affecting a minority, may disproportionately impact smaller or rural-based organizations, potentially exacerbating digital divides. This data reinforces the need for inclusive program design that offers alternatives or support mechanisms to ensure equitable participation, regardless of geographic or infrastructural context.

20. Do you have reliable internet and digital devices to attend online sessions?
56 responses

- Yes
- Partially (shared devices or slow internet)
- No

14.3%

85.7%
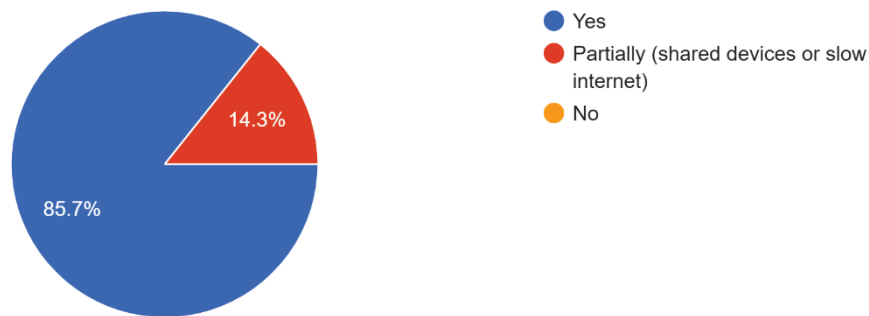
Chart 17. Availability of Reliable Internet and Digital Devices

The majority of organizations surveyed expressed enthusiasm for regional collaboration. 60.7% stated they would be willing to participate in a cross-border CSO network focused on digital governance and transparency, with another 37.5% open to the idea depending on time and resources. Only a very small minority was disinterested, suggesting broad regional appetite for greater connectivity, shared learning, and joint advocacy. This aligns well with DIGI-CORE's strategic vision of fostering transnational platforms where civil society actors can co-create solutions, amplify impact, and navigate shared challenges more effectively. The key going forward will be to ensure that such networks are designed with flexible participation models that accommodate varying capacities and national contexts.

21. Would you be willing to participate in a cross-border CSO network for digital governance and transparency?
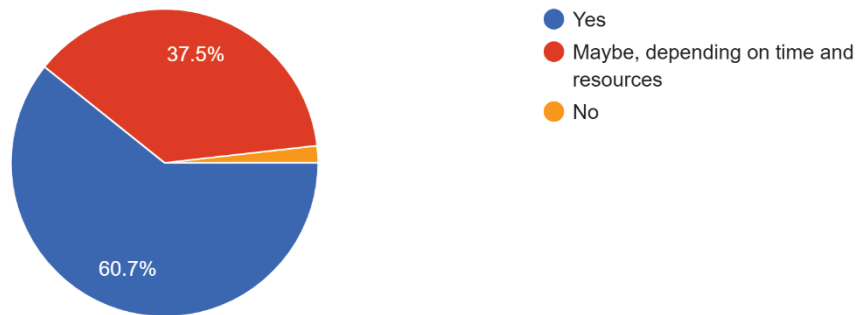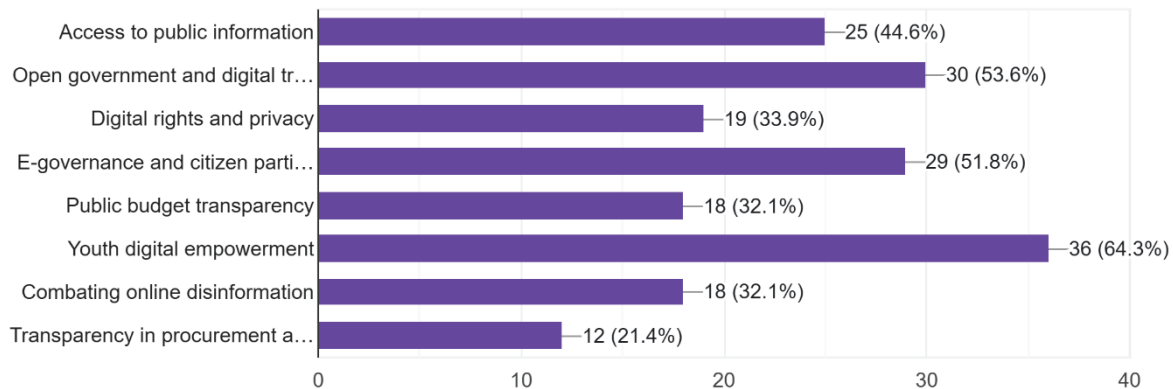
56 responses

● Yes
● Maybe, depending on time and resources
● No

37.5%

60.7%

Chart 18. Willingness to Join Cross-Border CSO Networks

🔸 Future Priorities and Policy Engagement

Looking ahead, civil society organizations across Albania, Kosovo*, and North Macedonia are demonstrating a strong readiness to engage in shaping digital policy landscapes. The top thematic priority identified by respondents is youth digital empowerment, with 64.3% of CSOs expressing a commitment to equipping young people with the skills and tools needed to participate meaningfully in digital civic life. Closely following are open government and digital transparency (53.6%) and e-governance and citizen participation (51.8%), signaling a clear desire among CSOs to be active contributors to the digitalization of public institutions—ensuring that it remains inclusive, accountable, and rights-based. Significant attention is also directed toward access to public information (44.6%), digital rights and privacy (33.9%), and public budget transparency (32.1%), reflecting a continued emphasis on the democratic values of openness and oversight. Interestingly, combating online disinformation and transparency in procurement drew relatively lower—but still notable—interest, indicating that while CSOs recognize these as important issues, many may still be building the expertise or partnerships necessary to address them.

22. Which of the following policy topics would you most like to work on in the next 2 years? (Select up to 3)

56 responses

Access to public information	25 (44.6%)
Open government and digital tr…	30 (53.6%)
Digital rights and privacy	19 (33.9%)
E-governance and citizen parti…	29 (51.8%)
Public budget transparency	18 (32.1%)
Youth digital empowerment	36 (64.3%)
Combating online disinformation	18 (32.1%)
Transparency in procurement a…	12 (21.4%)

Chart 19. Priority Policy Topics for the Next Two Years

In terms of how organizations wish to stay connected to DIGI-CORE's future activities, email newsletters emerged as the most preferred channel (46.4%), reflecting a need for clear, concise, and easily archived communication. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn followed at 35.7%, underscoring their importance not only for public engagement but also for staying informed within the sector. Other suggestions, though less frequently selected, included WhatsApp, Viber, or Telegram groups, website updates, and even direct phone contact—highlighting the diversity in communication preferences across the region. This reinforces the importance of a multi-channel outreach strategy that balances accessibility, regularity, and relevance in keeping CSOs actively involved and informed throughout the implementation of the DIGI-CORE initiative.

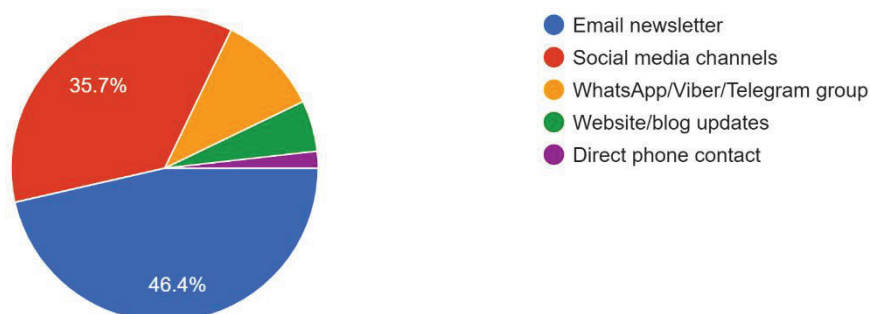23. How do you prefer to be informed about future DIGI-CORE activities?
56 responses

Chart 20. Preferred Communication Channels for DIGI-CORE Updates

⚜ Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

The digital transformation of public life across the Western Balkans presents both a profound opportunity and a growing challenge for civil society. As this assessment has shown, CSOs in Albania, Kosovo*, and North Macedonia are aware of the potential that digital tools hold for advancing transparency, civic participation, and democratic governance. Yet they remain unequally equipped to participate in or influence these processes in a meaningful and sustained way.

The results paint a picture of a sector marked by resilience and commitment, but also by fragmentation, capacity limitations, and institutional marginalization. While a majority of CSOs report basic digital infrastructure and an openness to collaboration, deeper challenges persist, including limited digital literacy, underdeveloped cybersecurity practices, and scarce engagement in digital policy design. These gaps are further compounded by funding insecurity and the absence of structured, trust-based relationships with public institutions.

At the same time, the appetite for improvement is strong. Respondents voiced a clear demand for practical, hands-on training; more regular and strategic engagement with policymakers; stronger regional cooperation; and inclusive digital policies that recognize the diversity and decentralization of the CSO landscape. Notably, younger and smaller organizations expressed a desire not only to receive support, but to contribute actively to shaping digital norms and standards, underscoring the dynamic potential of the sector when adequately empowered.

In short, if civil society is to keep pace with, and help shape, the region's digital future, it must be equipped with more than tools, it needs pathways for inclusion, mechanisms for influence, and sustained investment in its people, structures, and values.

Recommendations

1. Develop Structured Digital Capacity-Building Programs

Design and implement long-term training programs tailored to CSOs' real capacities and needs, including beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels on topics such as digital literacy, data protection, cybersecurity, online advocacy, and digital monitoring tools. Trainings should be practical, scenario-based, and sector-specific.

2. Provide Targeted Support for Digital Infrastructure Gaps

Launch small grant schemes or equipment-sharing initiatives to help CSOs, particularly in rural areas or underserved communities, secure reliable internet, updated hardware, and essential software tools to enable digital participation and remote collaboration.

3. Establish Institutionalized Mechanisms for CSO Participation in Digital Policy

Work with public authorities to create formal consultation platforms that involve CSOs in the drafting, monitoring, and evaluation of national digital strategies, legislation on data governance, and public e-services development.

4. Facilitate Peer Learning and Regional Exchange Initiatives

Organize regular cross-border learning labs, exchange visits, and joint training workshops among CSOs in the Western Balkans focused on best practices in digital advocacy, e-governance monitoring, and community-based tech innovation.

5. Offer Tailored Mentorship and Advisory Support

Pair smaller or emerging CSOs with more experienced digital organizations through structured mentoring programs focused on capacity assessment, digital strategy development, and organizational digital transformation planning.

6. Invest in Fundraising and Sustainability Skills for Digital Programs

Include in all training cycles dedicated modules on building sustainable funding models for digital projects, covering donor engagement, grant writing for tech-oriented initiatives, and integrating digital components into broader program design.

7. Deliver Applied Trainings on Civic Tech and Open Data Tools

Offer hands-on training for CSOs on how to build and use civic technology platforms such as budget trackers, participatory mapping, transparency dashboards, and digital feedback tools, accompanied by open-source resource kits.

8. Integrate Digital Safety and Cybersecurity into Core Capacity Building

Ensure all digital training modules include foundational awareness and practices around cybersecurity, secure communication, data encryption, and incident response planning, especially for CSOs working on sensitive or rights-based issues.

9. Launch Inclusive Training Cohorts for Underrepresented CSOs

Prioritize access to capacity-building opportunities for women-led, youth-led, grassroots, and minority-serving CSOs through inclusive outreach, adapted training formats (e.g., mobile-based or self-paced), and language-accessible materials.

10. Track and Evaluate Capacity Growth Over Time

Develop a simple monitoring framework to assess improvements in digital capacity across CSOs over time, using pre- and post-training assessments, peer reviews, and self-evaluation tools that feed into broader program learning and adaptation.

The author of "Digi-Core: Mapping CSO capacities and digital engagement needs in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia" is Ardita Çuni – Digital Expert.