Combatting Civic Space Closure in Serbia

An evaluation of the INSPIRES project

December 2023

Anu Singh and Courtney Tolmie
Results for Development (R4D)

Combatting Civic Space Closure in Serbia:
An evaluation of the INSPIRES project

Introduction

The USAID-funded Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) program, led by Internews, has undertaken work to increase the understanding of the drivers of closing civic and political space and to strategically respond to the growing trend of closing civic and political space. Since launching in October 2018, the INSPIRES consortium (Internews, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), DevLab at the University of Pennsylvania, PartnersGlobal, and Results for Development (R4D)) has undertaken work to contribute to three complementary objectives:

1. Develop Innovative Analysis to Deepen Understanding of Civic Space Drivers and Inform Programmatic Priorities for Civil Society
2. Test Resiliency+ Framework Interventions
3. Empower Local Partners to Address Civic Space Threats Effectively (Flexible Response Funds)

In 2019, with support from the USAID Mission in Serbia, the INSPIRES program was awarded funding to undertake country-focused work to enhance civic space in Serbia that cut across all three objectives. The work was launched in 2019 and faced several shocks and adaptations, including the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and crackdowns on civil society implemented by the Serbian government.

This report presents the results of a qualitative ex-post evaluation of the INSPIRES work conducted in Serbia, assessing outcomes, new engagements, and factors that supported and hindered the progress of activities. The next section describes the INSPIRES approach undertaken in Serbia between 2019 and 2021, followed by a section outlining the evaluation methodology. The final section presents the results of the evaluation, organized by the four research questions: (1) what led to greater engagement and collaboration, (2) to what outcomes did INSPIRES contribute, (3) did outcomes and engagement sustain after the completion of INSPIRES, and (4) what factors helped and hindered engagement, outcomes, and sustainability.

INSPIRES approach in Serbia

The INSPIRES engagement in Serbia provides a unique opportunity to understand the programs because activities were carried out at the same time for each of the three project objectives; this is distinct from many other countries in which only one or two activities were undertaken, often at different points in time. As such, the work in Serbia provided the potential for INSPIRES consortium partners and local partners to collaborate, learn from each other's work, and adapt their programming based on the learnings from other project activities.

Objective 1 - Develop Innovative Analysis to Deepen Understanding of Civic Space Drivers and Inform Programmatic Priorities for Civil Society. As part of this objective (also referred to as Machine Learning), DevLab at the University of Pennsylvania worked with the Serbian organization Catalyst Balkans to pilot a new machine learning model built to forecast civic space changes in the one-, three-, and six-month periods before they occurred. Between October 2019 and September 2021, DevLab and Catalyst Balkans worked together to collect and integrate expert input as well as other data sources into the machine learning model for Serbia to improve its accuracy, produce regular forecasting reports for Serbia that outlined expected changes in civic space drivers for the country, and disseminate these reports and findings to civil society, USAID and diplomatic actors, and other stakeholders.

Objective 2 – Test Resiliency + framework interventions. PartnersGlobal led a set of activities in Serbia with the implementation of the Resiliency+ ("Res+") framework with two cohorts of six organizations each in Serbia. The Res+ program was designed as an adaptation to traditional organizational development programs to specifically help CSOs strengthen their resilience to internal vulnerabilities within their organization as well as external shocks they could face from governments and other actors. Each cohort of Res+ for INSPIRES was made up of CSOs from 5-7 countries and undertook a set of integrated steps: (1) selection of CSO Res+ recipients for the cohort; (2) identification of local and international coaches for CSOs; (3) Res+ launch event (in-person for cohort 1 and virtual in cohort 2, due to the COVID-19 pandemic); (4) completion of the Resilient Organization in Changing Civic Space (ROCCS) assessment; (5) Roadmap development; and (6) continued support through coaching, training and technical resources, and sub-grants to complete elements of the organization's Roadmap.

Objective 3 - Empower Local Partners to Address Civic Space Threats Effectively (Flexible Response Funds). In Serbia, consortium partners ICNL and Internews undertook several distinct but complementary flexible response fund (FRF) activities with local partners, taking a multi-pronged approach to existing and emergent civic space challenges identified in the country.

Supporting an enabling environment for crowdfunding. ICNL, their regional partner the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), and the Trag Foundation (also a Res+ cohort 1 CSO) led work designed to help CSOs in Serbia better understand and utilize crowdfunding as a means to improve the financial sustainability of the civil society sector. This FRF was designed to include several key components, including: (1) reviewing Serbian laws, regulations, and bank practices related to crowdfunding to assess their compliance with existing standards and best practices; (2) providing CSOs, the Philanthropy Council, and government officials (where appropriate) with legal analysis, comparative examples, and assistance crafting arguments to develop the legal framework for crowdfunding; (3) facilitating a knowledge building workshop for CSO representatives, government officials, the Philanthropy Council, and banks to increase their understanding of best practices and develop common understanding of what an enabling infrastructure for crowdfunding looks like; and (4) providing support (including technical assistance and, if appropriate, funding) to CSOs and the Philanthropy Council to develop strategies for advocacy and public awareness around crowdfunding.

Countering restrictions in the name of anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorists (AML/CFT). While efforts to curb money laundering and financing of terrorism are important for countries to undertake and enforce, many governments have used laws and regulations related to AML/CFT to make false accusations and crack down on civil society actors that they see as a threat. To combat such actions in Serbia, ICNL and ECNL worked with the Serbian organization Civic Initiatives to provide tools and resources for Serbian

civil society to advocate for an AML/CFT legal framework that comports with international standards and thus lowers the risk of improper application by the government. The FRF included the following activities: (1) conducting an in-depth assessment with local partners who are already aware of and engaged in identifying challenges to CSOs posed by the government's AML/CFT efforts; (2) facilitating workshops for civil society actors to learn about the AML/CFT process, issues it may raise for CSOs, and the experiences of their peer organizations in Serbia to date; (3) coordinating engagement in the sector around these issues to enable organizations to jointly develop strategies for advocacy and public awareness around legal issues; (4) reviewing Serbian AML/CFT laws, regulations, and government implementation plans to assess their compliance with international, EU, and FATF laws, standards, and best practices; and (5) additional opportunistic activities to support interest and engagement in these issues among civil society.

Using EU law to tackle legal restrictions on civic space. Building on its work in other countries in the region, ICNL and ECNL led a set of FRF activities to build the capacity and expertise of Serbian stakeholders to undertake efforts to protect civic freedoms in the country. This FRF included the following activities: (1) conducting training and providing mentoring for CSO representatives, staff of independent human rights bodies, judges, and judges' associations to increase their understanding of the protections that EU law provides for an enabling legal environment for civil society; (2) expanding existing expert task force on the use of EU law to defend civic freedoms; and (3) working to ensure that EU legal arguments and the need to bring Serbian law into compliance with EU standards are integrated into other flexible response activities.

Information space support. Internews worked with Centar E8 (also a Res+ cohort 1 CSO) to lead a multipronged effort to combat disinformation and misinformation in Serbia. Through a sub-grant from Internews, Centar E8 undertook activities including: (1) tracking hate speech, rumors, toxic narratives and fake news through case studies that demonstrate this manipulation; (2) counteracting these narratives through innovative media and social media techniques; and (3) supporting positive reporting on marginalized targets of hate speech in the country. Centar E8's approaches to these activities were diverse and included the production of a theatrical performance highlighting the danger of disinformation, an online platform to collect information on fake news, and written, audio, and visual products to engage a wide range of audiences.

Responding to violations of assembly rights. In addition to the FRF activities described above that were introduced in 2019, ICNL and ECNL launched a final FRF activity in 2020 in response to needs identified by one of their partners, the Belgrade Center for Human Rights (also a Res+ cohort 2 CSO). The partners worked together on the emerging need for analysis, monitoring, and guidance related to the rights of Serbian people to assemble, undertaking the following activities: (1) offering support to local legal representatives; (2) conducting public opinion research; (3) drafting an analysis of authorities' actions during July 2020 protests; (4) collecting data and drafting analysis of Serbian prosecutorial and judicial criminal policy in police brutality cases; (5) producing educational materials; and (6) producing recommendations for amending the current legal framework.

While each of the above activities was led by a dedicated member of the consortium, consortium partners and local partners communicated regularly with USAID and with each other about learning from their work and the evolving situation in Serbia to support the adaptation of activities.

Methodology

This evaluation utilizes ex-post qualitative analysis to identify trends that can be corroborated across multiple independent sources. The evaluation was designed to answer four research questions:

1. Did INSPIRES activities contribute to new or stronger engagements and collaborations across Serbian civic space actors – and if so, how?
2. Did INSPIRES activities contribute to other civic space outcomes – and if so, how?
3. Did changes in engagement, collaborations, and outcomes sustain fifteen months after the completion of INSPIRES activities?
4. What factors helped and hindered these changes and sustainability?

The study analyzed several forms of data, incorporating structured interviews, monitoring surveys, documentation review, and thematic analysis to gain comprehensive insights into the research topic. This diverse methodological approach enabled a multi-dimensional examination of the participants' perspectives and the broader context of the study.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with a diverse group of participants from consortium partners, local partners of INSPIRES, and other stakeholders who were involved in the work in Serbia. The structured format allowed for a systematic comparison of responses and facilitated qualitative analysis, offering valuable insights into the research questions. While KIIs were the main data source for this analysis, quantitative and qualitative data from quarterly monitoring surveys and documentation review (e.g., use of materials from the FRFs, Res+, and machine learning) were also utilized.

Next, a thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts and selected documentation to identify recurring themes and patterns in the stakeholders' narratives. The researchers employed open coding for each of the three research questions, enabling an exploratory and inductive approach to identify emergent themes related to engagement, outcomes, and factors. This qualitative approach delved deeper into the participants' experiences and allowed for comparison across different activities, ultimately offering a nuanced understanding beyond the predefined interview questions.

Limitations. While this method provides strong evidence and is well-suited to study a complex systems-focused program such as this one, it is worth acknowledging the limitations of our approach. First, the methodology does not allow us to say conclusively whether INSPIRES definitively caused changes in engagement or outcomes that we may observe. The results presented reflect this by presenting evidence for correlation or association of program and outcomes. Second, for some activities undertaken as part of INSPIRES, we have only a limited number of stakeholders and documents able to corroborate findings. While we only present results that have been validated by multiple independent sources, it is worth noting that some outcomes can only be verified by three sources.

Anonymity of sources. Note that we do not include the names or organizational affiliations of any respondents in quotes in this report. We do identify organizations in outcomes or engagements of INSPIRES activities led by those organizations (specifically for machine learning and FRF activities). However, organizational changes made in connection to Res+ are not attributed to the specific organization that made the change.

Results

Did INSPIRES activities contribute to new or stronger engagements and collaborations across Serbian civic space actors – and if so, how?

To answer this question, we analyzed data related to a series of consortium-led activities as well as external activities and events that occurred during the implementation of the INSPIRES work in Serbia.

The role of consortium-led activities

Starting in 2019, several activities were orchestrated by the consortium that in part sought to strengthen collaboration and engagement among stakeholders – including International Civil Society Week (ICSW) activities (April 2019), the Res+ Cohort 1 Launch (March 2020), and online events that took place during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, we highlight how stakeholders experienced each of these events in relation to strengthening collaboration and engagement.

ICSW led to minimal engagement among INSPIRES stakeholders in Serbia. Among key informants, participation in the International Civil Society Week events in Belgrade was relatively low, with the majority of informants stating that they did not participate in ICSW activities. Among those stakeholders who attended ICSW, at least one attended for reasons independent of INSPIRES. ICSW served as foundational to INSPIRES activities in Serbia, as meetings between consortium partners and the USAID mission took place during this trip and led to a mission buy-in to support the extensive activities in the country. However, informants overarchingly noted that these meetings did not lead to new engagements, with the exception of collaboration directly between USAID Serbia and the core consortium partners.

Res + Launch promoted greater participation and connection with international organizations, but minimal new engagement among Serbian civil society. The Resiliency + launch, which took place in March 2020 in Belgrade, had much greater participation, with almost all informants stating that they were actively involved in this event. While several respondents noted that the event provided an opportunity to liaise with civil society organizations outside of Serbia, informants overwhelmingly agreed that there were few new engagements that took place during the launch event, due in large part to the fact that Serbian civil society organizations are already very well-connected with each other.

> *"In Serbia, no new connections, we are a close-knit community, so we know each other, but I had the opportunity to meet other people from other countries around the world and exchange experiences."*

> *"They were all known to me. I knew them from before so it's not that I met anyone new. I know all the organizations and individuals there. I knew the coaches from before. There were some international people I never met before, but from the Serbian side I knew all of them."*

Online events provided opportunities to share updates on INSPIRES but not additional connections. Shortly after the Res+ launch, global lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in all subsequent INSPIRES-wide Serbia activities moving online. Several informants reported that they did participate in online events, including sessions to discuss the Machine Learning for Peace work and emerging learning from Serbia, and those informants noted that these events provided helpful insights into data, evidence, and experiences that came from the INSPIRES project. However, informants overwhelmingly noted that these virtual exchanges did not result in further engagement and collaboration, due in part to the overwhelming nature of the pandemic and the fact that Serbian partners were largely not being introduced to new organizations and actors working within the country.

A limited number of new collaborations emerged, but not from a single event or activity. Several informants noted that the INSPIRES activities were not necessarily designed to increase collaboration, instead focusing on outcomes such as greater resilience of individual CSOs and improvements to restrictive laws and legal frameworks. Despite this, a small number of concrete engagements between Serbian and international partners can be linked back to the INSPIRES project as a contributor, if not sole driver. The majority of these engagements are between Serbian actors and regional or international actors, and many are continuing as of the time of this writing.

DevLab collaboration with PartnersSerbia and Catalyst Balkans. During the launch of the Machine Learning for Peace work, DevLab engaged with Catalyst Balkans (as the Local Voices sub-grantee and direct partner for machine learning in Serbia) and PartnersSerbia (providing feedback and insight into Serbian data and potential for uptake in the country); neither Serbian partner had previously worked with DevLab. In both cases, DevLab has continued to engage with the Serbian partners after the completion of the INSPIRES sub-grants. PartnersSerbia and DevLab are currently undertaking a new flexible response fund activity together, with PartnersSerbia leading a survey of 270 NGOs across the country. DevLab's continued engagement with Catalyst Balkans is less formal; however, multiple sources highlighted that they continue to engage on issues related to the Serbian data and opportunities to increase its uptake and use.

ECNL with Civic Initiatives, Belgrade Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Trag Foundation, and Catalyst Balkans. The project, and especially the Res+ launch, also provided the opportunity for new engagements between ECNL and several Serbian partner organizations. These initial engagements were supported under the INSPIRES project as part of the legal FRF activities, and the March 2020 event provided an opportunity for ECNL to meet with new partners, confirm their work plans together, and ensure that all parties were comfortable moving forward with their engagements:

> *"Yes actually, that was the first time we met in person with [the organization], the whole team. We also met with [another organization] who were co-partners. And we had a meeting there because we used that time to not only harvest input through official workshop sessions on priority topics and issues, but we also had work meetings with [the organizations] to agree on the form of partnership we would like to enter into in the future. So, it was very useful."*

Many of these partnerships have continued, now being supported under a new USAID-funded initiative led by PartnersGlobal Serbia that builds upon the work and collaboration from the INSPIRES activities.

<u>Additional engagements strengthened by INSPIRES.</u> While every Serbian civil society included in this study highlighted that they knew and are known by all other domestic INSPIRES partners (including Resiliency + grantees and Local Voices partners), some informants did highlight that the project may have helped to catalyze concrete engagements with organizations with which they had not previously had recent tangible partnerships. Cases include engagement between Centar E8 and the Jelena Santic Foundation (collaboration on a civic freedom-focused theatrical production), Centar E8 and Catalyst Balkans (collaboration on crowdfunding activities), and emerging collaborations currently under discussion with Catalyst Balkans, PartnersSerbia, Trag Foundation, Civic Initiatives, and others.

> *"Because of my role, I became more engaged in the conversation about civil society in general. Meeting other organizations, mingling with other organizations at events, discussing elements of R+ … that was a strategic decision for [my organization]. So yes, I started to have more conversations with other organizations – for example, we met a couple of days ago [with one of the INSPIRES partners] for them to be a part of the new project, ideas for an e-learning platform. And it is not just them."*

The role of external activities and events

While internal events like the Res + launch can be tied to minimal new engagement between INSPIRES partners in Serbia, evidence suggests that INSPIRES may have played an important role in how Serbian civil society and international partners engaged in response to a major external event – the "List Incident."

The List Incident. In July 2020, the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering (an official government agency in Serbia) published a list of 57 individuals and organizations, citing a legal provision that the government could request bank information for actors suspected of money laundering or the financing of terrorist activities. The "List" was not initially made public but was leaked to Serbian media two weeks after it was shared with banks across the country. Several individuals and organizations included on the List were local partners of INSPIRES Res+ and FRF activities. After the List was made public, it was widely agreed by civil society and international actors that those cited on the List were included because they were seen as a threat to the ruling Serbian party and not for actual evidence of money laundering or financing terrorism. Civil society's response to the List played out in parallel and sometimes as part of INSPIRES activities, as highlighted in the results of this study. An analysis of the List Incident, produced by ECNL and Civic Initiatives with support from USAID, can be found here.

While INSPIRES was not initially designed to address a shock like the List, several elements of the project changed after the List was released. The project itself swiftly adapted with the support of USAID to ensure that project resources were being dedicated to help civil society respond. This adaptation was necessary, especially given the representation of INSPIRES Serbian partners on the List.

> *"In fact, we were named on this list… We were really concerned for a number of reasons. … (O)nce the situation developed, I felt quite concerned primarily, I didn't feel threatened physically but I was concerned about the reputation of the organization and what that may entail in terms of the fact that, for months after that, I was expecting some kind of unannounced inspection, tax inspection, some kind of inquiry that I was sure would yield to know specific findings but it definitely slows down your work plus the fact that we were working online still at the time because it took place in the summer of 2020.."*

INSPIRES project adaptations. Many of the organizations included in the List were also Res+ cohort 1 participants. As such, one major adaptation made by INSPIRES was for the Res+ coaches and program as a whole to provide support to CSOs to address the real and current needs they faced to be resilient to this existing civic space threat.

> *"It was an important element of every conversation with the [organization's] leadership, for some of them it was yet another crisis, for some it was a surprising situation. But we used that example when we would meet organizations after a while. The first meeting with them after the incident, we used that as an example: 'how did you respond, how did you react, did it create disturbances.' So, we exploited the situation to see if the organization was prepared for crisis communications primarily – but also, we played around with some elements of the R+ framework, also issues of connectedness."*

In addition to Res+ adaptations, the two major flexible response fund activities also adapted to help those on the List respond. In the case of legal response, ECNL updated its work plan to provide strategic support to the organizations affected by the List, using several pathways to support their actions:

> *"We were trying to always steer to the strategic direction because we understood it as difficult for them to look, being in the middle of it, to look at the whole picture from a bird's eye view. So, we did not want to meddle into the internal response that much because we understood that could have been perceived as interfering from the outside – so we were careful not to interfere. My activist background was like 'okay, I'll help you decide – this is what you need to do' but I had to restrain myself not to go in that direction but instead to support from the outside that they need. What is our role? How can we support? What can we draft? Who can we put you in touch with? What are the avenues for external support we can bring in? So, this is what we took as our role – and then slightly contributing to what they were deciding at the internal national level."*

ENCL's support took many forms, including connecting Serbian organizations with international bodies that could bring external pressure on the government:

> *"… when people are in this situation, they need very practical support – so how do we contact UN Special Rapporteur, what do we say, should we have a call? Let's have a call and explain what is happening. Let's contact Moneyval - so these types of international attention and pressure that materialized in concrete actions from Moneyval and UN Special Rapporteur."*

The Serbian organizations also received support from INSPIRES to develop a "shadow report" to undertake a self-assessment of CSO risk capacity for money laundering. In addition to the legal support received, INSPIRES's flexible response work that focused on freedom of information and combatting toxic narratives also adapted to support organizations that were being targeted by the government:

> *"We not only signed the letter against this action; we also talked about this in our zoomer portal. We were dealing with toxic narratives, and a bit part was a lot of serials on the zoomer platform – in including YouTube content and long read articles – and one package [we created] was about the List of the organizations. Some of these organizations [other R+ cohort] were on there."*

INSPIRES partner involvement in response. Beyond the project's response to the List, several INSPIRES partners (including those on the List) collaborated with each other and played a major role in how civil society responsed; these actions cannot be directly tied to the project but are worth noting here given the involvement of project actors.

First, a small group of CSOs targeted by the government created a coordinating body to develop and implement a response, and this group was led by and comprised of INSPIRES partner organizations. This coordinating group took several actions, including releasing a joint statement quickly after the List was made public, coordinating civil society response to potential meetings with representatives of the government, and threatening legal action against the government. In addition, the USAID Serbia mission sought to help civil society respond by attempting to facilitate discussions between the affected organizations and government representatives to mediate between the two parties. Ultimately, the coordinating group of Serbian civil society and the mission as well as other government representatives help different perspectives regarding the most effective strategies to use in response to the List, which we explore in more depth below.

What were the outcomes of INSPIRES partner engagement in response to the List?

Ultimately, we cannot tie outcomes directly to the INSPIRES project; however, there is evidence that engagement across partner organizations did lead to important changes in how the List incident played out, both positive and potentially negative.

Perception that civil society response minimized threat. While it is not possible to know the counterfactual, several informants highlighted that the swift and direct response of civil society to the publication of List may have lessened the harm that the government action caused for civil society.

> *"I remember a conversation I had with a friend a year after [the List incident], where I mentioned this, and he said 'why are you so concerned? It was a minor thing in tabloids?, and I said, 'well the fact that we were working like crazy made it minor because I am pretty sure we managed to stop this further spillover into tabloids and everything with this front action.'"*

Response from international bodies. Informants also noted the critical role that international bodies such as Moneyval played by condemning of the government action. Of List outcomes, this one has the most evidence of being tied to INSPIRES activities, due to the important influence of ECNL in brokering connections between Serbian civil society and many international bodies as part of the adapted INSPIRES FRF work plan.

> *"In parallel, we cooperated a lot with [the coordination CSO group] and ECNL in order to inform international bodies what we were dealing with. This resulted in FATF and Moneyval condemning the list situation. If there is any lesson learned from that experience, it's that we have to work on multiple fronts in order to counter the situation. So, you go to the public and seek citizens' support, but also work on the international arena to seek support from relevant bodies who can indirectly influence the government's policies towards civil society."*

> *"And another thing I think turned out to be the most important – the international community. How the [Serbian] government reacts if they are pressured, especially in the process of EU integration - if this is raised high enough to EU authorities, and they respond in some relatively friendly way, then the government sees that reaction."*

It is interesting to note that it was not only Serbian civil society who saw themselves as benefiting from this response and situation; international partners themselves pointed to this response as helping them in their work across the region:

> *"It also affected the regional cooperation with Moneyval, which is the body that is important for this story because in all of the consequent reports, through the pressure of civil society in Serbia and our assistance, Moneyval keeps repeating not just for Serbia but also broader messaging that they will keep an eye on these types of developments of abuse of their standards in all of the countries in their region which is an important positive point and effect. It also affects us because it gives us the tool to go to other countries and help other civil society amplify that message to their government and say, 'look what happened in Serbia and what Moneyval said to Serbia and that they are keeping a close eye not just on Serbia not to repeat this but also other countries in the region.' So, it gave us from a positive side an example we could go to for other civil society to help with their advocacy toward government."*

> *"I think it is one of the good outcomes for the region itself - that this had such a public visibility with all of the different bodies involved [such as] Moneyval, FATF, UN Special Rapporteur, Council of Europe and many others and of course all of the embassies, diplomatic institutes, international organizations that work in Serbia and the region, everyone was involved. So, it sent a strong message through various channels – not only the public, but the silent diplomacy channels that this is something not to be repeated."*

Increasing solidarity between and awareness by civil society across the country. Informants largely highlighted the existing close relationships across the civil society sector in Serbia before the List incident; however, several stakeholders noted that this relationship only improved in the response to the List. INSPIRES partners that were not directly included on the List noted activities that they undertook to support their colleagues, and those on the List engaged extensively with each other in response, building on existing relationships.

> "My perspective is that this was a key moment for civil society in Serbia, because from that moment we became much closer to each other, and everybody understood that we need to stand together in everything because we are much stronger."

In addition to solidarity, informants highlighted how the List itself and the subsequent response by civil society ensured that the sector was more aware of the threats it faced and strategies it could use to address these threats when they come again:

> "I know for sure it had a wider impact on the sector as a whole. It was yet another wake-up call on what's happening to civil society in Serbia and what coming together, and collaborating could mean in such a situation. There's not a single NGO in Serbia that's unaware of the list and what it meant. There's very much before and after the list."

Beyond general solidarity, informants also noted that this threat helped them to better articulate a "common voice" and strategy as a sector, including in response to new threats and challenges that emerged in Serbia after the List itself:

> "...this type of mobilization helped us to find a common voice, also for other issues that came up later, be they joint statements against movements of governments and policy-related issues, be it the campaign we tried to initiate among the wider group of organizations to support the pro-[vaccination] agenda, be it more recently about the adoption of a new strategy for enabling environment for CSOs."

Impact beyond INSPIRES partners. Finally, informants assessed the potential role of INSPIRES-related collaborations on organizations and stakeholders not directly supported by the project. Overwhelmingly, they noted that actions like the legal and information support provided by the project and the actions of INSPIRES Serbian partners had ripple effects beyond project partners.

> "We were doing this work on behalf of all 34 organizations and 36 individuals on the list, so yes it impacted all of them too ... This work empowered a lot of civic groups, especially outside of Belgrade where attacks happen more. Mostly informal, small community groups usually without any legal entity. So that helped them a lot."

> "I remember at one of our events in October after the List case, we had over 65 organizations physically and hybrid, there were over 60 organizations or journalists present. [This included] most of the affected but also broader. That was the event where the Financial Intelligence Unit Deputy Director was present as well and kind of explaining himself, the actions, trying to explain what happened. So that was one of the spaces where people could learn what happened, why, get some promises from him to get some answers, and really engage on the topic. We only focused with the core [INSPIRES] group, but [the Serbian coordinating group] had a broader group that was constantly in contact."

Potential negative outcomes. While many informants highlighted the positive role that INSPIRES partners played in the response to the List, there were some potential negative outcomes cited as well. In particular, the divergent strategies of Serbian civil society and the international diplomatic community in Serbia, as well as delays in producing response materials such as the "Shadow Report," may have ultimately hindered relations and trust between the two parties.

Results of collaboration and engagement

Looking beyond engagement that came about in response to the List incident, we did find evidence of several outcomes to which INSPIRES-supported collaboration contributed.

Increased visibility, reputation, and visibility with some partners. While many INSPIRES partners were already well-known to Serbian civil society and diplomatic communities, the project did help to elevate some organizations that were less visible within the sector. In particular, multiple informants highlighted the evolution of two Res+ CSOs, noting that both organizations leveraged INSPIRES support to strengthen their resilience and capacity. In both cases, there is evidence to suggest that the improvements in both operations and visibility that INSPIRES supported led to further engagement and support from USAID outside of the INSPIRES project, allowing the organizations to focus more resources on pursuing their critical missions.

> *"USAID started working with some of the lesser known (at the time) and smaller organizations, mainly [CSO 1] and [CSO 2], because of INSPIRES. Res+ in particular had a huge impact on these smaller organizations and helped jump start and get them to the next level. USAID now partners with [CSO 1] on other projects and activities, such as the new grant. [CSO 2] is also now an implementing partner with USAID and has a 2-million USD standalone activity. They were the underdog, but we expected them to get this grant … Res+ really helped [CSO 2] and was the main driver for their growth. The process took this smaller organization and gave them the encouragement to connect with others and showed them that they can compete with other organizations."*

Opportunistic increased collaboration related to shrinking civic space. As noted above, INSPIRES led to few collaborations between new partners, at least in part because civil society in Serbia was already very well-connected. However, several informants noted that CSOs in general have grown closer in recent years in response to shrinking civic space in the country (including but not only related to the List incident). It is challenging to determine whether the INSPIRES project helped to catalyze any of these opportunistic engagements. With that said, in a limited number of cases it is clear that the project directly supported this engagement, including:

- ECNL's work with the Belgrade Center for Human Rights (BCHR) in response to state action against protesters (new collaboration between ECNL and BCHR supported under the project); and,
- Several Res+ Roadmap actions related to concrete engagements between Res+ partners as they faced threats.

Engagement on Machine Learning for Peace. Several INSPIRES activities provided opportunities for DevLab to receive feedback as well as active participation (in the form of the expert survey) from Serbian civil society

actors. Because the Machine Learning model was still being developed and tested during the time when the majority of INSPIRES activities in Serbia were taking place, there is evidence that the engagement of Serbian stakeholders provided greater support to the overall model as compared to the forecasts in Serbia specifically. However, this engagement was seen by informants as having an important impact on the quality, accuracy and effectiveness of the model that is now being implemented in nearly 60 counties.

Did INSPIRES activities contribute to other civic space outcomes – and if so, how?

The INSPIRES activities in Serbia led to several notable outcomes and changes, internally for the civil society organizations who were engaged with the program, as well as across the civil society sector and the wider international community.

Internal Organizational Outcomes

Crisis Communication Plans created or improved. Through the Res+ activities, several local partner organizations either created crisis communication plans for the first time or had the opportunity to strengthen and improve existing ones. Four CSO partners highlighted this as a key outcome and spoke of instances where they ended up utilizing them in a real-life situation.

One partner hired an external consultant to improve their crisis communications plan, which they still use today. They were able to strategically use the plan when they were specifically targeted and attacked by the government in March 2021:

> "*We were targeted in March 2021 in parliament. An MP from the ruling party spoke about [CSO] as a foreign agent and attacked the president of the organization. He went as far as to name the part of Belgrade where our director lives, what type of car she drives, etc. So, it was a really direct attack. Now he's a minister and he continues to repeat that narrative with further lies about us owning a villa in Dedinje - the wealthiest neighborhood in Belgrade - which we do not. We made a joke on Twitter in response, where we posted that we're giving away our villa in Dedinje to the minister if he can show us where this villa is! When we responded to these attacks in parliament, we informed the international community in detail of the situation, and to the public, we published one Tweet stating that the message the MP sent -- how do you say -- we made the focus more of a gender issue because he publicly attacked a woman. We received so much support from the community - when you get attacked you get more visibility in a way. We didn't go around arguing 'no. what he said isn't true' because the people know us, they know what we do. We didn't respond to him (the minister) directly - we responded to the public."*

They spoke of how they were able to strategically use their crisis communications plan in this situation, and continue to do so:

> *"For example, when they call us foreign mercenaries, we respond and say yes, as an organization we apply for funding from foreign donors and embassies, and we don't accept domestic donors, but we are patriots because we're paying taxes in Serbia, our finances and donor lists are transparent, and everything is available to everyone on our website. Also, if you call us foreign mercenaries, then what would you say about our State itself that is receiving so much funding from the EU, etc. i.e., from the very same donors."*

The local coach highlighted the importance of the organization's use of the crisis communications plan, stating that it allows them to respond in a thoughtful and structured manner and has also made them better at lobbying for support from the international community and wider civil society.

Increased interconnectedness, visibility, and reputation of organizations. There was consensus among interviewees – from coaches to CSO partners, to the Mission - that the INSPIRES program in Serbia was able to increase interconnectedness, both by building some new connections, and by strengthening existing relationships within the sector.

- For example, Catalyst Balkans was able to engage organizations they met or got to know better via INSPIRES engagements, to participate in some of their other work and projects. The organization assists Serbian CSOs through their crowdfunding platform (Donacije), philanthropy hubs and a recently launched e-learning platform (Proaktor), as well as Neprofitne.rs (a site for non-profit transparency). While not entirely attributable to INSPIRES, the partner did report that the project helped them increase the visibility of their work and they were able to connect with more organizations which they met through INSPIRES and bring them in to some of these platforms. For instance, Catalyst Balkans was able to onboard Civic Initiatives – another Res+ organization – and assist them in claiming their profile on Neprofitne.rs, as well as in running crowdfunding campaigns.
- Another partner organization, Centar E8, credited the INSPIRES project to their surviving the COVID years, as well as their improved reputation and visibility, which led to further opportunities.

Through ECNL activities in Serbia, several organizations were able to increase the visibility of their work and are being seen increasingly as experts on technical civic freedom topics. More broadly, for organizations that worked with ECNL, informants reported that this visibility has helped them gain the backing and support of international experts and evidence.

Beyond local CSOs, Res+ coaches also felt a similar sense of increased connectedness and visibility. One coach remarked that playing a consultant and coach role on INSPIRES resulted in them being more engaged in conversations within and about civil society in general, increased their connection with some of the organizations and strengthened partner ties for them personally as well as for their organization. The coach is now involved in a new USAID-funded project and is regularly asked to provide inputs on USAID activities and civil society meetings and events.

> *"We were able to increase collaboration and connectedness with civil society, media actors, private sector and other relevant actors working on safeguarding civil space."*

Improved staff engagement and well-being. Staff engagement and well-being were core areas of focus for CSO partners during the Res+ process. Several partners hired external consultants through their subgrants to work on this aspect of their organization. One partner hired a consultant therapist to conduct 1:1 sessions with their staff. Another partner spoke of how simply going through the Res+ process helped improve staff morale during COVID.

> "The R+ process started together with COVID, and I think that these meetings, ROCCS and everything we conducted together was also one of the important things for our surviving when we talk about team members. It was really crazy, and this process actually helped us stay together, thinking about tasks and what we can do and thinking COVID will end at some moment."

The organization has since enacted monthly meetings where staff come together to talk about issues around the country (economic, political, social) and how these might affect them. They have continued to work on staff well-being by also holding weekly team-building meetings where they take turns to create a 'fun and relaxing session' – which are very popular among staff.

Additionally, some organizations have taken steps to ensure that their staff is more involved and participate in organizational decision-making and planning. Two partners now include all staff in strategic planning sessions and give everyone an equal platform to participate in decision-making. This was not the case prior to INSPIRES, and one CSO directly attributed this approach to Res+. Overall, partners and coaches also highlighted how leadership of the CSOs has become more open to discussing organizational issues with their staff and peers.

Increased internal reflection and awareness of organizational issues. Local coaches noted a marked uptick in open conversations among CSO leadership and staff around the state of their organizations, their strengths, and areas for improvement and development. Often such conversations brought to the forefront differences in perspectives or understanding of internal challenges between staff and leadership. One coach spoke of how this often led to "Aha moments" once internal issues were identified, resulting in organizations initiating further discussions or instilling procedures to address the issues. Both coaches attributed the Res+ process to opening doors to such discussions.

Additionally, several partner organizations stated how going through the Res+ process gave them time to focus solely on internal organizational matters – something they typically are unable to do with their day-to-day responsibilities. One Res+ CSO had a new director as they kicked off the Res+ process. He spoke of how the process allowed them to come together to improve their internal workings and coordination among colleagues:

> "…In a way, it was a perfect tool for me as a newly appointed director, to have such a project in challenging times, but still a time where reflecting and thinking about these processes occurred within a structured project."

Besides these self-assessments, a few partners also specifically praised the scenario planning exercise, as a valuable experience for them, with some continuing to use this today. One partner emphasized how scenario planning is *"a really crucial thing for us, because we never know after the election whether we will exist or not. So, we really used those scenarios and developed our capacity there to be more resilient."* Another partner highlighted how they benefitted greatly from the scenario planning exercise, as they ended up using it in a real-life setting on different projects sooner than they had anticipated. They also reported using scenario planning beyond their own organizational strategy – to plan for the various directions that the country could move: *"We were asked by an international company to do a political risk assessment. We're still applying the scenarios developed, to present the most likely, less likely, and unlikely options."*

Improved internal processes and organizational development. Partners organizations that went through Res+ also reported outcomes focused on the creation of better internal processes, some of which were flagged as areas to improve upon as part of their self-assessments and in internal staff discussions. For example, one partner improved their human resource policies and processes and spoke of how they were able to have open conversations around some of the procedural issues staff were facing: *"…ok we are doing fine as an organization in terms of budget, programming, number of people, but we need to take more care of internal consolidation and strengthening… This is what I wrote in the application – it was useful as a self-reflection process when we entered our next strategic planning process."*

Another Res+ CSO worked to improve their organizational security, security of digital and personal data, and related internal processes: *"We completely changed the softwares and our means of communications. For example, earlier, we never talked on Signal which we now use exclusively. The complete system software for finances was also changed - we're now using SharePoint and Microsoft Project."* They also created policies and had them approved by the board on protection of individual employee data. There was some collaboration seen here as the organization reported learning lessons from another INSPIRES partner that had already implemented similar changes.

Organizations feel more prepared and resilient. There was consensus among coaches, CSO partners, and international partners that organizations feel more prepared in the face of threats and understand resiliency at a deeper level. One coach who was involved with all CSOs noted a visible improvement in how organizations navigate their difficult environment, understand and filter threats better, and express confidence in addressing threats or crisis.

One partner organization also specified being more proactive and prepared in advance of a crisis, as a key outcome for them. They spoke of being able to apply their learnings from the process and this mindset in real world situations.

> *"We now think more about how to react before a crisis hits. Having a referendum and elections in Serbia, provided us a real-life opportunity to practice everything we'd developed. It was always top-of-mind for us, but we never had the time to do it. We did handle crisis situations before but not in a structured manner like this. The whole thing made us feel more secure and safe on Election Day."*

Outcomes for the wider civil society sector

Beyond organization-level changes, there is evidence that INSPIRES contributed to changes and outcomes that affected the broader sector in Serbia, particularly related to evidence and knowledge generation and the creation and dissemination of tools and resources to support the sector at large. Several of these outcomes (such as international responses to the List Incident) have been described in the early section on Engagement and Collaboration. In this section, we share additional outcomes to which there is evidence that INSPIRES contributed.

Machine Learning for Peace Tool. The machine learning activities in Serbia took place via a collaboration between DevLab and Catalyst Balkans. Catalyst Balkans, through this engagement, was able to create a large-scale database of Serbian voices online, particularly on Twitter, as well as a database of Serbian media outlets that went beyond the sources the machine learning instrument was using. This allowed them to run their own analyses and extract more information on the state of civil society in the country, as well as enabled them to validate DevLab data from these two databases, using it to improve DevLab's process in Serbia.

Catalyst Balkans reported that collaborating with DevLab helped improve their internal systems, knowledge, and processes. Through the collaboration, they successfully hosted online events to disseminate knowledge around the machine learning forecasts to local CSOs. These online workshops taught CSOs about the tool, forecasting of results, and provided local CSOs a platform via breakout rooms to connect on specific issues.

One result cited by several informants was that the model successfully predicted civic space events in Serbia several months prior to their occurrences. However, both partners and the mission are unclear whether there the tool has seen continued uptake in Serbia. The reasons why uptake may have been low in Serbia are explored more below in the section on hindering factors.

It is important to note that informants agreed that machine learning work in Serbia, especially the collaboration with the local partner, helped improve the machine learning model in other countries.

Creating awareness and resources to tackle policy brutality and wrongful arrest. BCHR worked with ECNL to deliver research and tools focussed on the state of police and government violence in Serbia, as well as citizens' rights when faced with wrongful arrest or police brutality. Through this work, BCHR provided written analysis on the actions of public officials in response to citizens' complaints of ill-treatment, and on prosecutorial and judicial criminal policy in Serbia in case of police brutality. As part of this work, they also filed over 30 criminal complaints representing 35 cases. While prosecutors noted that there was no proof to convict, there was positive evidence related to misdemeanor proceedings filed in connection with the FRF, with 99% of rulings in favor of the victims.

In addition, the organization used the funding to produce and disseminate a variety of materials – including leaflets, brochures, a book, and online content – informing citizens of their rights and methods to document and report evidence of torture and ill-treatment at the hands of police. In collaboration with the Ministry of Human Rights, this material was distributed at detention centers, prisons, and other closed facilities. The material is also available in PDF form on BCHR's website, which they continue to use for protests in Serbia. They continue to disseminate material to organizers and citizens, as well as upload to their website and social media.

BCHR made legal recommendations and undertook initiatives for amending the current legal framework to relevant authorities and the public. They are now part of a Ministry of Interior working group examining a new law on policing.

Finally, they compiled their work on educating citizens on their rights and documenting police mistreatment, as well as public opinion research and written analyses on policy brutality and judicial policy in Serbia, into a publication. This was published in both English and Serbian and is written for a broad audience. The publication caught the attention of the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR), from whom they received guidance on utilizing the case data on police torture and inhuman treatment in their publication and was developed into a shadow report for the Council of Europe. BCHR has initiated the procedure, and the Serbian government must now respond to the Council's/ECHR's recommendations.

Increasing awareness and knowledge around toxic narratives and misinformation. Centar E8 used their FRF grant to purchase technical equipment to produce material focussed on the deconstruction of toxic narratives, particularly around civil society and misinformation. In addition, they collected data from the media and other CSOs. All the material was disseminated through their transmedia storytelling channels and continues to be available online. These channels received a large number of interactions with users and were cited by Centar E8 as some of the most widely commented-on work that they have produced.

Research and advocacy around a legal framework for crowdfunding. Trag Foundation, with support from ECNL, carried out a range of research and dissemination activities on creating a legal framework for crowdfunding to support civil society at large. This included conducting analysis, creating policy proposals, engaging the business community around proposals, and engaging civil society actors.

These efforts to improve the legal and fiscal environment for crowdfunding in Serbia were partially successful. While the local partners were able to raise awareness and provide concrete recommendations, the key decision-makers were not fully engaged, particularly the government and the national bank. Despite these challenges, the advocacy continued through a public campaign, using op-eds and other forms of media to raise awareness and push for change. As a result, while they were unable to fully achieve their goals for this activity, they felt they were able to pause the threat of restrictive new rules around crowdfunding.

> *"Because of all the analysis and meetings held with local partners, the topic was elevated. Unfortunately, the trends in the European space are very restricting for crowdfunding…in terms of AML initiatives – but this has not trickled down to Serbia yet. We are carefully working with [partners] to ensure it does not happen. The bare minimum is to not have negative trends like this spill over into new spaces…so it's not a bad outcome."*

Informants noted that the research and advocacy undertaken as part of INSPIRES has laid important groundwork and have helped local partners take away concrete and tangible actions to implement in this regard.

> *"The overall framework for crowdfunding can get very technical and you can overhaul the full system which is not likely to happen. But there are 3-4 practical things that can be implemented fairly quickly given the political will to include that in a couple of tax reform processes…It's a good outcome to have this very concrete stuff that can be easily plugged in when the window of opportunity is there, so let's hope this happens."*

Additionally, though their proposed measures have not been adopted in Serbia, the partner shared their knowledge with other colleagues in Bosnia, who have been able to use it to further their crowdfunding framework.

Outcomes related to the List Incident. The List incident garnered significant public visibility and responses from numerous international bodies like Moneyval, FATF, UN Special Rapporteur, Council of Europe, as well as several embassies. This sent a strong message to the Serbian government and gave wider civil society and international organizations an example to use in the region to advocate for better treatment by the government and help prevent similar attacks elsewhere. Informants noted that this international response was supported by ECNL's engagement with AML/CFT as part of the INSPIRES FRF as well as collaboration with several CSOs cited on the List.

There was consensus from CSO partners on how this attack provided them the chance to improve their skills on how to respond strategically and effectively to threats from the government. It gave them an opportunity to apply their crisis communication plans and other lessons from Res+, as well as brought them closer together through their joint response.

However, some informants noted the List incident was a missed opportunity for improving relations between civil society and the government, expressing the perspective that some CSOs derailed the international community's efforts to mediate and resolve the issue, as they approached the attack with a "boycott mindset" rather than a problem-solving approach. Other informants noted that they felt uncomfortable engaging with the donors and embassies via closed-door, unofficial, and off-the-record meetings.

Did changes in engagement, collaborations, and outcomes sustain fifteen months after the completion of INSPIRES activities?

In addition to understanding the changes to which INSPIRES activities contributed during the implementation of the project, this research also sought to assess which of these changes were sustained fifteen months after the completion of activities in September 2021.

Many engagements have continued but may not be the result of INSPIRES. As discussed above, the INSPIRES project itself contributed to only a small number of new collaborations. When asked about current engagements (as of December 2022), several partners noted that they are actively collaborating with other INSPIRES partners; however, while these engagements were not hindered by INSPIRES activities, it is also difficult to point to the project as a contributing factor for these engagements. Such partnerships include specific engagements cited by six CSOs interviewed.

A small number of new INSPIRES-related engagements have developed and sustained. With that said, informants did note some engagements that they do attribute at least in part to the INSPIRES project. These include:

• Continued engagement between DevLab and PartnersSerbia as well at Catalyst Balkans (described in an earlier section);
• USAID's support of a new project focused on LGBTQIA+ rights in Serbia, with Res+ cohort CSOs as partners;
• USAID's support of a new project focused on civil society resilience, with both consortium and local Serbian INSPIRES partners as project partners. As part of this new project, ECNL is also building on work started under INSPIRES which is expected to include continued partnership with other organizations such as Trag and BCHR; and,
• Engagement of new Res+ partners in the BCSP-led Belgrade Security Conference.

Finally, one informant highlighted that, beyond specific partnerships, the strengthened solidarity in the civil society sector in Serbia remains to this day, stating:

> *"… when [one organization] was under attack, other organizations were there to provide support, legal assistance, or even just say, 'hey you are not alone.' And that solidarity does last – after it, ties are stronger. I think that a couple of years ago we in the civil society sector, I can say it has become more apparent that even though your goal is to reform domain X and there are only limited partners there, it is not enough to collaborate with those limited partners in domain X. You need to elevate the narrative to work with other partners to address societal problems. So those connections are more tied. It could be attributed to INSPIRES in a manner that in that it became more apparent that that sort of sectoral connectedness is relevant. It may be because I have become more part of that conversation, but other directors also share more about strategic dilemmas, even management issues – they share more."*

Outcomes around key Res+ priorities, including internal organizational changes, have continued. As discussed above, many key organizational changes have been sustained, and partners continue to actively work on these Res+-initiated organizational changes, including:

• **Strategic plans**. Partners continue to use their strategic plans, with two CSOs having embedded them into their annual planning and fundraising processes.
• **Staff engagement and well-being** outcomes have sustained, including continued involvement of staff in key decision-making process in at least two Res+ CSOs,
• **Crisis communications plans** are still in place and continue to be used by partners, with one partner citing the use of the plan as recently as two month before data collection (October 2022) and stating "… *we invited the Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo to come to Belgrade. He was allowed to enter Serbia but was turned away when he was 100km from Belgrade. That's when we activated the protocol. It's not just that we have it in place, but it works - it functions."*

- Partners have continued to work on improving internal organizational processes and procedures around **human resources, financial and data security, and staff structure**. One Res+ CSO stated that they continue to improve their financial systems, which were prioritized in their Res+ roadmap as an area to address. They now regularly assess and adjust policies in this area, as well hold staff trainings on issues of corruption, financial and risk management. Another Res+ CSO has introduced plans to update their fundraising process, reshuffle staff structure and introduce some new staff positions, from January 2023, in line with weaknesses identified through the Res+ process.

> *"I'd say this is still an ongoing process because of the mindset shift involved, with regard to some personnel in the organization who need to now find other ways of fundraising. We'll see the true outcome of this component in the time to come."*

In addition to using Res+ tools internally, one CSO has also started to spread the knowledge and tools acquired during the Res+ process to other Serbian CSOs:

> *"We organize regular curricula for activists outside Belgrade. In the last two years we've held around 17 seminars. Each seminar is 2 hours long and dedicated to security of data, assets, etc. Typically, 50-60 people attend each seminar."*

Knowledge, content, and resources created for wider civil society are still in use. The evidence, materials, and tools generated and disseminated through INSPIRES FRFs with Catalyst Balkans, Trag Foundation, BCHR, Centar E8 and ECNL remain available and continue to be utilized across civil society. For example, BCHR most recently distributed their leaflets and publication around citizens' rights and response to police mistreatment, prior to Euro Pride 2022 in Belgrade. The materials were distributed in hardcopy as well as circulated online through the partner's website and Twitter. Content was available in both Serbian and English, to accommodate visitors who would be attending.

> *"We have such a huge audience on our social media and this material is still so alive…For Euro Pride we shared points for activists, organizations, and attendees both in softcopy and hardcopy. It's really very live and people come back to us and thank us. We continue to repost the material every time there could be a situation threatening Freedom of Assembly."*

In addition to Centar E8's content on tackling toxic narratives and misinformation still being live on their website, E8's theatre performances of *The Editor*, focused on combatting fake news, were ongoing at the time of endline data collection (December 2022).

Trag Foundation and ECNL have continued to cooperate on supporting a legal framework for crowdfunding, under a new USAID project. At the time of this endline data collection they were actively working on next steps for advocacy, including an open call for partnerships on the topic.

The Machine Learning model for Serbia continues to be updated every two months with high-quality data. Catalyst Balkans has also continued to develop, expand, and use their database of Serbian voices since the end of the INSPIRES engagement, with their Twitter database sample being expanded every 6 months. They have continued to host convenings around this topic, tying in with their work on tracking philanthropy data and enabling CSOs to consult the data and Machine Learning forecast to make decisions.

ECNL-led regional engagement and cooperation has sustained. As a result of the List incident, regional and international intervention and engagement with Serbian civil society increased. ECNL has continued to use the Serbian example in the region and to work closely with regional bodies. A key example is Moneyval, which has continued to emphasize the example of the Serbian government in their broader messaging and around their ongoing monitoring of abuse of their standards. This has also given ECNL a tool to assist civil society in other countries and amplify the message with other governments.

> *"We are able to go to them and say look what happened in Serbia and what Moneyval has said to Serbia. They are now keeping a close eye not just on Serbia not to repeat this but also other countries in the region."*

A new USAID project in Serbia supports and expands key aspects of INSPIRES. A new project in Serbia, including a new consortium that includes many INSPIRES partners, has continued to implement key components of the Res+ process with new organizations in the country. Participating local coaches expressed a sense of gratification at seeing the continuation of the Res+ approach in this form. The mission of the new project is to deliver Res+ at a different level with previous Res+ cohorts, with previous trainees now becoming the trainers and taking forward these lessons to other Serbian CSOs, expanding and embedding them beyond Belgrade.

> *"We initiated the CSOs on what the ROCCS assessment takes, how to be coaches, and the discussion continues. We'll be doing even more in year 2 to carry on this community."*

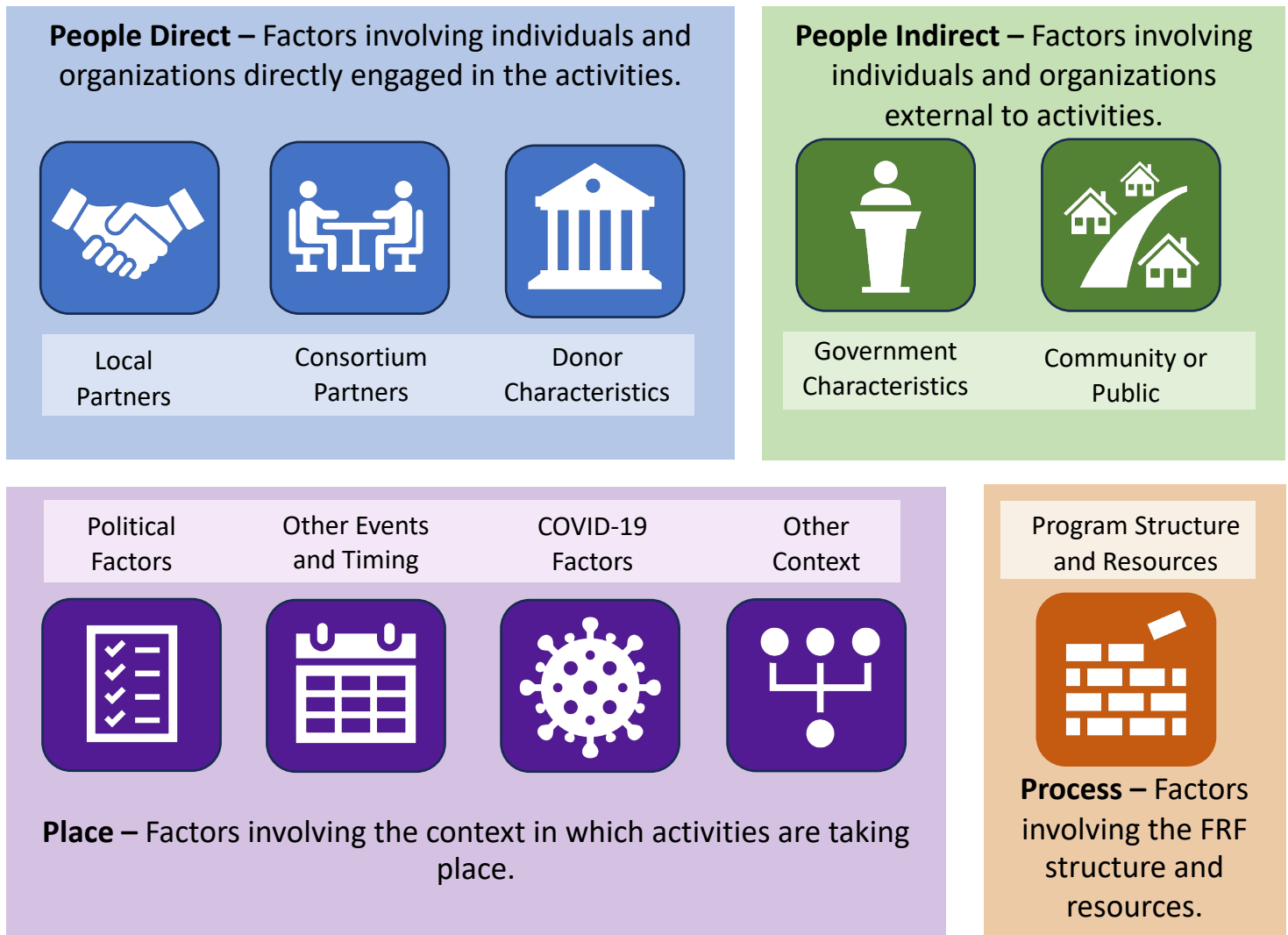### What factors helped and hindered outcomes, engagement, and sustainability?

The analysis of helping and hindering factors for the broader INSPIRES project, completed by April 2023, resulted in a four-component framework that may support or inhibit flexible and rapid response programming (Figure 1).

The four components of factors include:
- **People Direct:** These factors refer to characteristics and behaviors of individuals or organizations directly involved in the design, implementation, and funding of INSPIRES. Specific factors in this component include: Consortium Partners, Local Partners, and Donors.
- **People Indirect:** These factors refer to characteristics and behaviors of individuals or organizations not directly involved in the design, implementation, and funding of INSPIRES. Specific factors in this component include: Government and Public/Community.
- **Place:** These factors refer to aspects of the external environment (enabling or restrictive) that affect the design, implementation, and/or success of INSPIRES activities in achieving their intended results. Specific factors in this component include: Political Factors, Other Events and Timing, COVID-19, and Other Context.
- **Process** - these factors refer to the structure, resources, and policies of INSPIRES programming itself that affect the design, implementation, and/or success of activities in achieving their intended results. Factors in this category have been combined into a single factor: Program Structure and Resources.

In this section, we share People-, Place-, and Process-related factors that emerged as helping and hindering engagement, outcomes, and sustainability of INSPIRES activities in Serbia.

Figure 1. INSPIRES helping and hindering factors framework

People Direct – Factors involving individuals and organizations directly engaged in the activities.

Local Partners

Consortium Partners

Donor Characteristics

People Indirect – Factors involving individuals and organizations external to activities.

Government Characteristics

Community or Public

Political Factors

Other Events and Timing

COVID-19 Factors

Other Context

Place – Factors involving the context in which activities are taking place.

Program Structure and Resources

Process – Factors involving the FRF structure and resources.

Helping Factors

People:
- <u>CSOs are already well-connected.</u> While this did not create much space for entirely new partnerships, the close-knit nature of civil society in the country meant that enhanced engagements between partners happened more seamlessly.
- <u>Res+ coaches as connectors.</u> Several CSOs noted that their Res + coaches played a critical role in informing them about what other organizations were working on, especially outside of INSPIRES, and that this in several cases led to concrete engagements on work outside of the project.
- <u>Existing relationships of consortium partners, especially with international bodies.</u> Many new engagements that did occur as part of INSPIRES formed between domestic and international actors. Informants noted that the wide networks of the consortium partners helped to facilitate these collaborations, which continued after the completion of project work.

- Responsiveness of consortium partners, coaches, and the USAID mission. Key INSPIRES stakeholders were highlighted as being supportive, responsive, and collaborative, leading to an overall positive experience.
- Specific positive and engaged government actors such as the Ministry of Justice helped enable some of the successful outcomes for ECNL's work.
- CSO leadership and staff were engaged, invested, and committed to the program and resolving internal issues. This factor was highlighted by CSOs themselves, as well as coaches, as being key to the successful Res+ outcomes that were seen.
- Support and rapid response of international actors when needed, particularly in case of an external crisis like the List.
- Hiring external consultants was cited as a positive decision that helped CSOs tackle some of the internal challenges they wanted to address, more effectively.
- Local partners were crucial to successful Machine Learning outcomes. They helped validate the ML data and findings, as well as provided civic space expertise for the expert survey.

Place:
- The List incident was regarded as a motivating factor to help CSOs recognize the importance of building resilience and strategies to address civic space threats as they emerge. In addition, several informants noted factors that helped engagement in response to this incident, specifically: (1) the role of the coordinating group, led by several INSPIRES-supported organizations, and (2) Serbia's campaign for EU integration. With regard to the latter, several informants noted that international actors may have been more ready to engage with civil society in response to the List because of the government's existing activities in pursuit of being accepted into the EU.
- COVID-19. While COVID was cited more frequently as a hindering factor, one respondent noted that the pandemic may have had a silver lining concerning supporting engagement: *"… I would argue that the fact that Corona was taking place, we were all stuck behind computers, it helped mobilization – and this helped us to be present and react quickly. Because otherwise we would have been in the field and doing this and that and this kind of concerted effort would not be efficient."* Similarly, the pandemic was also cited by some partners as having a positive impact on their Res+ activities, as it allowed them to slow down and truly focus on internal issues, giving leaders and staff time to connect without the distraction of everyday work.

Process:
- Involvement in INSPIRES trainings. Several organizations that participated in legal, information, and other civic space-focused trainings continued to connect on these issues after the completion of the events.
- International peer learning opportunities. While this research largely focuses on the work undertaken in Serbia between 2019 and 2021, a second cohort of Res+ organizations had an opportunity to attend a peer learning opportunity led by PartnersGlobal in Tanzania in November 2022. Several informants who attended this event acknowledged the value of this event, even in connecting Serbian organizations with each other. Relatedly, one informant who has been involved with both Res+ cohorts in Serbia noted that they had several learnings from cohort 1 (including the need for in-person engagement) that were carried over to cohort 2 and may have made cohort 2 and continual work that PartnersGlobal is undertaking in Serbia more effective.

- <u>Program flexibility.</u> This was cited by both CSOs and coaches as a key enabler, as it allowed them to adapt to changing situations on the ground. Two respondents noted this was not typically the case in their experience of other programs, and the lack of flexibility often creates hurdles, particularly in the context of the work they do.
- <u>Res+ design provided a safe space for discussion</u> and brought staff together in an intentional manner, regularly.
- <u>Res+ components were themselves credited as enabling successful outcomes</u>. CSO partners mentioned how having coaches and external facilitators walk through and identify their organizations' strengths and weaknesses, allowed them to achieve the successful outcomes they have attained in addressing issues. Similarly, a couple of partners mentioned how deliberately timing the Res+ process with their internal strategic planning exercise was immensely helpful in creating lasting outcomes.

Hindering Factors

People:
- <u>Existing relationships between civil society</u>. As noted earlier, the existing closeness of the sector helped to make existing engagement stronger, but this also meant that there were limited "new partnerships" to be developed.
- <u>Disengaged or hostile government actors</u> created a stressful environment for CSOs, particularly through the List incident and other threatening actions which occurred during their engagement with INSPIRES.
- <u>Divergent strategies around the List incident.</u> Both domestic and international actors in Serbia noted that the differing strategies from civil society and the diplomatic and international community about how to respond to the List incident may have hurt future engagement and trust between the sectors. While not directly related to the INSPIRES project this factor can be observed within project activities as it involved so many project partners.

Place:
- <u>Election timing.</u> One informant noted that another event – Serbian elections – also led organizations to shift their focus away from engagement with other groups and more toward election-related activities.
- <u>COVID-19</u>. Most informants independently cited the pandemic and the resulting rapid changes in context and environment, both within Serbia and globally, as a key hindering factor for both engagement and outcomes.
  - Engagement became more difficult due to the shift to online spaces.
  - Organizations and staff felt added pressure and stress and took a "turn inward" as they focused on ensuring their own work could continue in these challenging new circumstances.
  - Several informants highlighted how the Res+ process felt exhausting at times, as they spent too much time online and missed the connection of in-person events.
  - General morale was low for many organizations due to the stress.

Process:

- Competing priorities and projects made it difficult for CSO partners to consistently focus and give the necessary time and capacity for INSPIRES activities.
    - Organizations did not have time to work on internal processes when urgent external matters came up, such as the List. One partner described it as a luxury to be able to focus on resolving internal organizational issues.
    - Relatedly, some CSOs felt the Res+ process was too time-consuming and should have been shorter, as it became hard to manage with their existing workload and projects.
- Machine Learning Process challenges:
    - The newness and difficulty of developing a complex machine learning tool from scratch was challenging for the partners.
    - Partners noted the tool was difficult to communicate to CSOs at times.
    - While the project envisaged opportunities for collaboration around machine learning data and forecasts, the timing of developing and testing the model made it difficult to pursue these engagements in Serbia.
- More intentional design needed to encourage collaboration (Res+). One partner noted that Res+ was not originally designed to encourage more collaboration across organizations, and as such the project activities were not created to directly seek greater collaboration.
- Res+ ecosystem analysis and scenario planning perhaps not suited to junior staff. One partner felt their junior staff did not have much to contribute to these two activities as they were too removed from the workings of the organization, and perhaps should not have been involved.

Conclusion

While the evaluation of INSPIRES activities in Serbia cannot provide conclusive evidence of attribution, the analysis does highlight evidence that the INSPIRES project was able to contribute to important changes in civil society engagement and outcomes during its implementation between 2019 and 2021.

The project was able to support a limited number of new collaborations and engagements between civil society organizations and international actors, many of which have been sustained for more than a year after the completion of the project. While this change was limited by the already close-knit nature of Belgrade-based civil society, informants cited that INSPIRES activities were able to both strengthen existing collaborations between CSOs and to forge new engagements such as new projects in which CSOs and international partners alike have furthered their work together.

The project also contributed to significant number of internal organizational changes for CSOs, especially those supported as part of the Res+ objective. These changes were especially important due to the timing of the first Res+ cohort, which launched shortly before lockdowns that were implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs received support from coaches and sub-grants to implement changes ranging from developing crisis communications plans to implementing initiatives to improve staff well-being to responses to diversifying funding. Interviews with Res+ participants fifteen months after their official engagement with INSPIRES ended highlight that these changes are still being implemented and utilized long after the completion of Res+.

Beyond organizational changes, INSPIRES also supported broader changes for civil society in Serbia. Activities undertaken as part of the Machine Learning and FRF objectives produced concrete tools and resources that, in many cases, are still being used by civil society today to protect against shocks like a crackdown on assembly rights and misuse of AML-CFT regulations to restrict civic freedoms. Partner engagement on these topics proved to be especially critical during the July 2020 List incident, in which several Serbian partners were targeted by the government. Flexibility and quick responses by international partners, local partners, and the USAID mission ensured that INSPIRES resources could be used to help in the response to the List incident.

While this analysis does provide strong evidence that INSPIRES has made positive contributions to the ability of civil society to operate in Serbia, informants also highlighted several lessons for how programs like this could be strengthened in the future. First, informants noted that more time was needed to achieve many of the changes that INSPIRES sought to see during the engagement in Serbia. In the case of Res+ and FRF activities, both organizational and broader sector changes take time, and achieving these changes was especially challenging with competing priorities related to COVID-19 and the elections. In the case of machine learning, the time required to create a model that would accurately predict civic space changes left little time to then undertake outreach to ensure uptake of the model when it was completed. Finally, while efforts were taken to integrate work across the objectives of INSPIRS, informants did note that more could be done to ensure that responses across CSOs, consortium partners, and the mission were coordinated in response to the List incident and other activities.