



Tirana conclusions

Strengthening accountability - Empowering efforts against corruption in the Western Balkans -

On 4 and 5 March 2024, an international conference was held in Tirana, Albania, to explore regional strategies for enhancing a culture of integrity based on accountability in the Western Balkans. The event was co-hosted by the Ministry of Justice of Albania, the State Minister of Albania for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption, and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, with the support of the United Kingdom. This gathering provided a platform to exchange experiences, achievements and challenges between justice ministers, high-ranking officials in the fields of justice and public administration, heads of regional anti-corruption agencies, and representatives from relevant regional and international institutions, civil society and academia. All stakeholders reiterated their dedication to combating corruption through a multifaceted approach, and discussed the critical importance of accountability – both for decision-makers and technical-level experts – to build a solid foundation for advancing the anti-corruption agenda both nationally and across the region.

Building on the conclusions of the Šibenik conference in 2022, the Tirana exchanges touched on a number of key issues that are vital for strengthening integrity and accountability:

Leadership and political will: Leadership and political will are paramount for creating and maintaining a culture of integrity. Many participants stressed that commitments to fight corruption are only as good as their implementation. Therefore, politicians and senior officials in public administration and the private sector must lead by example. Not only does this reduce the risk of corruption, but it also strengthens the trust of citizens in their institutions and governments.

Greater transparency in political financing: Particular attention was paid to the issue of political financing and the threat to the region posed by '[organized corruption](#)'. This includes not only the financing of political parties and elections, but also political influence and control over state-owned enterprises and the political use and control of public procurement. Participants emphasized that transparency, accountability and responsible management of public resources are both a public good and a way of strengthening trust between citizens and public institutions. It was also stressed that strengthening integrity is vital to slowing the trend towards illiberal democracies and is a precondition for EU accession. At the same time, it was underlined that fighting corruption is a global challenge, not specific to any one region or sector, and that the risk of corruption does not end when a country joins the EU. Therefore, it is crucial to have systemic checks and balances, as well as education and best practices that strengthen social antibodies against corruption.

Justice system and law enforcement authorities: The important role played by the criminal justice system, in particular the police, prosecutors, the judiciary and anti-corruption institutions, was also highlighted. Participants emphasized that professional, independent and accountable justice and law enforcement authorities are essential for implementing laws and strengthening a culture of integrity.

Their effectiveness is enhanced through cooperation and coordination at all stages of anti-corruption procedures. Participants stressed the need for enhanced cross-border cooperation, including joint investigations, both within the region and with partners in countries where criminal groups from the Western Balkans are active.

Technology as an anti-corruption ally: While technology is an enabler of organized crime, it can also play a key role in fighting corruption and improving accountability and integrity systems. Greater digitalization and technical innovations provide unparalleled opportunities to increase transparency, improve service delivery and track corruptive patterns in governance processes. Such innovations can be particularly impactful in corruption-prone sectors, such as the construction sector, public procurement and property rights. Several national strategies in the region are focusing on the use of such tools to enhance transparency and accountability.

Anti-corruption education and a citizen-centric approach: Instilling a culture of lawfulness, especially among young people, and raising public awareness of the harms caused by corruption are vital for shaping societies that operate based on integrity and accountability. The conference discussed best practices in anti-corruption education, both from the region and internationally. Participants stressed that a citizen-centred approach is essential for informing and empowering individuals, strengthening prevention and creating traction for the sustainable implementation of the anti-corruption agenda in the region. In this regard, the importance of civil society engagement was highlighted. Furthermore, the need to engage youth, and for youth to involve themselves, in anti-corruption campaigns was underlined, and the role of women in strengthening integrity in public institutions was discussed and emphasized. More generally, it was observed that since corruption affects us all, effective anti-corruption strategies require a whole-of-society approach.

European Union aspirations: The aspiration to join the European Union remains a powerful incentive for the countries of the Western Balkans to advance accountability and integrity reforms. The conference provided an opportunity for the countries of the region to learn from the experiences of EU members and institutions, as well as from the best practices of relevant regional and international anti-corruption organizations. Crucially, many exchanges highlighted the common challenges faced by countries in the region, as well as similar experiences in other parts of Europe and the world. As a result, participants underlined the need for greater regional cooperation and knowledge sharing with countries and institutions with relevant experience in strengthening integrity at all levels of government and in both the private and public sectors.

Diverse perspectives, a common aim: Contributions from civil society actors, academics, specialized anti-corruption agencies and institutions, as well as national practices showcased a diverse range of approaches to combating corruption. The also meeting recalled existing standards and commitments, such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), as well as implementation review mechanisms, including that of UNCAC, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) evaluation rounds and the Regional Anti-corruption and Illicit Finance Roadmap. While these instruments reveal a wide and diverse range of actors and perspectives, it was emphasized that there is a common goal of fighting corruption and strengthening integrity.

In conclusion, participants expressed their appreciation for the Tirana conference and its hosts, and their interest in further strengthening networks of action, building bridges between relevant actors and enhancing regional cooperation in the fight against corruption. It was suggested that in the future more emphasis could be placed on the challenges and opportunities of local government in fighting

corruption, on bolstering the role of the judiciary and anti-corruption bodies, and on how to engage more closely and effectively with the private sector.