Centralization of Local Philanthropy: A Social Network Analysis of Donor–Beneficiary Ties in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, post-socialist countries local philanthropy is gaining importance as external aid diminishes. This paper examines the changing structure of these local giving ecosystems between 2015-2022. Social network analysis is used to map the relationships between donors and beneficiaries, treating each donation as a relational tie rather than as a financial flow, and examining the structure of giving rather than its volume. Key metrics tracking network centralization, but also density and cliquishness, showed changes over the years. There is a significant trend towards network centralization in both countries: philanthropic activity is increasingly concentrated around fewer central entities, potentially marginalizing smaller groups. While number of connections generally increased, dense collaborative clusters did not strengthen uniformly. Consolidation presents potential efficiencies alongside risks for the sector's diversity and inclusivity. This paper provides an empirical basis for designing strategies that counteract centralization and support a more distributed local giving ecosystem.

Keywords: Philanthropy Networks, Social Capital, Western Balkans, Social Network Analysis, Civil Society Development

Introduction

Philanthropy in the Western Balkans has emerged as a considerable force in shaping social and economic development, particularly in the region's transition from a socialist past. This paper examines changes in philanthropic activity in the two Western Balkan countries – Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – in a region experiencing political and economic shifts. A key assumption is that studying philanthropic activity reveals forces behind community-level social change, considering the common histories and socio-political hurdles these countries face. A network analysis of donor-beneficiary ties reveals typical structures and effects of philanthropy in this region at a crossroads of influences. This study is timely, as the big foreign donors are pulling away from the regions, and funding from USAID, an important regional donor to the nonprofit sector, is completely disappearing (Rigby et al. 2025), leaving a major gap in funding for civil society services. This withdrawal of major international donors is not merely a financial problem; it represents a significant shift in the political architecture of civil society support. For decades, external funding has been a key driver of democratic advocacy and civic engagement. Its decline forces a critical question: can locally-sourced philanthropy fill this void, not just in monetary terms, but in its capacity to support an independent and critical civil society? In a context marked by concerns over democratic backsliding and state capture (Transparency International 2020), a robust, independently funded civic sector is necessary for democratic resilience. This study therefore explores whether the emerging local philanthropic ecosystem is developing into a diverse, resilient network or replicating patterns of centralization that could render it vulnerable to co-option or narrow interests.

While philanthropy is important for socio-economic development (Acs 2013; Giloth 2019), measuring it accurately is difficult, often hampered by scarce quantitative data and a focus on financial inputs alone. This difficulty is pronounced in the Western Balkans. Most research measures philanthropy by reported monetary value, potentially missing the relational dynamics and broader effects, particularly in post-conflict, post-socialist regions such as the Western Balkans. This paper addresses these gaps by employing social network analysis not to track financial amounts but to examine the networks of interactions between donors and beneficiaries, measuring the social capital formed through these relationships over time.

This study analyses changes in philanthropic networks in Serbia and Bosnia using longitudinal SNA metrics to track social capital and network structures over time. Moving past purely financial measures, this method shows how philanthropic actions support community connection, resilience, and cohesion in these post-conflict, transitioning societies. The results are intended to inform policymakers, NGOs, and donors in developing philanthropic approaches that strengthen social capital and address socio-economic difficulties in the Western Balkans.

Why philanthropy?

Philanthropy, defined as 'private giving for public purposes' (Barman 2017, 272), provides the financial foundation that allows civil society organizations to operate without state control. In the Western Balkans, this independence carries particular weight. Civil society organizations were instrumental in overcoming the semi-authoritarian regime of the 1990s, serving as a substitute for fragmented political opposition during democratization (Bieber 2003). Today, these organizations face what Kostovicova (2006) calls a 'double challenge': opposing illiberal state tendencies while contending with undemocratic, nationalist elements within the nonprofit sector itself. More recent scholarship has elaborated this diagnosis, documenting how the very category of ‘civil society’ in the region has been reshaped by two decades of donor dependence, state pressure, and the rise of organizations that mimic civic form while serving partisan or governmental ends (Bieber 2020; Fagan and Sircar 2017). The challenge is how to distinguish genuinely autonomous organizations from those embedded in clientelist or captured structures. Meeting this challenge requires funding that does not compromise organizational autonomy. ‘Civil society’ term is used descriptively rather than as a synonym for liberal-democratic organizing, as the sector in the region includes conservative, religious, nationalist, and clientelist actors alongside liberal ones, and our analysis is agnostic about the political orientation of the organizations involved.

The source of funding shapes what civil society can do. Foreign donors long filled this role, but their support created its own problems. Research shows that citizens often view internationally funded organizations with skepticism, perceiving their agendas as abstract and disconnected from local priorities (Danković and Pickering 2017). EU assistance, while building professional capacity, often produced organizations accountable to donors rather than local communities (Fagan 2013). Now, with major funders like USAID withdrawing entirely (Rigby et al. 2025), the question becomes whether local philanthropy can sustain an independent sector, and whether its structure will support diverse voices or concentrate resources among a few established players.

The importance of locally sourced philanthropy

As foreign donors withdraw from the Western Balkans, the sustainability of independent civil society depends increasingly on local philanthropic resources. Organizations that once relied on international grants must now build local constituencies capable of providing both funding and legitimacy (Vasiljević, Radovanović, and Nikolić 2024). The implications extend beyond finances. Civil society performs democratic functions: engaging citizens in public life, holding power accountable, delivering services to marginalized communities, and representing diverse interests. These functions require funding independent of both state and foreign control. A civil society funded by local donors answers to local communities rather than distant institutions, which may strengthen its democratic legitimacy and its ability to withstand political pressure. Yet cultivating local philanthropy in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina presents serious obstacles, many stemming from the region's post-socialist legacy and political economy.

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the focus of this paper, are both post-socialist, middle-income nations that were part of former Yugoslavia and share a common language (often abbreviated BCMS: Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian). Their common communist past fosters a tendency to rely on the state for public goods (Grødeland 2006; Wiepking and Handy 2015). This historical context often translates into citizens looking to governmental bodies to solve societal problems, potentially dampening traditions of private giving for public benefit that might be stronger in other contexts. Examining the specific ways local philanthropy does emerge against this backdrop becomes particularly informative.

The political environments in the Western Balkans, marked by differing democratic maturity, intermittent instability, and corruption, present a difficult setting that may obstruct or sometimes spur philanthropic action (Transparency International 2020; EWB 2023; Freedom House 2016). Legal frameworks for philanthropy and nonprofits offer possibilities but also include restrictions that may curb the sector's growth and effectiveness (USAID 2023). Such a legal environment does more than create obstacles for civil society; it actively erodes the region's human capital. Molnar et al. (2024) show that weak institutions, poor rule of law, and the perception of widespread corruption are powerful 'push' factors for emigration, with their influence in non-EU countries being even stronger than wage differences alone (Molnar et al. 2024). This creates a vicious cycle: the very institutional deficits that philanthropy seeks to address are also driving away the educated and engaged citizens who would form the backbone of a local donor base. Economic factors, middle-income status, regional disparities, and legacies of the socialist transition strongly influence philanthropic activity and resource distribution (Bartlett and Prica 2011). Reliance on state welfare remains strong; a 2019 survey found that citizens view the state as chiefly responsible for the common good, suggesting obstacles for local giving, perhaps including distrust regarding fund use (Trag Foundation 2019).

Foreign donors consequently hold considerable sway, which creates accountability problems and undermines public views of CSOs (Daly 2011; Puljek-Shank 2018). This influence can also sideline smaller local groups, leading to competition rather than cooperation (Wunsch 2015). Dependence on foreign aid is widespread, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was heavily affected by the Yugoslav wars (Selimović 2011). Government funding presents a similar problem, as it might crowd out local giving (Sokolowski 2013). The issue of government funding is particularly complex in the regional context. While it can provide stability, it also carries the risk of co-option, especially in environments with weak democratic checks and balances. The rise of government-organized non-governmental organizations

(GONGOs), as noted by Meyer et al. (2019), is a well-documented strategy to create a façade of civic engagement while neutralizing genuine independent voices. This phenomenon, sometimes termed 'captured civil society,' leads to a sector that may be active but is ultimately unwilling or unable to challenge state narratives or hold power to account. Independent, locally-sourced philanthropy is thus a matter of financial sustainability and of preserving the autonomy and function of the third sector. A diversified funding base, rooted in local communities and businesses, mitigates these risks. The nonprofit sector's future growth relies heavily on mobilizing local resources (Mikuš 2015).

Diaspora populations are one such local resource; their cultural and geographic closeness positions them to contribute to their home countries' socio-economic progress (Flanigan 2017). Although reliance on remittances varies, it is higher in Bosnia (Bajra 2021), the diaspora generally plays a substantial economic role in the region and has shaped how philanthropy developed. Diaspora contributions are included as 'local' because these donors remain embedded in what scholars of transnationalism term 'transnational social fields', networks of social relationships that span borders but maintain ongoing ties of obligation, trust, and shared identity with home communities (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Unlike external institutional donors who operate through formal project-based relationships with time-limited accountability to distant funders, diaspora giving emerges from enduring kinship and community networks, and is a distinct form of community-rooted support. This holds in monetary and social capital terms: Predojević-Despić (2022) shows that returnees to Serbia draw on their transnational competencies and networks, bringing back substantial cultural and social capital.

Theoretical framework

A civil society sector made up of organizations with different sizes, missions, and constituencies performs democratic functions that a homogeneous sector cannot. Smaller, grassroots organizations are often better at engaging local citizens and serving as what Putnam (2000) called 'schools of democracy,' and larger, professionalized organizations may be better positioned to serve as watchdogs over state power or deliver services at scale (Salamon and Anheier 1998). This pluralism matters for representation as much as for efficiency: a sector dominated by a few central actors risks narrowing the range of voices and interests that receive philanthropic support. In post-socialist contexts, where civil society must simultaneously oppose illiberal state tendencies and counter undemocratic elements inside the nonprofit sector itself (Kostovicova 2006), keeping organizational diversity intact is necessary for democratic resilience.

Theories of philanthropy suggest that private foundations, freed from electoral cycles and short-term reporting pressures, have the freedom to take risks and support innovative or unpopular causes over the long term (Shaw, Canavan, and Dolan 2021). Foreign institutional aid, while considerable, operates differently: it typically flows through competitive grant cycles with predefined priorities, favoring organizations with the professional capacity to handle demanding application and reporting requirements (Herrold 2025). When such aid withdraws (as the USAID case demonstrates), it does so based on distant political calculations, leaving local partners stranded. Local philanthropy, which grows out of existing community relationships, may lack scale but has structural features that may better support a varied civil society: lower barriers to entry for small organizations, accountability to local rather than distant constituencies, and funding relationships built on ongoing social ties rather than time-limited contracts. But whether this potential materializes depends on how local philanthropic networks actually develop, which is the empirical question this study addresses.

The structure of philanthropic networks shapes whether such diversity can be sustained. Social Capital Theory, which stresses the social and economic benefits derived from networks built on shared norms and mutual support (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000), helps explain how these patterns emerge. At the organizational level, philanthropic relationships create infrastructure through which resources and information flow. When donors fund multiple beneficiaries, they create pathways connecting those organizations; when beneficiaries share donors, they become linked through common resource streams. These network ties form what might be termed the sector's ‘social capital infrastructure’, the relational architecture that allows or constrains collective action and resource mobilization (Bryce 2006; Miković et al. 2019). Following Putnam (2000), we understand social capital as connections among individuals, i.e., social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them, and following Coleman (1988) as a resource inhering in the structure of relations between actors. We operationalize the concept at the organizational rather than the individual level: the actors in our networks are donors and beneficiaries, the ties between them are giving relationships rather than interpersonal bonds, and we treat social capital as a property of network structure rather than a quantity attached to individual nodes. Inferences about its distribution in the sector therefore come from structural metrics (density, transitivity, centralization) rather than from actor-level measurement, and we make no claims about interpersonal trust, civic norms, or generalized reciprocity at the population level.

Network structure determines how social capital is distributed throughout the sector. Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding social capital (ties among similar groups) and bridging social capital (ties that span different groups) translates at the network level into questions of clustering and centralization. Dense, clustered subnetworks may signal strong bonding capital inside specific communities of practice, while dispersed, decentralized structures may better support bridging ties that connect actors who differ from one another. Highly centralized networks, by contrast, concentrate relational resources around a few core actors, which may create what Borgatti and Everett (2000) term core-periphery structures that isolate smaller actors from resource flows and collaborative opportunities. In the Western Balkans, this kind of centralization risks hardening existing hierarchies where, as Mikuš (2015) argues, professionalized NGOs become increasingly detached from the grassroots communities they claim to represent. In practical terms, this means contending with GONGOs that may absorb corporate giving through political pressure on firms in Serbia, and with ethno-political fragmentation that channels giving along entity and ethnic lines in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our metrics speak to overall architecture rather than to the political alignment of specific actors. For example, coerced or captured giving may be consistent with centralization around favoured hubs, fragmentation with disconnected clusters, and the marginalization of grassroots actors with peripheral network positions.

This structural perspective fits the Western Balkans well. As Lutovac (2025) argues, prevailing political and cultural narratives in the region often create strong distinctions between in-groups and constructed ‘others.’ Philanthropic networks operating in this context must either reinforce such fragmentation or actively work against it by building bridging ties that cut through societal divides. Higher community social capital is associated with greater financial sustainability for nonprofits (Dell et al. 2022), and network formation among Western Balkan nonprofits supports donation acquisition above all and project implementation (Miković et al. 2019). For less privileged communities with fewer options for mobilizing resources, such networks matter even more (Kim 2018).

We apply this framework using longitudinal social network analysis to measure changing connections among philanthropic actors in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Figure 1).

Three network metrics capture different aspects of the sector's relational structure, each with implications for social capital distribution and civil society diversity:

Network density measures the proportion of possible relationships that actually exist. Increasing density suggests that philanthropic actors are becoming more interconnected, which may widen the channels through which resources circulate. We hypothesize:

(H1) Network density will increase over time, reflecting more connections relative to the number of actors.

Transitivity (or clustering) measures the tendency for actors who share a common partner to also be connected to each other, forming closed triads. High transitivity signals cohesive subgroups—possible sites of bonding social capital where trust and collaboration may deepen. We hypothesize:

(H2) Network transitivity will increase over time, meaning actors connected to a common third party will more often be connected to one another.

Degree centralization measures how concentrated network connections are around a few actors versus distributed among many. As Herrold (2025) shows in her ethnographic analysis of Serbia, the administrative burdens of foreign aid favor a small tier of professionalized ‘managerial NGOs’ that possess the absorptive capacity to handle donor requirements. These organizations increasingly act as intermediaries (or ‘matchmakers’) between donors and grassroots groups, which makes centralization structurally necessary. Given the withdrawal of direct foreign aid and the dependence on these hubs, we hypothesize:

(H3) Network degree centralization will increase over time, showing that connections become more concentrated around a smaller number of actors.

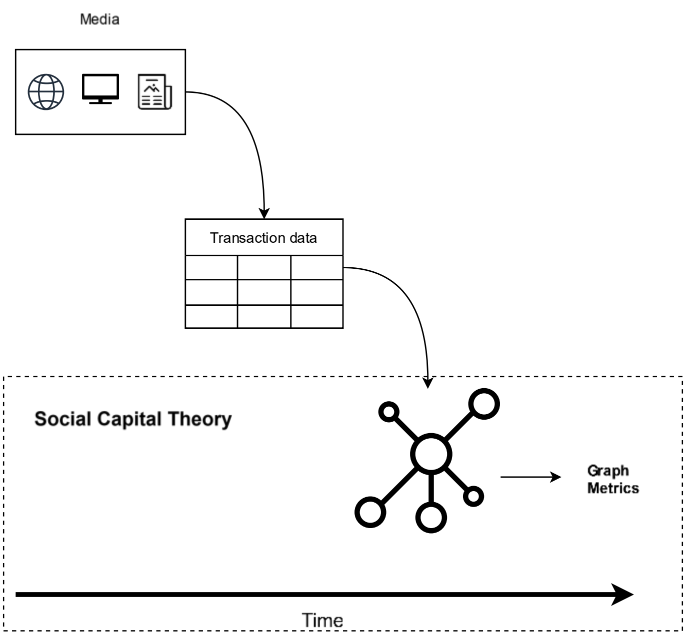

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Data and methodology

Data

Our data source is the Giving Balkans philanthropy database, which records philanthropy across the seven countries conventionally grouped as the Western Balkans: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro (Catalyst Balkans 2023). We adopt this geography from the data source; the term 'Western Balkans' is an EU policy designation rather than a natural region, and the two countries examined here can equivalently be described as post-Yugoslav post-socialist states. It compiles over 90,313 recorded gifts involving more than 35,779 unique entities, totalling over half a billion euros, from 2015 to 2022. The Giving Balkans database is curated by Catalyst Balkans, a Belgrade-based regional nonprofit founded in 2013 whose mission is to support the development of philanthropic infrastructure in Southeast Europe. The database was created to fill a documented gap: no official register of philanthropic activity exists in any of the countries covered, and aggregate philanthropy statistics are otherwise unavailable. Catalyst Balkans is itself a civil-society actor in the sector it documents, and we note this for transparency, though the database is widely used by researchers, donors, NGOs, and policymakers across the region and the underlying records are subject to a verification process (described below). The data used in this study were extracted on 30th June 2023 and are archived in the project's OSF repository to ensure reproducibility regardless of subsequent changes to the live database interface.

The database includes donations from individuals resident in the seven countries; donations from corporate entities operating within the seven countries, including local subsidiaries of multinational firms (on the grounds that the donating entity has a legal and operational presence in the country); donations from private foundations established within the region; and diaspora donations, flagged separately, on the grounds that diaspora donors remain embedded in transnational social fields linking them to home communities. The database excludes direct donations from foreign individuals (not part of diaspora), corporations, or institutions based outside the seven countries and going directly to recipients in the region (typically large institutional grants from international donors such as USAID, EU instruments, or foreign private foundations); and re-granted foreign funds, where a local intermediary disburses funds originally received from a foreign donor, which are excluded to avoid double-counting and to maintain the focus on locally-sourced resources. Donations from state and public-sector bodies within the region are not included in the database, but the database includes the donations from the corporate entities in which the government is a shareholder.

This longitudinal database, dedicated to the Western Balkans and compiled systematically, allows for tracking changes over time that would otherwise be obscured by anecdotal evidence or single-point snapshots. The Giving Balkans database tracks only locally sourced philanthropy within the seven countries, including giving by foreign companies operating there and by the diaspora. It excludes direct donations from foreign entities outside the region. While significant, large foreign donations are omitted because they can distort the picture of local giving and are not seen as reliable funding streams for local nonprofits. The diaspora, however, is treated as a local resource and included.

The database categorizes donors by type, including corporate donors, individual donors (both identified private persons and mass individual giving through crowdfunding and SMS campaigns), private foundations, and other organizational forms. Throughout the data collection period, the majority of donated funds came from individual donors, followed by corporate donations (from companies or corporate foundations). Beneficiaries are similarly classified into individuals and families, nonprofit organizations, public institutions, government entities, and other categories. Donations from diaspora populations are flagged separately and treated as a local resource, given donors' cultural and social ties to the region. It should be noted that the database does not systematically track organizational characteristics such as asset size or annual revenue. A detailed data descriptor with descriptive statistics disaggregated by country, donor type, beneficiary type, and year is available in the project repository. Further analyses of giving, distributions across categories, and illustrative examples of philanthropic instances can be found in the annual country reports (Catalyst Balkans 2023b; 2023c). Importantly, the database captures only locally sourced funds; if an intermediary organization receives foreign funding (such as through international donor grants) and subsequently re-grants these funds domestically, this is not counted as local philanthropy and is excluded from the database.

Giving Balkans records used in this research are gathered from print, broadcast, and electronic media, then coded, classified, and verified (Figure 2), capturing publicly visible philanthropy. The data collection process is done in a semiautomated way, explained in more detail by Milinković and Galjak (2024). Catalyst Balkans contacts donors and beneficiaries for verification, where possible. Limitations exist – anonymous donations or undisclosed amounts may be missed if confirmation is unavailable. While the database tracks in-kind donations (with estimated worth), this study uses only cash donations for consistency with research focused on monetary giving. This decision excludes potentially substantial in-kind contributions, meaning the analysis does not capture the complete picture of resource flow.

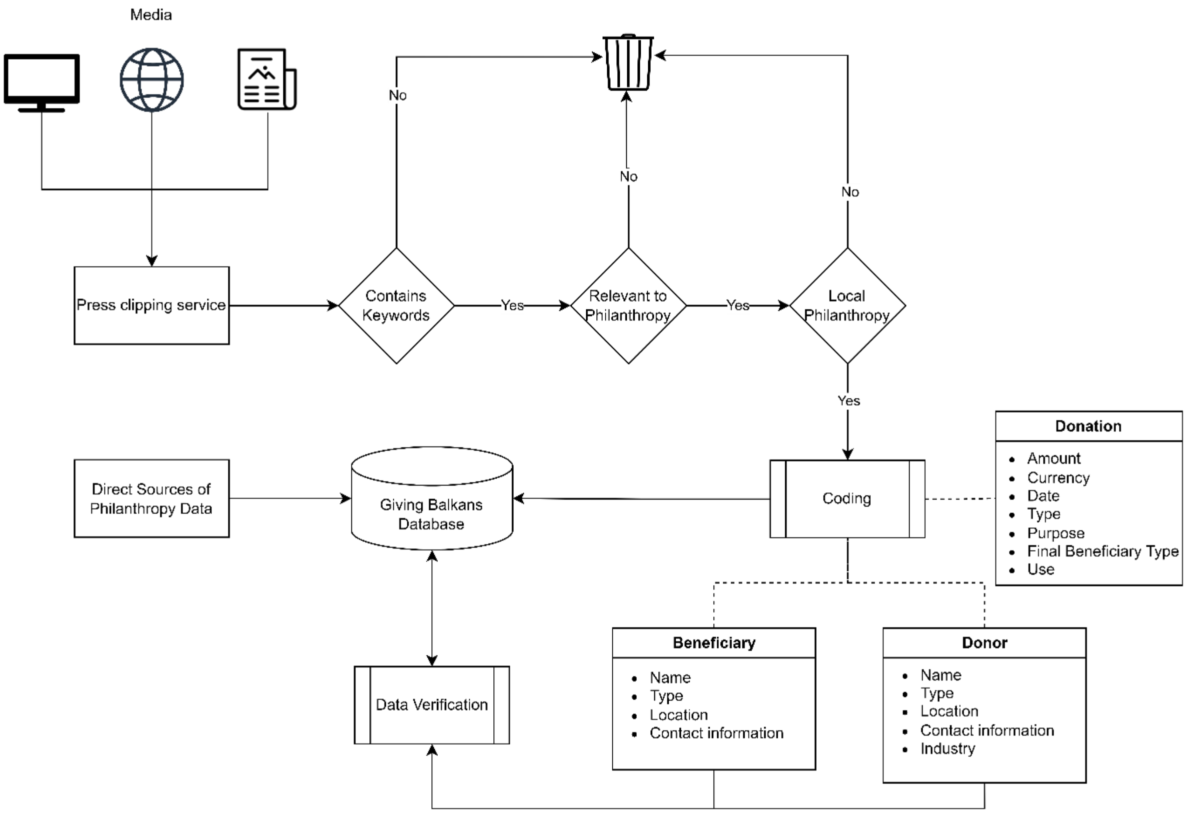

Figure 2. The process of data collection for the Giving Balkans database curated by Catalyst Balkans

While data collection from media reports yields an impressively detailed and useful philanthropy dataset, relying on media reports is likely to introduce bias toward larger, more visible donations, potentially undercounting smaller or less publicized giving. Empirical evidence from Serbia confirms that direct help to individuals is significantly more prevalent than volunteering for formal organizations (Radovanović 2019), indicating that a substantial layer of prosocial behavior remains uncaptured by media monitoring.

Timeframe

The timeframe is 2015 to 2022, a seven-year period for which data are available.

Methodology

We employ Social Network Analysis (SNA), based on graph theory, to quantify relationships and interactions in the dataset. By calculating metrics like centralization, density, and transitivity, we map the structure, connectivity, and possible structural weaknesses of these philanthropic networks.

First layer of the graph abstraction

First, we construct graphs for overlapping three-year periods (2015-2017, etc.). Entities become nodes, connected by directed edges representing donations. Donations missing donor or recipient information are excluded. Nodes are typed as donors (giving only), beneficiaries (receiving only), or intermediaries (both). This results in a directed graph, nearly bipartite (Jackson 2008) but complicated by intermediaries. This initial representation captures the raw flow of donations but presents analytical challenges. Edges are weighted by the number of donations between the pair. To align with social capital concepts focusing on established ties, we retain only edges with a weight > 1 (i.e., repeated donations within a three-year window) to focus the analysis on established, recurring relationships rather than single, potentially isolated giving acts. We emphasize that edge weights reflect the frequency of donations between a pair of actors, not the monetary value of those donations. The euro amount of each donation is recorded in the database but is deliberately excluded from all network metrics in this paper. This design choice follows from our framework: we are interested in the structure of relationships, not the size of resource flows.

Second layer of the graph abstraction

The initial graph structure, complicated by intermediaries, prevents the calculation of metrics like transitivity that require simpler network types. Therefore, we remove intermediary nodes to create a true bipartite graph. Removing these intermediary nodes simplifies the network for calculating certain metrics like transitivity. This choice means some specific pathways are not directly measured in the projected graphs, but it allows for a clearer analysis of direct donor-donor and beneficiary-beneficiary connections based on shared partners. This graph is then projected into two separate networks (Figure 3) – one containing only donors, the other only beneficiaries. In the donor network, an edge connects two donors if they gave to the same beneficiary. In the beneficiary network, an edge connects two beneficiaries if they received from the same donor. This clarifies relationships within each group. Projecting the network in this way allows us to apply standard network metrics designed for one-mode graphs (donor-only or beneficiary-only networks), enabling a clearer examination of clustering and centralization within these distinct actor groups.

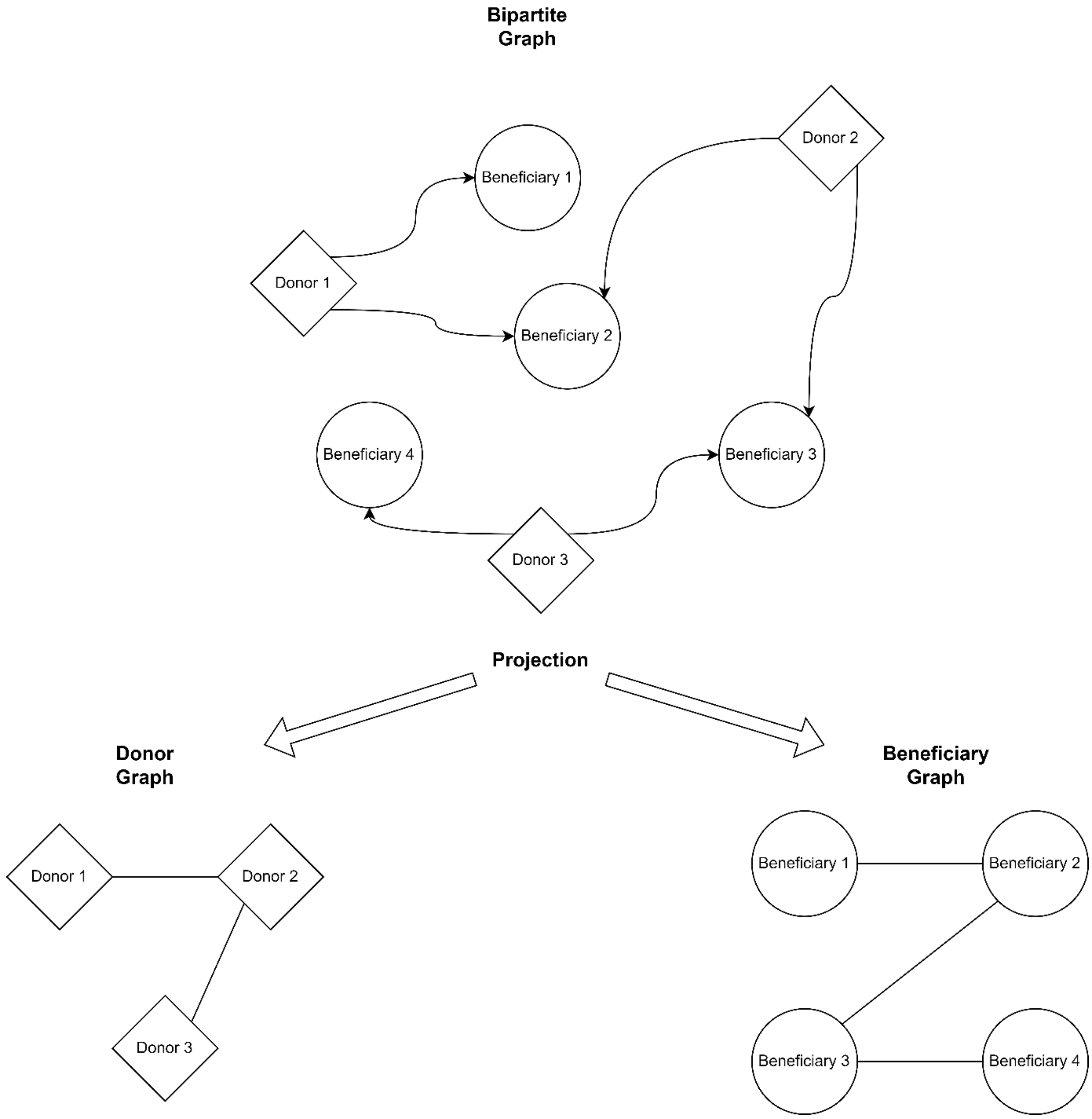

Figure 3. Projection of the bipartite network into two distinct donor and beneficiary networks.

Network metrics and their interpretation

Many network metrics are available. Selecting appropriate ones depends on the network structure. For metrics requiring an undirected graph, we converted the relevant projections accordingly. To quantify the structural properties of these networks, we selected several SNA metrics. These particular measures were chosen for their ability to reflect different aspects of network cohesion, integration, and hierarchy, which align well with the concepts central to Social Capital Theory. Table 1 provides definitions for the metrics used in this analysis, contextualized for philanthropic relationships.

Table 1. Network metrics as defined in the context of a philanthropy network. The network metrics' formal names are presented, along with a suggested common name.

Network metric	Common name	Definition

Network density	Relationships density	The ratio of actual shared donation/beneficiary relationships to the maximum possible. (range: 0,1)
Transitivity	Cliquishness	The measure of the network's tendency to form mutually connected triplets or 'closed triads.' This metric reflects the propensity for integrative and robust relational structures. (range: 0,1)
Degree centralization	Relationship Disparity	Reflects network centralization based on each actor's degree centrality, a measure of the proportion of actual to potential relationships. (range: 0,1)

Trends

We analysed temporal trends (2015-2022) in the SNA metrics using ARIMA time series models. Each metric served as the dependent variable, with year as the independent variable to detect a linear trend. Statistical significance of the trend was assessed by testing if the coefficient for the year term differed from zero ($p < 0.05$). This time series analysis complements the SNA by quantifying changes in network properties over the study period.

Code and reproducibility

The dataset used in this paper and all the code used to generate graphs, compute metrics, and create visualizations are available in an online repository https://osf.io/2g798. R programming language (Ihaka and Gentleman 1996) and igraph package (Csardi and Nepusz 2006) were used for network analysis. Data wrangling and date/time manipulation were handled using dplyr (Wickham et al. 2023) and lubridate (Grolemund and Wickham 2011).Visualizations were created with ggplot2 (Wickham 2016) utilizing functionalities from scales (Wickham, Pedersen, and Seidel 2023) and ggthemes (Arnold 2024). Time series modeling and diagnostics involved the forecast (Hyndman and Khandakar 2008), tseries (Trapletti and Hornik 2024), and lmtest (Zeileis and Hothorn 2002) packages.

Results

The ARIMA models produced trend estimates for each metric across the four projected networks. We evaluated hypothesis support based on whether the linear trend coefficient was statistically significant ($p < .05$) and in the predicted direction. Table 2 reports metric values at two-year time windows, with trend direction and significance levels.

Table 2. Summary of Network Metrics (2015–2022)

Network	Metric	2015–17	2017–19	2019–21	2020–22	Trend	p
Serbia							
Beneficiary	Density	.0025	.0044	.0056	.0054	+	< .001
	Transitivity	.921	.848	.826	.815	−	< .001
	Centralization	.052	.082	.142	.127	+	< .001
Donor	Density	.0021	.0022	.0034	.0040	+	< .001
	Transitivity	.774	.597	.688	.703		*ns*
	Centralization	.047	.056	.087	.113	+	< .001
Bosnia and Herz.							
Beneficiary	Density	.0034	.0367	.0450	.0359	+	< .001
	Transitivity	.891	.988	.934	.913		*ns*
	Centralization	.054	.120	.195	.254	+	< .001
Donor	Density	.0076	.0046	.0030	.0028	−	< .01

Network	Metric	2015–17	2017–19	2019–21	2020–22	Trend	p
	Transitivity	.948	.808	.616	.660	−	< .001
	Centralization	.060	.093	.078	.076		*ns*

Note. + *= positive trend;* − *= negative trend; ns = not significant. Significance determined by ARIMA time series models.*

Network Density (H1)

In Serbia, both donor and beneficiary networks exhibited significant increases in density over the study period (Figure 4, Table 2). The beneficiary network more than doubled in density, while the donor network nearly doubled despite intermediate fluctuations. These patterns indicate that philanthropic actors in Serbia became increasingly interconnected relative to network size, with a growing proportion of potential relationships being realized over time.

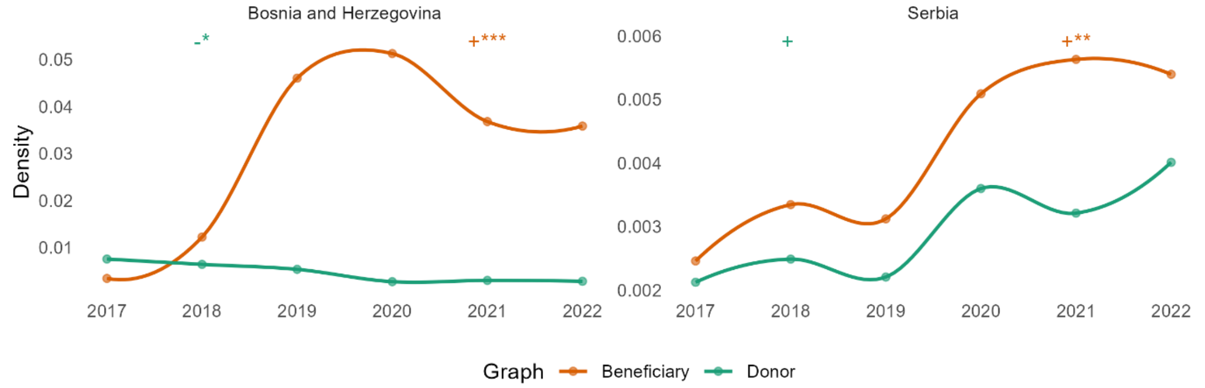

Figure 4. The density of the donor and beneficiary networks of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

*Note. + and – signs denote a positive or a negative trend *** p<0.0001, ** p<0.001, * p<0.01, . p<0.05*

Bosnia and Herzegovina presented a contrasting picture. The beneficiary network showed a dramatic increase in density suggesting substantial intensification of shared donor relationships among beneficiaries during the middle of the study period. However, the donor network moved in the opposite direction, with density declining significantly. This indicates that Bosnian donors became relatively less connected through shared beneficiaries over time, even as beneficiaries themselves became more interconnected.

Transitivity (H2)

Contrary to expectations, transitivity did not increase in any of the four networks examined (Figure 5). In Serbia, the beneficiary network maintained high absolute levels of transitivity throughout, yet exhibited a declining trend. The donor network showed considerable volatility with a sharp mid-period drop, though no overall trend emerged. Beneficiaries in Serbia became less likely over time to form closed triads based on shared donors, perhaps reflecting diversification in funding sources.

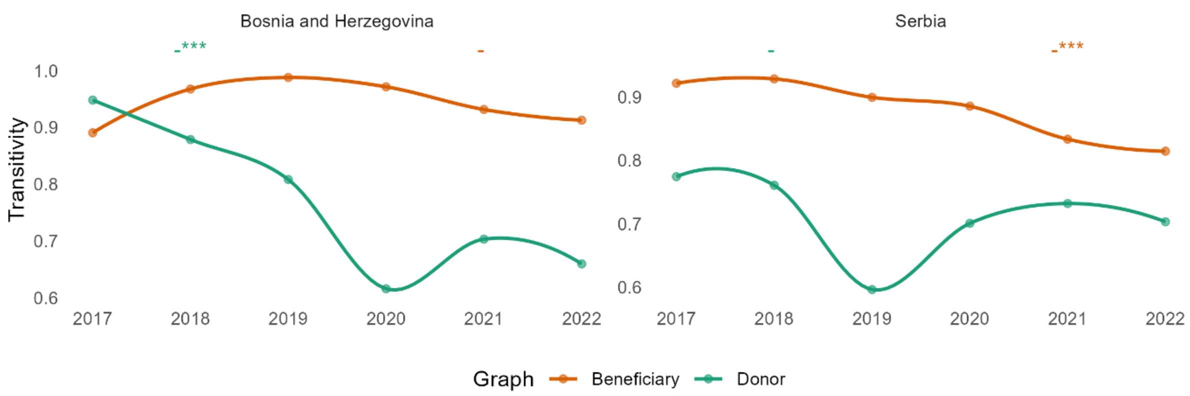

Figure 5. The transitivity of the donor and beneficiary networks of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

*Note. + and – signs denote a positive or a negative trend *** p<0.0001, ** p<0.001, * p<0.01, . p<0.05*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the beneficiary network maintained exceptionally high transitivity throughout the period, but without an upward trend, indicating stability rather than growth in clustering. More striking was the donor network, which showed a pronounced decline in transitivity. Starting with very high cliquishness, it dropped sharply mid-period and remained at reduced levels. Bosnian donors may be diversifying their giving portfolios or facing competitive pressures that discourage co-funding the same recipients.

Degree Centralization (H3)

The findings strongly supported increasing centralization in Serbia (Figure 6). Both networks showed marked upward trends, with the beneficiary network's centralization nearly tripling and the donor network's more than doubling over the study period. The acceleration in the latter half of the period was pronounced for donors, suggesting that giving patterns became increasingly dominated by actors connected to a wider, overlapping range of beneficiaries.

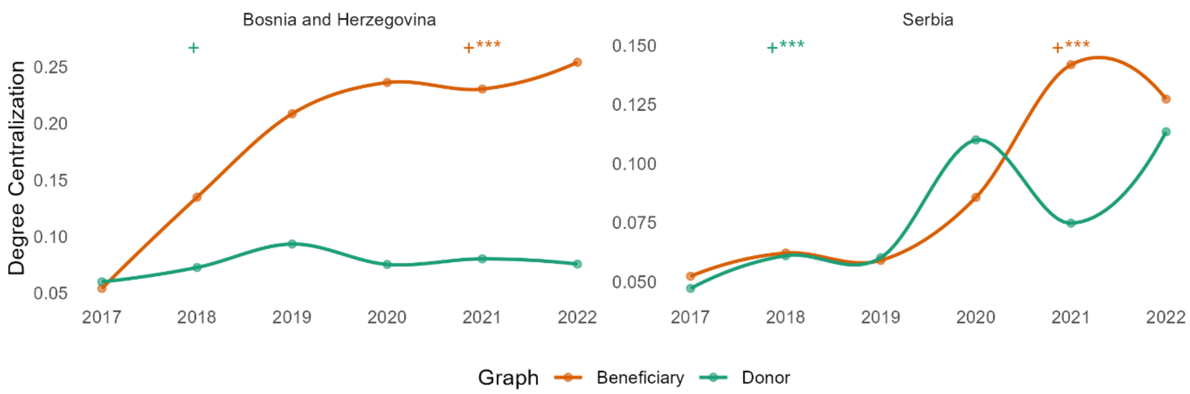

Figure 6. The degree centralization of the donor and beneficiary networks of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia

*Note. + and – signs denote a positive or a negative trend *** p<0.0001, ** p<0.001, * p<0.01, . p<0.05*

Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibited a split pattern. The beneficiary network displayed dramatic centralization, pointing to a rapidly growing hierarchy where a few beneficiaries became central hubs receiving support from many of the same donors. In contrast, the donor network showed no significant trend; while some concentration occurred mid-period, it subsequently declined and fluctuated, indicating no sustained movement toward relationship disparity among donors.

Discussion

While yearly reports suggest the two countries' philanthropy growth (Catalyst Balkans, annual reports), simple descriptive statistics reveal little about ecosystem development. Our network analysis provides a different perspective. The mixed support for our hypotheses indicates that network evolution is complex, likely influenced by varied factors across contexts, demanding a detailed view of regional philanthropy.

Read together, the three findings describe a coherent pattern: more connections (density rising in three of four networks), but no growth in tight collaborative clusters (transitivity flat or declining everywhere), and increasing concentration around a few hubs (centralization rising in three of four networks). The absence of rising transitivity matters as much as the rise in centralization: the sector is adding ties without building dense pockets of collaboration.

The complexity of network evolution is evident in the diverging trends for network density. While density significantly increased in both Serbian networks (donor and beneficiary) and among beneficiaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, suggesting greater interconnectedness relative to network size in these spheres, density among Bosnian donors showed a statistically significant decrease. This contrasting pattern, where connectivity increases in most areas but density among Bosnian donors falls, warrants explanation. The increases might reflect growing philanthropic activity or more efficient relationship building, whereas the decrease specifically among Bosnian donors could indicate factors such as donor withdrawal, a shift towards fewer, larger grants to shared beneficiaries (which would not increase density in the donor projection), or perhaps increasing reliance on intermediaries not captured in this projection. These patterns suggest that local philanthropic networks are expanding their relational infrastructure in ways that may widen the pathways for resource circulation as foreign aid withdraws.

The trends in transitivity (cliquishness) also reveal complex dynamics. Contrary to our hypothesis, no network showed a significant increase, highlighting that network evolution can follow varied paths beyond simple increases in local clustering (Easley and Kleinberg 2010). Instead, beneficiary transitivity significantly decreased in Serbia, while remaining high but without an upward trend in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This suggests that beneficiaries, particularly in Serbia, became less likely over time to form closed triads based on shared donors, perhaps indicating diversification in funding sources or less overlap within specific cause areas. Donor transitivity significantly decreased in Bosnia and Herzegovina and showed no increase in Serbia. This decreased donor clustering (sharing beneficiaries) aligns with interpretations suggesting that donors might be diversifying their giving portfolios or exploring new beneficiary groups as part of deliberate funding strategies, or perhaps facing heightened competition that discourages co-funding the same pool of recipients. The lack of increasing cliquishness overall suggests that dense, overlapping subgroup formation was not a dominant trend during this period. From a civil society diversity perspective, the lack of increasing clustering is not necessarily negative. While strong bonding capital within subgroups can deepen trust and collaboration, it can also create insular communities that exclude outsiders. A decrease in transitivity may indicate a sector that is diversifying its relationships rather than consolidating into closed circles.

Increasing network degree centralization (relationship disparity), indicating that connections became more concentrated around fewer central actors, was a prominent finding, supported significantly in three of the four networks analysed (both Serbian networks and the Bosnian beneficiary network). This suggests a growing concentration of influence and resource flow. While this trend was not statistically significant for Bosnian donors, the overall pattern points towards more hierarchical structures. This might stem from factors such as restricted civic space channelling resources to established players, or economic pressures favouring larger, more visible entities, potentially disadvantaging smaller or newer organizations.

Although our analysis is structural and does not identify nodes by name, the annual Catalyst Balkans country reports (Catalyst Balkans 2023b; 2023c) consistently identify a recurring set of large corporate donors (such as NIS and Telekom Srbija in Serbia) and a small group of high-visibility beneficiaries that capture a disproportionate share of giving (Fondacija Budi Human in Serbia, Pomozi.ba in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Herrold (2025) describes this professionalized tier from the inside, and Mikuš (2015) documents its distance from grassroots communities. The centralization we observe is consistent with the dominance of this identifiable layer of actors.

The strong trend towards centralization, particularly in the Serbian networks and the Bosnian beneficiary network, warrants a deeper contextual interpretation. Who are these central actors becoming the hubs of the philanthropic ecosystem? In this context, civil society faces a 'double challenge' of opposing an illiberal state while simultaneously contending with undemocratic, nationalist elements within the non-profit sector itself (Kostovicova 2006). While this centralization risks marginalizing smaller actors, Herrold (2025) offers a functional explanation for this structure, arguing that professionalized NGOs act as necessary bureaucratic shields that absorb donor requirements to protect and fund grassroots groups.

Unlike foreign institutional aid, which typically requires significant organizational capacity, professionalization, and competitive grant-writing expertise, locally-sourced philanthropy has lower barriers to entry and could serve as a more accessible funding pathway for smaller organizations. The observed centralization of local philanthropic networks is therefore particularly concerning: it suggests that established players increasingly capture the funding stream most realistically available to small CSOs.

This creates a 'Matthew effect' in philanthropy, where well-known, high-capacity organizations are best positioned to attract funding, further cementing their central role. Radovanović (2019) observes that the general population in Serbia engages far less with these formal organizations compared to informal direct help, creating a dynamic where formal networks remain the domain of a professionalized few. In contrast, smaller, grassroots organizations, which may be closer to marginalized communities and more innovative in their approaches, risk being pushed to the periphery, struggling for visibility and resources. Recent qualitative research confirms this structural divide, finding that while established, professionalized organizations possess the resources to maintain donor networks, younger and informal groups often rely on ad-hoc local solidarity but lack the strategic capacity for sustained constituency building (Vasiljević, Radovanović, and Nikolić 2025). This has implications for the diversity of issues addressed by the sector.

This network consolidation may also have different political meanings in the two countries. In Serbia, where concerns about democratic backsliding and the concentration of political and economic power are prominent, the centralization of philanthropy could inadvertently mirror and reinforce these broader societal trends. A philanthropic sector dominated by a few players may be less pluralistic and potentially more susceptible to political influence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its highly fragmented political system, the dramatic centralization among beneficiaries could be interpreted as a rational response from donors. They may gravitate towards a few trusted, country-wide or inter-entity actors as a way to navigate the complex administrative landscape, thereby maximizing their impact and minimizing transactional costs.

Such concentration can significantly affect philanthropic priorities and accessibility within the sector, raising concerns about power imbalances and the representation of diverse community needs. While potentially leading to more strategic or coordinated giving by core actors, this concentration risks marginalizing peripheral actors and narrowing the range of causes receiving substantial support.

From a social capital perspective, the findings present a mixed picture. The lack of increasing (and in some cases, decreasing) transitivity suggests that the formation of dense, collaborative clusters (cliquishness) was not strengthening over this period. Specifically, the decreasing beneficiary transitivity in Serbia might point towards weakening, rather than strengthening, bonding social capital (Putnam 2000) within certain beneficiary clusters defined by shared donors. Conversely, the decreasing donor transitivity (significant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but not increasing in Serbia) could reflect weaker collaborative capital or increased competition among donors. However, the strong trend towards increased centralization (especially among beneficiaries), while potentially indicating efficiency or strategic focus by key players, raises concerns. Increasing centralization often leads to core-periphery structures (Borgatti and Everett 2000). Concentrating ties around fewer actors could negatively impact bridging social capital across the broader sector if it limits opportunities for diverse connections and marginalizes peripheral organizations, potentially hindering overall network resilience and inclusivity. Although the underlying data record financial transactions, our analytical claims concern relational structure. The two are not equivalent, and a network can grow in connectivity while the volume of resources flowing through it stagnates or contracts (or vice versa). Readers interested in monetary trends will find them in the annual Catalyst Balkans reports. The contribution of the present study is specifically structural.

Centralization affects civil society's democratic functions. If smaller organizations, those often closest to marginalized communities and best positioned to serve as local ‘schools of democracy’ (Putnam 2000), are structurally excluded from philanthropic networks, the sector becomes less able to represent varied constituencies. The advantages of local philanthropy, lower barriers to entry, accountability to local constituencies, and relationships rooted in ongoing social ties, depend on network structures that distribute resources broadly. The observed centralization instead risks replicating patterns that made foreign aid problematic: a funding environment open mainly to organizations with existing capacity and visibility.

This case from the Western Balkans points to broader concerns. Social capital theory has typically been applied at the individual or community level, examining how interpersonal ties generate trust and collective action capacity. Our analysis shows the value of applying this framework at the organizational network level, where philanthropic relationships create infrastructure that shapes resource distribution throughout a sector. The pattern we observe, increasing density paired with increasing centralization and stable or declining transitivity, shows that network growth does not automatically translate into distributed social capital. A sector can become more connected while simultaneously concentrating those connections around fewer hubs. This challenges assumptions that expanding philanthropic activity simply strengthens civil society; the structure of that expansion matters as much as its volume. For theories of civil society development in post-socialist contexts, transitions from foreign to local funding sources are not simply about the amounts of money. The health and resilience of the philanthropic ecosystem depend on the relationships through which resources flow.

Future directions

If current trends continue, the philanthropic sectors in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina will likely consolidate further around a small number of central actors. This raises questions about the sector's capacity to absorb the functions previously supported by foreign aid. Will professionalized hubs redistribute resources to grassroots organizations, as Herrold (2025) suggests is possible? Or will peripheral actors find themselves increasingly excluded from both foreign and local funding streams? The ongoing civic mobilization in Serbia following the 2024-2025 protests (Vasović 2025) offers a natural experiment: mass engagement may generate new donors and beneficiaries outside established networks, disrupting centralization patterns, or existing hubs may capture this energy, reinforcing their centrality.

Future research should examine the actors occupying central and peripheral network positions through qualitative case studies. Such work could explore how these organizations operate, what drives them, and how they perceive the philanthropic field around them. Extending this network analysis to other Western Balkan countries in the Giving Balkans database would allow for comparisons of how different national contexts shape network evolution. Longitudinal tracking beyond 2022 will show whether centralization continues, levels off, or reverses as local philanthropy matures. Integrating analysis of informal giving practices, largely invisible to media-based data collection, would also deepen our understanding of solidarity economies in the region.

Implications

Foreign funding withdrawal does not have to accelerate centralization. Donors could build exit plans that emphasize developing local fundraising capacity rather than simply cutting off grants. Sudden withdrawal leaves organizations without the community relationships they need to survive independently. Donors who remain in the region might require grantees to seek multiple funding sources during their grant periods. They could also direct capacity-building support toward helping organizations mobilize local resources. Co-funding arrangements with local donors could demonstrate the shift from foreign to local support while building new network connections.

Governments that want to encourage a varied philanthropic sector should look at whether their current policies unintentionally push resources toward established organizations. Tax incentives that reward giving regardless of recipient tend to benefit large, well-known organizations disproportionately. Policymakers could explore tiered incentives that offer extra benefits for donations to smaller grassroots groups. Simplified registration and reporting requirements would lower barriers for grassroots groups to formalize and attract donors. Public matching fund programs that multiply local donations could make small-donor approaches workable for organizations that struggle to win large grants. Such programs may also be politically viable under governments that resist Western influence, since they channel support through domestic rather than foreign sources, making them a realistic focus for advocacy.

Infrastructure organizations should work to increase overall giving while also building network structures that spread resources more widely. This means creating platforms that help potential donors discover smaller, peripheral organizations. It also means promoting pooled funding mechanisms that spread risk and reach, and supporting collaborative projects between established and emerging organizations to build connecting relationships. Donor education could directly discuss the risks of concentrating giving in a few organizations. Such efforts would help funders understand how their individual decisions combine to produce sector-wide centralization

Conclusion

Our analysis of Western Balkan philanthropic networks (2015-2022) shows a clear move towards centralization, with activity concentrating around fewer actors. While potentially indicating more targeted giving, this trend also suggests a narrowing of the philanthropic field. This concentration means that while core actors might become more efficient or strategic, the overall ecosystem could become less diverse and potentially less resilient if dependent on too few central nodes. The growing visibility of a few central actors puts diversity and inclusion at risk, making it harder for smaller or newer initiatives to gain traction.

Significant differences in network density between countries highlight the influence of distinct national contexts (Salamon and Anheier 1998). While overall centralization is increasing, local dynamics vary. This underscores the need for country-specific approaches to support philanthropy. Future work should explore ways to foster a more inclusive and diverse sector, ensuring its continued role in civil society throughout the Western Balkans. For future research, an important next step is to move beyond this structural analysis and conduct qualitative case studies of the central and peripheral actors identified. Understanding their strategies, motivations, and perceptions would provide the necessary texture to explain why these network structures are emerging and what their lived consequences are for civil society organizations on the ground.

This paper offers a basis for designing strategies aligned with local cultures and requirements, and for encouraging more effective giving. By analysing the changing structure of philanthropy in the Western Balkans, it contributes to more informed and culturally attuned practices suited to the region's specific conditions.

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The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

While preparing this paper, the author used the Claude Sonnet 3.7 model and Grammarly to improve the language. Claude Sonnet 3.7 was also used to generate some of the code used in the analysis. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the publication's content.

Data availability statement

The data and the code for replication are available in a public online repository https://osf.io/2g798

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