



**Regional Workshop:  
The Fight Against Corruption in the Balkans and Beyond: Effective Action in  
Turbulent Times  
Pristina, Kosovo | March 30 – April 2, 2026**

**Executive Summary**

The regional workshop on anti-corruption brought together 24 participants from 10 countries, Swiss headquarters, SECO, and key institutional partners to share practical experiences, lessons learned, and approaches for strengthening anti-corruption efforts in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. The workshop responds directly to recommendations from the 2024 evaluation by the Swiss Federal Audit Office, which called for enhanced anti-corruption work, improved knowledge exchange, and stronger coordination between SDC and SECO.

Discussions highlighted global and European trends, analysed the specificities of corruption in Eastern European contexts, and deepened the reflection on the role of law enforcement and asset recovery, local governance, civil society and media oversight in anti-corruption. Furthermore the challenges of measuring behavioral change was discussed. Key conclusions emphasized the importance of long-term engagement and adaptive management as well as the centrality of political economy approaches and coalition-building in order to foster a change in behaviour and social norms. Participants identified practical next steps, including strengthening peer learning, streamlining anti-corruption indicators, and sharing policy messages to enhance Switzerland's anti-corruption impact.

**Background and Objective:**

Corruption remains a major impediment to sustainable development and democratic governance. In its 2025 evaluation, the Swiss Federal Audit Office recommended that SDC enhances its work on anti-corruption, strengthens knowledge exchange, and improves coordination between SDC and SECO. The Western Balkans and Eastern Europe represent regions where SDC and SECO have developed a growing portfolio of initiatives aimed at curbing corruption, ranging from dedicated anti-corruption interventions to measures that strengthen public sector integrity, the role of civil society and independent media as watchdogs as well as to support law enforcement and asset recovery. Against this backdrop and given the clear demand for such an exchange, the PGE Section together with the Regional Governance Advisor for the Western Balkans (Eastern Europe Section) and the Swiss Embassy in Pristina organized this regional meeting.

The regional workshop gathered 24 participants from 8 SDC priority countries (Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia), 2 new EU member states (Bulgaria and Romania) and head office, as well representatives from SECO and institutional partners (Basel Institute on Governance and U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Center).

The overall objective was to provide a space for FDFA and SECO colleagues to openly share practical and tactical experiences and lessons learned in addressing corruption in the Western Balkans and other regions. It aimed to promote joint learning, strengthen networks, and identify practical approaches for enhancing anti-corruption and integrity across Switzerland's international cooperation portfolio. As such, this regional workshop allowed to follow-up on many of the recommendations of the Swiss Federal Audit Office's evaluation on SDC's and SECO's work to fight corruption.

**Main insights and conclusions:**

**Global trends in anti-corruption**

Recent global trends in anti-corruption reveal a paradox. While international normative frameworks are under pressure, with key actors lowering standards, multilateral mechanisms losing influence, and funding is decreasing, the issue of anti-corruption mobilizes the public, driving mass protests in many countries and at times triggering political change. At the same time, anti-corruption efforts are increasingly being weaponized (e.g. misused to weaken the political opposition), creating new political and governance risks for development partners. Compounding these challenges, organized crime is

becoming more global and diversified. Moving huge sums of money it is also often deeply embedded within state structures, further complicating effective responses.

### **European Mechanisms and their Role in Anti-Corruption**

European integration is without doubt a key driver in the regions' anti-corruption reform. It relies heavily on a "stick and carrot" approach, particularly in enlargement contexts such as the Western Balkans, as well as in Moldova and Ukraine. However, the attractiveness of the "carrot", namely EU accession, appears to be diminishing for some political leaders. In the current geopolitical context, this creates tensions for the EU between the political imperative to accelerate accession processes and the risk of lowering normative standards, which can undermine the anti-corruption agenda. Moreover, once countries join the European Union, the leverage of this conditionality-based approach tends to weaken while severe corruption challenges remain in place. In parallel, the Council of Europe's Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) operates with a different incentive structure, relying more on peer pressure. The GRECO reviews are nevertheless an important entry point for Swiss interventions, for example the ongoing 6<sup>th</sup> Evaluation Round aimed at preventing corruption and promoting integrity at the sub-national level. Together with MONEYVAL, the regional FATF-style body that assesses compliance with international anti-money laundering (AML) and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) standards, these mechanisms form an important normative framework in the regional fight against corruption.

### **Political Economy of Anti-Corruption**

Anti-corruption efforts often fail not because of poor design, but because they 1) misread how systems actually work, 2) ignore power and incentives, and 3) assume linear change in complex environments. There is also a shift in emphasis needed: rather than focusing predominantly on legal and institutional reforms (that are often not implemented), efforts should prioritize interventions that lead to tangible improvements in people's daily lives. The workshop had therefore a strong emphasis on the Political Economy of Anti-Corruption. Participants discussed three critical mental shifts to improve anti-corruption programming:

- **Shift 1: From Technical Fixes to Navigating Complex Systems:** This shift clarified the distinction between complicated systems (like a car) and complex systems (like a forest), emphasizing that corruption is an emergent property of complex systems, and the need to ensure interventions are aligned with system dynamics.
- **Shift 2: From Institutions on Paper to Political Settlements:** This shift highlighted the importance of power dynamics, noting that rules are only enforced if they align with power realities and the political settlement. Consequently, reforms only succeed when power, capability, and interests are aligned.
- **Shift 3: From the Workbench to the Garden:** This shift focused on the role of development partners as facilitators rather than mere introducers of normative changes, supporting the formation of coalitions for change and fostering adaptive, behavior-focused reform.

### **Law Enforcement and Asset Recovery**

Law enforcement remains a key driver in fighting corruption, as illustrated by Mr. Altin Dumani, former Chairman of SPAK, Albania's Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime, who joined the workshop in person. SPAK, an independent judicial body at the heart of Albania's 2016 judicial reform, is widely regarded as the Western Balkans' most ambitious effort to dismantle systemic corruption and align with EU standards. Mr. Dumani presented SPAK's origins, major successes, and ongoing challenges, including its efforts to investigate and prosecute high-level political figures. Serving from December 2022 to December 2025, he led SPAK during a transformative period, resisting political and special-interest pressures to pursue independent and impartial justice. Under his leadership, SPAK targeted high-level corruption, including former prime ministers, ministers, and mayors, with landmark cases such as the Incinerators Scandal and the Sterilization Equipment Fraud, exposing links between public procurement and private interests. Key factors that enabled the success of SPAK were the constitutional provision that defines its independence, the vetting process for prosecutors, the special police and court unit working only for SPAK, the high technical capacities within SPAK. The discussion also highlighted SDC's experiences supporting law enforcement and asset recovery, with insights from Ukraine and Moldova.

### **Local Public Sector Management and Integrity**

Given SDC's historic focus on local governance, there is substantial expertise in projects that, while not always explicitly framed as anti-corruption interventions, are highly relevant from this perspective. The workshop discussed three projects from Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Albania, illustrating a range of approaches: leveraging political reform momentum to scale successful bottom-up reforms (Ukraine), strategically applying incentives through grants (Albania), and using adaptive methods to focus activities

where power, interest, and capabilities align (North Macedonia). Key insights emphasize the importance of understanding the political economy, adopting adaptive management, and moving beyond “tick-the-box” exercises. Linking local initiatives to national-level strategies is critical for coherence, sustainability, and meaningful impact.

**Oversight role of Civil Society and Media**

Independent civil society and media play a crucial role in combating corruption. Switzerland’s support to these organizations remains essential, particularly as they face increasing financial and political pressures. An interactive dialogue with a Kosovar journalist as well as a panel with Civil Society representatives and media organizations illustrated these challenges firsthand, including SLAPP lawsuits, threats, and police raids. The discussion underscored the vital contribution of investigative journalism in enabling legal proceedings and holding power to account. Media also serves as a powerful instrument for collective action and victim empowerment. When partnering with CSOs, the most impactful results come from long-term consistency and focusing on topics central to their core missions.

**Policy Dialogue on Anti-Corruption**

Policy dialogue on fighting corruption is particularly challenging, as anti-corruption efforts are hardly publicly dismissed but often secretly sabotaged. The viability of meaningful policy dialogue on corruption is therefore highly context specific: in some settings it remains purely performative, while in others setting committed counterparts might be capable of delivering tangible results. Effective dialogue requires well-established communication channels to ensure coherent messaging across all partners, from implementing agencies to multilateral organizations and the Embassy, and to facilitate information flow from technical to political levels. Competing foreign policy objectives, such as prioritizing short term stability or security over principle-driven agendas, can weaken the anti-corruption impact of such dialogues.

**Indicators for Anti-Corruption Results**

Measuring anti-corruption results remains a common challenge, particularly when it comes to capturing behavioral change at the outcome level. To improve this was also one of the recommendations of the Federal Audit Office evaluation. Aggregated indicators such as the Corruption Perceptions Index are not well-suited for project-level measurement due to their large margin of error and strong limitations when it comes to measuring the contribution of Swiss projects. There are several ARI/TRI that directly or indirectly refer to anti-corruption, which can and should be used more. Moving forward, efforts shall focus on streamlining country specific indicators (or at least establish a list of qualitatively good outcome level indicator), particularly for ICAR projects.

**Further Topics**

The workshop also provided space for small group discussions, allowing participants to engage in depth on a broad range of additional issues. These “clinic” sessions discussed the challenges of oversight institutions, private sector integrity, the impact of social conflict on anti-corruption, the evaluation of entry points for anti-corruption programming, learning from failure, modalities of EU Member States, digital transformation, as well as public finance management and participatory budgeting.

**Conclusion**

Keep Doing	Change and/or Stop	Invest more in
<p><b>Approach:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long-term engagement (a comparative advantage of Switzerland)</li> <li>- Strong context specificity</li> <li>- Combining mainstreaming with targeted interventions</li> <li>- Adaptive management</li> <li>- Applying a Political Economy Approach</li> </ul> <p><b>Themes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support to civil society and investigative journalism</li> <li>- Local governance</li> <li>- Asset recovery</li> </ul> <p><b>Internal:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthening the Anti-Corruption Peer Group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Move away from linear approaches; design programs that allow for adaptation</li> <li>- Stop reluctance to engage in anti-corruption and other politically sensitive areas</li> <li>- Avoid short-term anti-corruption engagements</li> <li>- Shift from rewarding formal compliance to focusing on real behavioral change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social norms and behavioral change approaches</li> <li>- Greater use of HQ backstopping services</li> <li>- Support agents of change within institutions</li> <li>- Support local institutions, champions, and positive outliers</li> <li>- Support oversight actors (parliament, civil society, independent institutions)</li> <li>- Coalition building across stakeholders</li> <li>- Improved anti-corruption measurement</li> <li>- Encourage calculated risk-taking</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Raising awareness of anti-corruption within Swiss international cooperation and make the already substantial existing portfolio visible</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strategic donor–government exchange, including at regional level</li> <li>- Treating failure as a necessary step towards change</li> </ul>
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**Next Steps:**

Concluding, the workshop provided a dedicated space to reflect on the practical implications for country portfolios for each country team

At the institutional level, the following next steps were agreed:

- Continue Anti-Corruption Peer Group meetings, including dedicated sessions on social norms and on mainstreaming (led by the PGE Section)
- Review existing anti-corruption indicators in RDM and work towards streamlining, including compiling a set of good practices, with a particular focus on ICAR projects (in collaboration with ICAR)
- Share and further develop key policy messages

*The organizing team would like to thank the Embassy in Pristina for being such a welcoming host and all the participants for making this workshop a highly interactive learning exercise.*

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**Annexes:**

- Workshop Agenda
- List of Participants