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Sida Decentralised Evaluation

Nordic Consulting Group Consortium

Evaluation of the European Stability Initiative (ESI) Project 2015-2021

Final Report

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**Final Report
November 2021**

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The views and interpretations expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida.

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Table of contents

Table of contents	1
Abbreviations and Acronyms	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
1.1 Evaluation Object.....	7
1.2 Evaluation Scope	8
1.3 Evaluation Purpose.....	8
1.4 Evaluation Ethics.....	9
1.5 Management of the Evaluation.....	9
2 Evaluation Approach and Methodology.....	10
3 Findings	11
3.1 Relevance.....	11
3.2 Coherence.....	13
3.3 Effectiveness.....	14
3.4 Efficiency	17
3.5 Impact and Sustainability.....	21
4 Conclusions	22
4.1 Relevance.....	22
4.2 Coherence.....	22
4.3 Effectiveness.....	23
4.4 Efficiency	23
4.5 Lessons Learned.....	23
5 Recommendations	25
5.1 Recommendations for Sida	25
5.2 Headline	25
6 Annexes	28
6.1 Annex A: Evaluation Matrix	28
6.2 Annex B: List of Key Documentation.....	34

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ESI	European Stability Initiative
Eurolatin Department	Sida's Department for Europe and Latin America at Sida Headquarters
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
OECD DAC	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
QA	Quality Assurance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
ToC	Theory of Change
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group

Executive Summary

The object of the evaluation is support provided by Sida to the European Stability Initiative (ESI), a ‘non-profit association with a focus on human rights and democracy in Europe.’¹

Sida and ESI entered into an agreement on an initial project between 2015 and 2017. The project has been amended 4 times with the current agreement period through June 2022. The total budget allocation is 26,872,896 SEK, financed through the *Results Strategy for Sweden’s Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey 2014-2020*. ESI aims to influence and improve EU policy towards the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Turkey, with the intent of impacting on public debates and provide concrete innovative ideas to policy makers in areas that may affect the region’s stability and development.

The evaluation covers the intervention in its entirety, including the entire project period. The purpose is *to help Sida and ESI assess the progress of the intervention and to learn what works well and less well* and to provide inputs to assist Sida in making ‘*a decision on whether the intervention shall receive continued funding or not.*’² The evaluation approach was implemented using the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) *Norms and Standards*.³ The evaluation was commissioned by Sida’s Department for Europe and Latin America (Unit for the Western Balkans, Turkey and Latin America). The intended user(s) are Sida’s Eurolatin Department and ESI.

This evaluation focused on the project’s overall theory of change, as revised from time-to-time during implementation. Analysis of and discussions about ESI’s theory of change were initially undertaken during the inception phase and as the evaluation progressed. The analysis is specifically visible in the Evaluation Questions and Evaluation Matrix, which were framed to address the theory of change. The evaluation approach was to analyse the data from the evaluation using Quirkos, with subsequent refinements to the analysis based on reflection in the evaluation team.

The evaluation was undertaken with a phased approach. The *inception phase* was critical to the formulation of the evaluation team’s understanding of the project and Terms of Reference requirements and to the detailed planning of the evaluation. Products included analysis of ESI’s theory of change; stakeholder mapping; a detailed risk analysis; finalising the approach and methodology, including gender equality and utility/usefulness; analytical framework development, including evaluation question refinement, evaluation matrix development, detailed specification of data collection methods and defining the evaluation’s approach to triangulation of data; finalising the proposed structure of the evaluation report and finalising the evaluation implementation plan. The *field research phase* involved document analysis and key informant interviews. The *synthesis and reporting phase* involved analysis of the primary and secondary data gathered in the field research phase against the evaluation

questions and evaluation matrix.

The evaluation found this to be a particularly relevant initiative, notably in relation to Sida's strategic priorities and perspectives (as framed in the *Results Strategy for Sweden's Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey 2014-2020*), EU accession priorities and policy, national priorities and stakeholder needs and priorities. ESI plays a positive and creative role in providing evidence-based contributions to policy debates and in assisting government representatives to understand and influence policy questions and directions. This is true of priorities related to EU enlargement, and beyond this to the wider priorities of the EU and EU Member States in their relationships with neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe. Political and foreign ministry representatives in a number of countries communicate with and take advice from ESI and recognise the breadth of knowledge and independence of the organisation. This is specifically visible in Swedish agencies where ESI contributes to strategic and policy thinking, although it is not as apparent in Swedish Embassies in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. ESI's work is relevant to and visible in the media and with civil society organisations. Civil society in particular notes the relevance of content and value in how policy dialogue is influenced by ESI. Human rights cut across ESI's work, notably in relation to democracy and the rule of law in the rights of refugees and political prisoners, and in terms of poverty where this intersects with refugee rights and the economic impacts of the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. There is insufficient emphasis in ESI's work on Sweden's fundamental focus on gender equality.

ESI establishes and maintains contacts with a range of activists and civil society organisations, and these contacts are of benefit to both ESI and the other party. The evaluation did not, however, find a deep connectedness with civil society in the Western Balkans, Turkey and the Eastern Neighbourhood, with civil society pointing to few synergies and limited collaboration.

The evaluation found ESI to be effective, with its effectiveness directly impacted by the concrete policy ideas that ESI puts forward. The evaluation found significant credibility for ESI and its innovative approach, substantive arguments, evidence-based approach and 'action orientation.' While this effectiveness is in a broad range of areas, it is worth mentioning here the specific role played on the EU-Turkey migrant deal, in relation to corruption through the *caviar diplomacy* report and advocacy and on the protection of the rule of law in Poland. ESI also plays an important role in a broad and important range of topics relevant to the relationship between the EU, EU Member States and the Western Balkans, including annual progress reports, the two-step accession process proposal, visa liberalisation, access for workers to the EU, accession and reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the name change and accession priorities in North Macedonia.

ESI's management systems work well and provide strategic direction and organisational cohesion. This is particularly visible in the way the organisation develops its areas of priority and focus over time, through internal interactions, and how papers are developed and revised in an iterative process within the organisation. Less effective is how reporting contributes to an understanding of the relationship

between Sida support and the work of ESI. ESI has a theory of change, but the concept of a theory of change does not permeate ESI's work nor provide the organisation with a clear *expression* of its strategic footing. ESI has a clear and well-defined understanding of its context, but this is not framed clearly against Sida and Swedish strategies, priorities and policies, and a clear approach to what its activities will focus on and what they are intended to achieve. ESI's theory of change does not permeate its proposal writing and reporting to Sida. Nor does it strongly influence ESI's interactions with the donor. It gives no *specific* consideration to Sida's defined areas of cross-cutting importance: poverty, environment, and gender equality; neither directly as areas of focus nor through a cross-cutting focus of defined priority areas. The evaluation did not find a need for greater control of the approach and work of ESI but did find insufficient care on the part of ESI for the needs of the donor – particularly in ensuring the donor has sufficient information to be confident in the value of contributions and how they are contributing to Sweden's strategic priorities. Current approaches do not *share the story* of what ESI is doing and what ESI is achieving in an effective way, neither for the benefit of ESI nor for the needs of the donor.

There are indications of impact and sustainability in the work of ESI on migrants, not just in the EU-Turkey deal but in how this type of agreement offers potential resolutions in other places. The approach used in relation to corruption in Azerbaijan also provides a replicable pathway in its use of strong evidence and well-focused advocacy with civil society, the media and political organisations. There are a range of impact possibilities in ESI's work in the Balkans.

Recommendations for Sida

1. It is recommended that Sida continue providing funding to ESI. Included with this funding should be a requirement for ESI to be more aware of the intersection of its priorities and Sweden's, and that ESI be more visibly responsive to Sida's perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment.
2. To assist with this, Sida can provide clearer guidelines, and possibly assistance, to ESI on Sida's requirements in relation to gender equality, poverty and the environment.
3. Sida can discuss with ESI the possibility of additional funding for administrative (specifically reporting) assistance. These discussions should not overly burdening ESI with the administration but assist with ensuring a more informative narrative on outcome-level results being achieved, including qualitative and quantitative evidence of these results.
4. Sida can support and encourage improved communication and linkages between ESI and CSOs active in the Western Balkans and Turkey that are focused on gender equality, poverty and the environment, towards supporting each other in policy research and argumentation and building strategic alliances on issues of shared concern.

Recommendations for ESI

5. Linked to Recommendations 3, ESI should engage in discussions with Sida on the possibility of additional funding for reporting assistance, not to stress administrative processes per se, but to aid in formulating a stronger reporting regime (internally and to Sida) that provides clear evidence of and narrative about the outcomes of ESI's work. This includes:

- Refinement of and a more consistently expressed theory of change for ESI.
- Activity reporting – a matrix of thematic areas, geographical focus and activities (papers, advocacy, capacity-building) is an effective approach for consideration. This could be balanced with narrative descriptions of specific activities.
- Output reporting – similarly, the policy and strategy proposal outputs of the above activities should be detailed, possibly in a similar matrix approach. The focus should be on the results of the activities, including gender analysis.
- Outcome reporting – the greatest importance should be placed here, providing analysis and examples of where the above activities and outputs are actually changing policy, strategy and/or practice, inclusive of gender impact analysis.
- Overall, ESI's narrative does not currently ensure Sida's strategic frameworks (strategy documents as well as perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment) are addressed. ESI planning and reporting do not show how these perspectives are considered in planning, are part of activities, and are visible in policy and strategy change at the core of ESI's intended outcomes.

6. ESI should draw a clear link in its planning and reporting documentation to Sweden's strategic frameworks and its perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment. This does not intend to draw ESI's focus in line with the donor's agenda, but rather to:

- Ensure ESI is aware of Sweden's underlying priorities in relation to democracy, human rights, gender equality and poverty, as well as the environment.
- Ensure ESI considers and plans how its work can contribute to addressing these.
- Ensure that where ESI's work is clearly focused on and is contributing to addressing these this is clear in ESI documentation (particularly but not limited to reporting to the donor).

7. ESI can engage more intentionally with civil society organisations focusing on human rights, gender equality, environment and/or democratisation as a way of strengthening the knowledge and approach of ESI and that of these potential partners, as well as improving coordination and thus potentially effectiveness in achieving shared aims.

Introduction

According to the Terms of Reference for this assignment, ‘EU membership is a prospect for several of the Western Balkan countries. The road towards EU accession consists of negotiations and dialogue between relevant key EU stakeholders and the governments of countries aspiring to become EU member states. Such dialogues and negotiations revolve around reforms and standards that the EU has set out as requirements for eventually acquiring membership status. The road towards EU enlargement is marked by challenges both within the EU, as well as within the countries aspiring to become member countries. While the Western Balkan countries continue to progress towards EU accession – at different paces – several challenges to democracy and the rule of law persist, such as corruption, flaws in the judicial system, as well as organised crime.’⁴

The Terms of Reference also note that in the Western Balkans ‘Sweden is present with bilateral as well as regional programs through the *Results Strategy for Sweden’s Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey 2014-2021*.’⁵

1.1 EVALUATION OBJECT

The object of the evaluation is support provided by Sida to the European Stability Initiative (ESI), a ‘non-profit association with a focus on human rights and democracy in Europe.’⁶ According to its website

‘ESI is a non-profit policy and research institute. Thanks to our network of strategic partners and supporters, we are able to offer our analysis and services free of charge. For many years the Government of Sweden (first the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since 2015 the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) has been supporting our work on South East Europe and Turkey, asylum policy and the rule of law in the EU.’⁷

Sida and ESI entered into an agreement on an initial project that would last from 2015 to 2017. The project has been amended four times with the current agreement including an activity period through to December 2021 and an agreement period through to June 2022 (Amendment 4). Following discussions in the inception phase, this last agreement is also included in the evaluation. This brings the total budget allocation to 26,872,896 SEK, financed through the *Results Strategy for Sweden’s Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey 2014-2020*.

The contribution aims to support achieving the following goals of the Results Strategy:

- Improved conditions for democratic accountability to the people and participation in political processes, including the promotion of free elections.
- Partner countries better fulfil their international and national commitments on human rights, gender equality (including the EU's strategy for equality between women and men) and non-discrimination.
- Increased trust and reconciliation between parties in and between countries.

In the original application (Project period: 2015-2017), the strategic goals of the project were formulated as follows:

- To influence and improve EU policy to bring about more effective convergence and integration in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the Eastern neighbourhood; to have visible impact on public debates and help policy makers with innovative ideas and a better understanding of how to motivate reforms in a strategic region of Europe.
- To develop networks and skills of young policy analysts in the regions committed to empirical research, integrated into advocacy efforts of this project, with a special focus on EU accession and empirical research on issues of economic convergence.

In the second amendment of the project (Project period: 2018-2020), the goals were formulated as follows:

- With this project ESI aims to improve EU policy towards the Western Balkans and Turkey. We want to have a visible impact on public debates and over concrete innovative ideas to policy makers in core areas that determine the stability and evolution in this region.’⁸

These goals have remained the same in subsequent agreements.

1.2 EVALUATION SCOPE

The evaluation covers the intervention in its entirety, including the entire project period (2015-2021).⁹

1.3 EVALUATION PURPOSE

The project has been ongoing since 2015, including with the extensions/ amendments noted above, and has not previously been evaluated. According to the Terms of Reference, ‘Sida considers ESI to be a relevant and important actor working for reform in the area of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the EU. However, Sida assesses that there are several areas where ESI could improve the project design and its implementation, particularly in the following areas:

- RBM (logical results-chain, outcome and impact-level results).
- Integrating relevant perspectives for development effectiveness: multi-

dimensional poverty analysis (MDPA), human rights-based approach (HRBA), a gender equality perspective, a conflict perspective, as well as an environment and climate perspective.

- Intervention ownership: connectedness to the Western Balkan region, and in particular civil society.¹⁰

These areas are specifically covered in the evaluation's analytical framework.

The evaluation is *intended to help Sida and ESI assess the progress of the intervention and to learn what works well and less well* and provides inputs to assist Sida in making 'a decision on whether the intervention shall receive continued funding or not.'¹¹ As well, the evaluation formulates recommendations on 'how ESI's management team can improve and adjust implementation.'¹²

1.4 EVALUATION ETHICS

The evaluation approach was implemented using the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) *Norms and Standards*.¹³ More detail on this is provided in *Annex E: Evaluation ethics, principles and standards*.

1.5 MANAGEMENT OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was commissioned by Sida's Department for Europe and Latin America (Unit for the Western Balkans, Turkey and Latin America). The intended user(s) are Sida's Eurolatin Department and ESI.

2 Evaluation Approach and Methodology

The evaluation took a theory-based approach for its analysis.

‘This approach is based on careful articulation of the programme theory or models and the use of these theories/models as a guiding framework for evaluation. It sets out the theoretical assumptions underlying an intervention in terms of a phased sequence of causes and effects—a program theory.’¹⁴

In terms of this evaluation, the focus was on the project’s overall theory of change, as revised from time to time during implementation. Analysis of and discussions about ESI’s theory of change were initially undertaken during the inception phase and then as the evaluation progressed. The analysis is specifically visible in the Evaluation Questions and the Evaluation Matrix, which were framed to address the ToC.

The evaluation was undertaken with a phased approach:

A detailed evaluation plan was prepared and agreed, via an inception report. The ***inception phase*** was critical to the formulation of the evaluation team’s understanding of the project and the requirements of the ToR and to the detailed planning of the evaluation. Products of the inception phase included the mentioned analysis of the ToC, both to understand the project’s design and implementation and to contribute to the evaluation’s analytical framework; stakeholder mapping; a detailed risk analysis; finalising the approach and methodology, including - gender equality and utility/usefulness; analytical framework development, including - evaluation question refinement, evaluation matrix development, detailed specification of data collection methods and defining the evaluation’s approach to triangulation of data; finalising the proposed structure of the evaluation report and finalising the evaluation implementation plan.

Field research phase. The field research phase involved document analysis and key informant interviews. Three key types of documents were analysed by the evaluation team – intervention design documents (agreements with Sweden), intervention reports (to Sweden) and intervention products (publications and similar). Key informant interviews were undertaken with ESI staff Sida representatives, policymakers, media, activists, CSO representatives and young analysts/ ESI interns.

The ***synthesis and reporting phase*** involved analysis of the primary and secondary data gathered in the field research phase against the Evaluation Questions and Evaluation Matrix. The evaluation team undertook analysis of data using the Quirkos qualitative analysis tool, with subsequent refinements to the analysis based on feedback from and reflection in the evaluation team. The product of this phase was the evaluation report (this document).

3 Findings

The work of the evaluation was framed, initially and largely, by the assignment's Terms of Reference, but also key ESI documentation (funding proposals and reports to the donor). Additional to these core documents were inception phase discussions that provided clarity and detail.

3.1 RELEVANCE

The evaluation found ESI to be a particularly relevant initiative. The evaluation assessed relevance in relation to EU Accession priorities/policy, Sida strategic priorities and perspectives (framed by the three above-mentioned areas of *Results Strategy for Sweden's Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey 2014-2020*), national priorities, stakeholder needs and priorities, while considering the potentially different access, needs and priorities of diverse women and men.

The evaluation found a breadth of evidence supporting the positive and creative role played by ESI in evidence-based contributions to policy debates and in assisting government representatives (at the national level and/ or in EU Member State foreign policy agencies) to understand and influence policy questions and directions. This theme is prevalent in funding proposals ('To influence and improve EU policy ...; to have visible impact on public debates and help policy makers with innovative ideas and a better understanding of how to motivate reforms in a strategic region of Europe,¹⁵ 'improve EU policy towards the Western Balkans and Turkey. We want to have a visible impact on public debates ...'¹⁶ and 'Democracy and the rule of law in the EU and its periphery and the EU accession process.'¹⁷ It is also prevalent in the actual publicised work of ESI (its core product). What is most clear is the relevance of the work of ESI to the priorities of EU enlargement (for the EU itself, for EU Member States and for the countries of the Western Balkans wishing to accede to the EU). However, this goes beyond EU enlargement per se, to the wider priorities of the EU and EU Member States in their relationships with neighbouring countries in eastern Europe.

In this context, specifically, the evaluation found contributions to policy and policy discussions on:

- Reform of the European Commission's reporting on the Western Balkans and Turkey. The structural and content changes to EU Progress Reports is a particularly good example of how ESI's approaches are relevant – based on a clear picture of the shortcomings of the annual reporting of candidate countries to the EU and a similarly clear picture of what practical improvements could be made.¹⁸ These ideas were shared over an extended

period, in a variety of settings, ensuring a range of stakeholders could understand the issue and consider potential resolutions.

- The EU-Turkey statement in 2016.¹⁹ The work done by ESI on the EU-Turkey Statement was of significance to the basic human needs of refugees and matters of importance to the EU, EU Member States and Turkey in contributing to an evidence-based, balanced approach to the flow of refugees into and out of Turkey.²⁰
- The proposal on a common market in the Western Balkans.
- The opening of the EU Single Market to the Western Balkans.
- Visa liberalisation for the Western Balkans.
- Reviving the accession process for the Western Balkans and a noted effectiveness in explaining the background of the situation in the Western Balkans to EU and Member State policy makers.
- A number of reform and EU accession-related discussions relevant to Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Work on the name change for North Macedonia.
- Advocacy for multi-ethnic states and opposition to ethnic border changes between Kosovo and Serbia.
- Corruption in Azerbaijan, the effectiveness of the Council of Europe and pan-European human rights institutions (Caviar Diplomacy).²¹ This ongoing story has engaged a wide range of actors (political, media, civil society) in many countries.
- The rule of law in Poland, together with judicial reform.
- Knowledge of and engagement discussion which include human values at the core (human rights, asylum policies, migration policies and the rights of refugees, political prisoners, media freedoms).

In its field enquiry (interviews), the evaluation found detailed evidence of inputs into strategy thinking by Swedish agencies – ESI has been involved on many occasions in strategy thinking sessions with Swedish Embassy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) representatives, offering knowledge, perspective and policy thinking. The sessions provide well-considered analysis, feedback on policy settings and potential priorities in policy and development cooperation. However, the evaluation found little evidence of relevance to and work with Swedish Embassies in the countries of the Western Balkans/ Eastern Europe.

Political officials and foreign ministry representatives in a range of European countries in the Western Balkans and more widely communicate regularly and take advice from ESI, recognising the quality of ESI's research, its independence, its breadth of knowledge and an ability to communicate relevant ideas in easily digestible forms (clear writing; clearly expressed arguments; clear, concrete proposals). One phrase from the evaluation's field work that particularly resonates was that interactions with ESI were 'important in developing our thinking and our own work.'

The evaluation found relevance for the media in its interactions with ESI, although there is less confidence in this finding as only a small percentage of proposed media representatives elected to be interviewed by the evaluation team. What is visible is the

use of ESI papers in the media, for opening a topic, following up on a topic, or for providing the basis for requesting and undertaking an interview with a relevant actor.

The evaluation's findings in terms of ESI's relationship with local civil society were mixed. There is consistently strong support for the relevance of the content of ESI's agenda and value in the way policy dialogue is influenced by ESI's work. There is less strong support for ESI's engagement with local actors (individuals, civil society organisations (CSOs)). ESI does interact with and listen to civil society – the evaluation found systems for drawing on local knowledge and expertise in its research processes. However, collaboration and joint work on shared aims is less visible, as is attribution of the results of these interactions.

Human rights cut across ESI's work and are visible in a wide range of ESI papers, proposals and commentary. This is particularly visible in relation to the fundamental rights of refugees, as well as political prisoners. Poverty is visible in cross-cutting ways in many discussions, and while particularly notable with refugees, there is also relevance in ESI's advocacy for Western Balkan access to the European common market, proposals for a free market in the Balkans, and in terms of the impact EU accession would have on the poor.

Poverty too cuts across ESI's analysis and policy proposal thinking. There is however no mention of nor related intention to focus on Sida's multi-dimensional poverty analysis approach nor analysis of the intersection of gender and poverty.²² Discussions are more focused on the intersection of poverty with democracy, the rule of law and EU accession.

More recently, a focus on the environment can be found more readily. Work is being done that explores how the EU's Environmental Acquis can lead to alignment overall between Western Balkan states and the EU, and there is a current emphasis on alternative energy as a tool to promote economic development and peace.

What is missing is sufficient, visible emphasis on Sweden's defined priority area of gender equality; a specific focus on 'Partner countries better fulfil their international and national commitments on human rights, *gender equality (including the EU's strategy for equality between women and men)* and non-discrimination'²³ is not sufficiently visible. ESI documentation is largely silent on gender equality. There is no mention of the women, peace and security agenda, for example,²⁴ particularly and specifically relevant in the geography where ESI operates. There is some discussion of where gender intersects with the human rights of migrants/refugees, such as gender-disaggregated data on women and men in refugee camps; and the differing reasons women and men have for migrating. The evaluation found focus on democracy, the rule of law and human rights, with gender equality addressed from time-to-time where it intersects in these areas. There is, however, little beyond this.

3.2 COHERENCE

The evaluation was specifically tasked with ascertaining the extent of ESI's connectedness with civil society. While there is no doubt that ESI establishes and maintains contacts with a range of activists and civil society organisations, and that

these contacts are of benefit to both ESI and the other party, the evaluation did not find a deep connectedness with civil society in the Western Balkans, Turkey and the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Civil society:

- ‘Sees’ ESI and recognises its work.
- Recognises the relevance of the topics on which ESI engages.
- Acknowledges the influence ESI papers and advocacy have on their own thinking and work, as well as the importance to an organisation when it can quote from a well-researched report from a respected organisation.
- Discusses the topics in detail, and the importance of ESI’s perspectives and arguments (and their disagreements with some of these arguments, if not their intent).
- Acknowledges the impact ESI has had on visa liberalisation, the migrant crisis, EU accession, corruption, the rule of law and other issues.
- Expresses support for the solidarity provided by ESI when addressing difficult political and human right’s issues.

However, the evaluation found a range of civil society organisations unable to point to any significant synergies and collaboration and only limited cooperation in activities. Specifically, this included no collaboration with women’s rights civil society organisations funded by Sida to engage in bringing a gender perspective into the EU Accession process, despite numerous areas of potential for cooperation. The evaluation found a desire for greater synergy, and *partnership*.

3.3 EFFECTIVENESS

If we consider that the effectiveness of a think tank is measured in its policy proposals being translated into policy/ action and that it is being listened to, the evaluation found ESI to be effective. This effectiveness is directly impacted by the concrete policy ideas and by the substantive arguments (with statistics/data) that ESI puts forward. The evaluation found significant credibility for ESI and for its approach, based on concrete, innovative policy ideas and measures, substantive arguments, an evidence-based approach and an ‘action orientation.’ There is, not surprisingly, a direct correlation between the discussion in the Relevance chapter and ESI’s effectiveness.

The narrative below provides discussion on the areas of greatest effectiveness.

The EU-Turkey migrant deal. The EU-Turkey deal on migration is a significant achievement for ESI. The model which was proposed, and accepted, was compliant with human rights law and was humane, and was practically applied. Moreover, it is a recognised success in terms of EU migration policy and for ESI and is able to be modified in other specific situations - it is currently being discussed as having potential at the border between France and the UK and the border between Poland and Belarus. ESI continues to impact on the debate and discussions around migrant policy in the EU, having success in influencing these discussions based around the thoughtful and effective proposal done between the EU and Turkey.

Azerbaijan and ‘caviar diplomacy’. Possibly ESI’s best known work, Caviar Diplomacy addresses Azerbaijan’s use of corruption (largely through gifts of caviar and champagne) to ensure a better international discussion on its approach to human rights. ESI made use of a range of local sources, building evidence and drawing together analysis that, through the report, influenced a number of events and subsequent changes in European institutions. (Caviar Diplomacy²⁵)

Poland and protection of the rule of law (addressing executive control of the Courts and the Disciplinary Chamber). ESI has worked in detail on strategy, briefing papers, legal opinions, public messaging.

North Macedonia. The name change process for North Macedonia, a difficult and politically fraught process, included inputs from and the influence of ESI in framing the debate and resolutions. Further, the name issue impacted on North Macedonia’s EU accession agenda, and ESI contributed effective arguments for disconnecting the two issues.

EU Accession. A number of issues and some results related to EU accession and the (related) formal relationship between the EU and Western Balkans states are important to mention. The evaluation found evidence of support for the ESI approach even where policy has not or is not changing, i.e., in the contributions being made to keeping the accession focus for the Balkans, together with a related broad range of policy considerations on the agenda of political leadership across the EU and in the Balkans. Important contributions include:

- *The annual EU Progress Report process.* The Progress Reports are also a recognised achievement of ESI. Through the process of dialogue with relevant EU and Member State representatives and writing subsequent, related reports, the process and content of the annual Progress Reports from EU accession Candidate countries was modified. The evaluation found significant support for the revised process and products.
- The two-step accession process (1 – joining the Single Market and 2 – full accession) is not a reality but is being discussed in relevant circles as a realistic approach to unfreezing accession processes for Western Balkans states. (Hamster at the Wheel²⁶)
- Visa liberalisation, noted as being based on substantive arguments and advocacy. (After Maidan²⁷)
- The shifting of asylum approaches to legal migration approaches for workers from the Western Balkans.
- Using the EU accession process (and Membership application) in addressing aspects of reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (The First Circle of Hell²⁸ and Abandon Cliches²⁹)
- The provision of effective arguments against the concept of an exchange of territories in relation to Kosovo/ Serbia.

While relatively small points, the evaluation also found the regular and strong presence of ESI in the media and the style of writing and the language usage of ESI reports all contributed to effectiveness.

Young policy analysts³⁰

The original funding proposal included development of ‘networks and skills of young policy analysts in the regions committed to empirical research, integrated into advocacy efforts of this project.’ This component of ESI’s work continued through 2017. The evaluation found a process of development for those engaged as young analysts, a process of teaching the young analysts the ESI approach to research, writing and advocacy. ESI organised capacity-building seminars³¹ with the aim of generating domestic capacity for policy-oriented research, to ‘develop networks and skills of young policy analysts in the regions committed to empirical research, integrated into advocacy efforts of this project, with a special focus on EU accession and empirical research on issues of economic convergence.’³² The seminars intended to bring people together and provide them with training in how to operate successfully (conducting, structuring, managing and safeguarding research and drafting accessible, compelling reports). The seminars led to a junior fellowship programme, based on competitive applications including writing and an interview. During its history, ESI received 115 applications for junior fellowships and engaged 15 young analysts from Central and South-eastern Europe, Turkey and the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Those young people engaged as ‘young analysts’ or ‘interns’ welcomed their engagement and this approach. Findings included the importance of the programme in developing their skills in reading/ research, analysis (such as fact checking material they read), writing with a focus on use of evidence and on the readability of what is written. Interns also acknowledge the growth of their experience in the ‘policy space’, the relevance of the topics on which they engaged and the inherent long-term focus of ESI’s approach. The evaluation also found important value in mentoring young analysts received. One aspect of development that is missing in this activity is the lack of engagement of the young analysts in follow-up discussions on their work/ papers to gain an understanding of how they were received and where improvements could be made. While no longer a part of ESI’s Sida funding, ESI continues to host junior fellows and provide training for young analysts.

Local think tanks

Initially, the programme above was considered a foundational step in encouraging these analysts in the establishment of local think tank organisations in various countries in the Western Balkans. As a result of these seminars and follow-up work from ESI, the following organisations have been established by young analysts/ activists:

- IKS in Pristina.³³
- CRPM in Skopje.³⁴
- Reaktor in Skopje.³⁵
- Agenda Institute in Tirana.
- Popolari in Sarajevo.³⁶
- The European Initiative Liberal Academy Tbilisi (EI LAT).³⁷

3.4 EFFICIENCY

Internally, ESI's management systems work well and provide strategic direction and organisational cohesion. This is particularly visible in the way the organisation develops its areas of priority and focus over time, through internal interactions, as well as how products (papers notably) are developed and revised in an iterative process within the organisation. What is not as efficient, as discussed below, is how management systems in the form of reporting contribute to an understanding of the relationship between donor (Sida) support and the work of ESI.

Expression of a theory of change

ESI has a Theory of Change. It is not the type of Theory of Change found, for example, in a two-year capacity building project with customs officers at a border that comprises a set of training activities leading to a set of new competences and new work practices. The role played by an organisation such as ESI, a think tank, is quite different to the role played by a consultancy organisation in delivering a set of outputs linked to focused outcomes in the building of capacity.

A clear, well-defined and described understanding of ESI's context is available and useful, although it is insufficiently framed in relation to Sida and Swedish strategies, priorities and policies. Nor is the framing sufficiently linked to EU strategies related to EU accession or gender equality. An implicit Theory of Change permeates ESI thinking, but the concept of a Theory of Change does not permeate ESI's work and ESI's expressions of its Theory of Change are inconsistent and do not provide the organisation with a clear *articulation* of its strategic footing.

The evaluation team's summarisation of ESI's Theory of Change is found in the below table.

We will do (ACTIVITY)	In order to (OUTPUT-PRODUCT or SERVICE)	With the intention of (OUTCOME)
1.1.1 Research • Reading • Detailed drawing together of facts and figures, for example the work done with UNHCR statistics on migration, providing an innovative perspective on the facts and contributing to a better understanding from policy makers etc. • In-depth, thoughtful, reflective interactions within our team • Data gathering/ knowledge growing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, activists, civil society, academics) 1.1.2 Advocacy • Interactions with national, regional and international actors (politicians, representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and similar, media)	1.1 Influence policy thinking (service)	1. Changed EU policy (outcome) • Towards the Western Balkans (accession policy, policy of economic interaction, policy on visas and movement, etc.) • Towards migrants/ refugees
1.2.1 Research • Reading • Detailed drawing together of facts and figures, for example the work done with UNHCR statistics on migration, providing an innovative perspective on the facts and contributing to a better understanding from policy makers etc. • In-depth, thoughtful, reflective interactions within our team • Data gathering/ knowledge growing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, activists, civil society, academics) 1.2.2 Advocacy • Policy papers/ proposals (based on our reading/ reflection/ interactions) • Sharing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and similar, media)	1.2 Provide realistic policy proposals (product)	
2.1.1 Research • Reading • Detailed drawing together of facts and figures, for example the work done with UNHCR statistics on migration, providing an innovative perspective on the facts and contributing to a better understanding from policy makers etc. • In-depth, thoughtful, reflective interactions within our team • Data gathering/ knowledge growing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, activists, civil society, academics) 2.1.2 Advocacy • Sharing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and similar, media)	2.1 Influence policy thinking (service)	2. Changed policy footings of EU Member States • Towards the Western Balkans (accession policy, policy of economic interaction, policy on visas and movement, etc.) • Towards migrants/ refugees

3 FINDINGS

2.2.1 Research • Reading • Detailed drawing together of facts and figures, for example the work done with UNHCR statistics on migration, providing an innovative perspective on the facts and contributing to a better understanding from policy makers etc. • In-depth, thoughtful, reflective interactions within our team • Data gathering/ knowledge growing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, activists, civil society, academics) 2.2.2 Advocacy • Policy papers/ proposals (based on our reading/ reflection/ interactions)	2.2 Provide realistic policy proposals (product)	
3.1.1 Research • Reading • Detailed drawing together of facts and figures, for example the work done with UNHCR statistics on migration, providing an innovative perspective on the facts and contributing to a better understanding from policy makers etc. • In-depth, thoughtful, reflective interactions within our team • Data gathering/ knowledge growing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, activists, civil society, academics) 3.1.2 Advocacy • Sharing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and similar, media)	3.1 Influence strategic thinking (service)	3. Changed strategy/ strategic approaches of EU Member States • Towards the Western Balkans (accession policy, policy of economic interaction, policy on visas and movement, etc.) • Towards migrants/ refugees • In relation to corruption
3.2.1 Research • Reading • Detailed drawing together of facts and figures, for example the work done with UNHCR statistics on migration, providing an innovative perspective on the facts and contributing to a better understanding from policy makers etc. • In-depth, thoughtful, reflective interactions within our team • Data gathering/ knowledge growing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, activists, civil society, academics) 3.2.2 Advocacy • Strategy papers/ proposals (based on our reading/ reflection/ interactions) • Sharing with national, regional and international actors (politicians, representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and similar, media)	3.2 Provide innovative strategy thinking/ proposals (product)	

The ESI Theory of Change gives no *specific* consideration of Sida's defined areas of cross-cutting importance: poverty, environment, gender equality, neither directly as areas of focus nor through a cross-cutting focus of defined priority areas. The absence of a gender perspective within the Theory of Change is notable, particularly amid EU and Sida commitments related to furthering gender equality, including the EU's gender action plans (GAP) and within the context of the EU Accession process. Furthering gender equality at an objective level would need to be mentioned (or at least integrated into an objective) to be in line with Swedish commitments under GAP II (and now GAP III).

Reporting

The concept of a Theory of Change also does not permeate ESI's proposal writing and reporting to Sida nor does it strongly influence ESI's interactions with the donor. There is a significant difference between the detailed reflection and writing that goes into ESI's policy proposal and advocacy work and the lack of depth and detail in preparing funding proposals and reports for the donor. It is not possible to understand from ESI documentation what ESI is achieving in terms of outcomes. It is clear what activities ESI is doing and the outputs (the actual policy documents and papers and involvement with policy actors and in the media), but this is less important, and less well discussed, than the actual policy and strategy influences. The absence of a gender perspective in the Theory of Change, or attention to the other cross-cutting issues, hinders attention to these issues in reporting, which would be in line with EU and Swedish commitments to analyse and report on the impacts of actions on gender equality.

The evaluation did not find a need for greater control of the approach and work of ESI, but did find insufficient care on the part of ESI for the needs of the donor – particularly in ensuring the donor has sufficient information to be confident in the value of contributions and how they are contributing to Sweden's strategic priorities. The thread (from funding to activity to output to outcome) is missing, particularly in delivering an understanding at the outcome level (how policy and strategy have been influenced). ESI is not alone in being funded to deliver on a Theory of Change that is more complex than a traditional project and a logframe. The work undertaken by Kvinna till Kvinna, in similar geographies to ESI, is a good example of how advocacy and policy-focused work can be undertaken in this context for the benefit of all parties.

The key aspect of this discussion is that current approaches are not *sharing the story* of what ESI is doing and what ESI is achieving in an effective way, neither for the benefit of ESI nor for the needs of the donor.

Evidence

Separately, but related to reporting, is evidence in support of this story. If, as noted above, the measure of a think tank's effectiveness is its policy proposals being translated into policy/ action and that it is being listened to, the ESI story lacks sufficient expression of evidence in these areas. The evaluation found evidence, largely through its qualitative enquiry. Such enquiry, and ongoing monitoring and reporting, would benefit from the gathering of other evidence such as visits to and time spent on specific papers on the ESI site, use of ESI material by media, appearances of ESI personnel in the media or at seminars, information sessions, etc. with political actors, the media or civil society events, the leadership and/ or

facilitation of training/ capacity-building events or programmes, types and content of interactions with local actors/ CSOs, etc.

3.5 IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

The discussion in the Effectiveness chapter provides both the basis for discussing ESI's impact (wider or longer-term change) and sustainability and the areas in which this sustainable impact is most visible. That discussion will not be repeated here, but key points will be emphasised on where the evaluation found evidence of impact.

The EU-Turkey migrant deal. While the framework that was proposed and accepted can itself be used to describe an area of impact, it is the potential this framework has for influencing discussions in other migrant crisis areas that is most important in this discussion. As indicated above, this currently includes the situations at the border between France and the UK and the border between Poland and Belarus.

Azerbaijan and 'caviar diplomacy'. This area of ESI's work demonstrates the potential for wide and long-term impact, even to the highest levels of political systems, where strong evidence is coupled with well-focused advocacy and strategic use of civil society, media and political organisations.

EU Accession. What ESI has contributed, and continues to contribute, to discussions around the accession of Western Balkan states to the EU has already had impact (progress reports and changes with regards to Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia) and continues to have impact potential. Much work remains, and there is certainly no guarantee that the political priorities of the EU and its Member States will follow the arguments being proposed by ESI. But the potential in closer economic relations (the Western Balkans market and/ or access to the Single Market and the visa liberalisation changes) opens the door to possible wider engagement, all of which has impact potential for both the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU.

4 Conclusions

4.1 RELEVANCE

The ESI programme and focus is particularly relevant. ESI is an innovative actor in policy discussions in a range of thematic areas and across a breadth of European geography. Relevance is visible in relation to the strategic thinking and planning of Swedish agencies through the sharing of knowledge and well-considered policy/strategy options, and through assistance in the analysis of policy settings and development of priorities. This relevance is less visible to and in the work of Swedish Embassies in the Western Balkans. ESI also plays an innovative role in policy discussions and debates at the EU level and with EU Member States and has impact on policy debates at these levels through interactions with political officials and ministry representatives. Relevance is particularly notable in relation to a wide range of policy discussions related to the Western Balkans and its EU accession processes, detailed in the Findings section, although influence and relevance extend well beyond the borders of the Balkan peninsula. ESI has been a particularly relevant contributor in European and Turkish discussions on refugees and migration, played a particularly relevant role in relation to corruption in Azerbaijan and has had a clear impact in relation to threats to the rule of law in Poland. The ESI programme is of relevance to the media, offering evidence-based arguments and topics of importance that are followed through by journalists. The ESI programme is of relevance to civil society organisations, particularly in offering well-researched, well-argued discussions on policy matters important to civil society. Insufficient focus is given by ESI to the development of actual partnerships with civil society organisations and think tanks in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and there is insufficient focus in ESI's work on ensuring gender equality cuts across and is visible in its analysis and writing.

4.2 COHERENCE

While the ESI programme is particularly relevant to and useful for civil society, and while the work of ESI is used extensively by civil society in building its knowledge base and arguments, there is only a limited interaction with civil society organisations in the geographies in which ESI is focused and no examples of partnership or evolving partnership, including with women's rights organisations working on related issues. Development of synergies and collaboration is missing and would be of value to both civil society and ESI in strengthening the gathering of evidence, the analysis of the data, in presentation of reports and in subsequent advocacy approaches. It would also be of value in relation to Sida's perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment, and ensuring these receive an appropriate amount of focus, particularly in the context of EU Accession and related to EU/Swedish commitments to furthering gender equality.

4.3 EFFECTIVENESS

ESI is very effective in its work. ESI's effectiveness is based on its focus on a relevant set of topics, as detailed in the Findings section. From this base, the breadth of contacts, detail of research, quality of writing, internal reflection and revision, interaction with relevant actors and the quality and intent of advocacy with relevant actors all contribute to the achievement of intended policy influences and results. This is worth emphasising – while the quality of ESI's work is visible in policy options, the related/ subsequent advocacy (presentations, discussions) is where the value of this work is of notable value and importance.

4.4 EFFICIENCY

The key area of concern from the evaluation is ESI's systems and products of planning, monitoring and reporting.

The ESI Theory of Change would benefit from internal reflection, clarification and expression. As indicated in the Findings section, the intent of this is not to force ESI into an arbitrary, project-type formulation but to provide a solid framework for 'story telling' and reporting. This would be of clear benefit to Sida and in the view of the evaluation team would also benefit ESI.

Greater emphasis is required on the formal telling of ESI's story through reporting. While neither the donor nor ESI wishes for ESI to be overburdened with administrative processes, it is still of significant importance that reporting to Sida expresses clearly and fully the work and results of ESI's programme. This includes insufficient attention to cross-cutting themes in reporting, where gender impact analysis would be particularly important as per EU/Swedish commitments and could also contribute to learning and enhanced, more inclusive impact for ESI. Impact and sustainability

ESI is demonstrating sustainable impact. This is most visible in its ongoing focus on migrant and refugee policy, which brings a humane and human rights-based focus to all negotiations on this topic. Secondly, impact is visible in the relations between Balkan states and the EU, including particularly in the improved access Balkan residents have to travel and work in the EU. ESI has also demonstrated impact in relation to corruption, but it is not possible to assess the sustainability of this impact. There is significant potential for sustainable impact in the range of issues ESI works on in the Balkans but more time will be needed before actual impact is visible.

4.5 LESSONS LEARNED

Think tanks can and should have theories of change. Think tanks are not 'projects', do not function in a project context, and require a different approach from a project approach when being funded, monitored and evaluated. However, as demonstrated by ESI, there is a clear understanding of its context and operational framework and a

clear understanding of what it wants to do in order to achieve its clear objectives. It is within this context that analysis of the organisation and its work can be analysed. Having said this, a more detailed description of and summarised reporting on all areas of focus/ all issues being worked on would benefit external parties, including Sida, in having a clearer understanding of the work ESI is undertaking.

The approach applied by ESI, i.e., the policy idea development with advocacy/lobbying/presentation, has been very successful and well-appreciated by policymakers and journalists alike. It is this approach that makes them stand out as a think tank and has led to their success.

Continued political buy-in and ownership are key external factors which are contributing to sustainable reform outcomes being initiated by ESI.

It is not visible how the benefits of proposed and realised governance and economic reforms are to be equitably distributed across demographic groups – design, implementation and reporting would benefit from a clearer expression of impacts on different genders, ethnic groups, age groups, education levels, etc.

5 Recommendations

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SIDA

Recommendation 1 – It is recommended that Sida continue to provide funding to ESI. Included with this funding should be a requirement for ESI to be more aware of the intersection of ESI's priorities and those of Sweden, and that ESI should be more visibly responsive to Sida's perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment.

Recommendation 2 – In order to assist with this, it is recommended that Sida provide clearer guidelines, and possibly assistance, to ESI on Sida's requirements in relation to gender equality, poverty and the environment.

Recommendation 3 – It is recommended that Sida engage in discussions with ESI on the possibility of additional funding for administrative (specifically reporting) assistance. These discussions should be undertaken with the view of not overly burdening ESI with the administration while assisting with and ensuring a more informative narrative on the outcome level results being achieved, including both qualitative and quantitative evidence of these results.

Recommendation 4 – It is recommended that Sida support and encourage improved communication and linkages between ESI and CSOs active in the Western Balkans and Turkey that are focused on gender equality, poverty and the environment, with a focus on supporting each other in policy research and argumentation, and to build strategic alliances on issues of shared concern.

5.2 HEADLINE

Recommendation 5 – Linked to Recommendations 3, it is recommended that ESI engage in discussions with Sida on the possibility of additional funding for reporting assistance, not to stress administrative processes per se, but to aid in formulating a stronger reporting regime (internally and to Sida) that provides clear evidence of and narrative about the outcomes of ESI's work. Subsidiary aspects of this recommendation include:

- The potential for refinement of and a more consistently expressed theory of change for the organisation.
- Specific emphasis to be placed on:

- Activity reporting – a matrix of thematic areas, geographical focus and activities (papers, advocacy, capacity-building) is one type of effective approach for consideration. This could be balanced with narrative descriptions of specific activities. The focus here should be on what is being done.
- Output reporting – similarly, the policy and strategy proposal outputs of the above activities should be detailed, possibly in a matrix approach similar to the above. Here the focus should be on the results of the activities with a greater discussion of the results of papers, policy and strategy discussions and capacity-building events, including where they have appeared, numbers of reads or downloads, the demographics of event participation, etc., including gender-disaggregated data and gender analysis.
- Outcome reporting – greatest importance should be placed here – to provide analysis and examples of where the above activities and outputs are actually changing policy, strategy and/ or practice, inclusive of gender impact analysis.
- Overall, ESI's narrative does not currently ensure Sida's strategic frameworks (from its strategy documents as well as Sida's perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment) are included. Similar to the 'thread' mentioned above, ESI planning and reporting does not note how these perspectives are given solid consideration in planning, are components of activities and are visible in the policy and strategy change at the core of ESI's intended outcomes.

Recommendation 6 – It is recommended that a clear link be drawn in ESI's planning and reporting documentation to Sweden's strategic frameworks and its stated perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment. This recommendation specifically does not intend to draw ESI's focus into line with the donor's agenda; rather, it intends to:

- Ensure that ESI is aware of Sweden's underlying priorities in relation to democracy, human rights, gender equality and poverty, as well as the environment.
- Ensure that ESI gives consideration in its thinking and planning to how its work can contribute to addressing these where appropriate in its work. Ensuring attention to these, particularly gender equality, also has the potential to enhance the quality, inclusiveness, and relevance of ESI's work. This includes attention to ESI's possible contributions to Sweden implementing its commitments to the EU Gender Action Plan III, particularly in the context of EU Accession.

- Ensure that where ESI's work is clearly focused on and is contributing to addressing these this is clear in ESI documentation (particularly but not limited to reporting to the donor).

Recommendation 7 – It is recommended ESI engage more intentionally with civil society organisations who focus on human rights, gender equality, environment and/or democratisation as a way of strengthening both the knowledge and approach of ESI and that of these potential partners, as well as improving coordination and thus potentially effectiveness in achieving shared aims.

6 Annexes

6.1 ANNEX A: EVALUATION MATRIX

As discussed above, an evaluation matrix has been developed. The matrix provides the framework for the evaluation methodology. It provides a set of indicators and data collection methods for each agreed evaluation question.

Evaluation criteria – OECD DAC	Evaluation Question – as agreed during the inception phase	Indicators to each question focus on the following: - What we are looking at - What we are looking for - Key areas of enquiry - Sub-questions	Data collection methods and sources – here we indicate for each question where we will find the data and how it will be collected	Summarised evaluation findings.
Relevance: Is the intervention doing the right thing	EQ1 To what extent has the intervention's design responded to: - EU Accession priorities/policy - National priorities. - Stakeholder needs and priorities, considering the potentially	Do stakeholders see a correlation between the focus and content of the project and their perception of realities in the project geography? Is there a clearly defined link between and correlation with project priorities and: - Defined EU accession focus areas? - Sida's regional strategy?	Data collection method - Document review - Key Informant Interviews Source - Project documentation - Project staff – key stakeholders, with extensive and deep knowledge about what ESI does and what its	A particularly relevant initiative: - Positive and creative role played by ESI in evidence-based contributions to policy debates and in assisting government representatives (at the national level and/ or in EU Member State foreign policy agencies) to understand and influence policy questions and directions. - Reform of European Commission's reporting on the Western Balkans and Turkey. - The EU-Turkey Statement. - Visa liberalisation for the Balkans.

	different access, needs and priorities of diverse women and men. • Sida strategic priorities and perspectives. EQ1a To what extent has the project design incorporated a gender perspective?³⁸ EQ1b To what extent have Sida's definitions of poverty dimensions, and a multi-dimensional poverty analysis (MDPA) impacted on the project's design? EQ1c To what extent do climate perspectives, the environment and conflict perspectives impact on the project's design?	Is a specific focus on gender equality and poverty visible in design and reporting?	results are from this work. • Project beneficiaries • Sida and Swedish Embassy representatives • Other stakeholders, and knowledgeable non-stakeholders	• To the priorities of EU enlargement (for the EU itself, for EU Member States and for the countries of the Western Balkans wishing to accede to the EU). • Independence, breadth of knowledge, ability to communicate relevant ideas in easily digestible forms. • Inputs to strategy thinking of Swedish agencies. • Human rights cut across ESI's work and are visible in papers, proposals and commentary. • Fundamental rights of refugees, as well as political prisoners. • Poverty is visible in cross-cutting ways. • Environment more visible recently. • No visible emphasis on Sweden's defined priority area of gender equality.
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Coherence: How well does the intervention fit?	EQ2 How compatible/complementary has the intervention been with other interventions in the region, countries, sectors, and organisations where it is being implemented? EQ2a To what extent does the project demonstrate a connectedness with civil society in the Western Balkans, Turkey and the Eastern Neighbourhood?	Do stakeholders recognise interactions, communication and cooperation with other, similar interventions and organisations? Do stakeholders (and knowledgeable non-stakeholders) recognise complementarity, as opposed to competition, in the work of the project and other, similar interventions and organisations? Focus of EQ2a will be on the impact civil society has on the priorities and activities of ESI.	Data collection method • Document review • Key Informant Interviews Source • Project documentation • Project staff – key stakeholders, with extensive and deep knowledge about what ESI does and what its results are from this work. • Project beneficiaries • Sida and Swedish Embassy representatives • Other stakeholders, and knowledgeable non-stakeholders	Particularly relevant to and useful for civil society. Used extensively by civil society in building its knowledge base and arguments. Only limited interaction with civil society organisations, including women's rights organisations, in the geographies in which ESI is focused. No examples of partnership or evolving partnership - development of synergies and collaboration is missing.
Effectiveness: Is the intervention achieving its objectives?	EQ3 To what extent has the project achieved its objectives and results? EQ3a To what extent has furthering gender equality been visible in	Have defined outputs (reports/policy papers) been delivered (and to what extent are they inclusive of a gender perspective)? Has the project made clear contributions to improvements in EU policy toward the Western	Data collection method • Document review • Key Informant Interviews Source • Project documentation • Project staff – key stakeholders, with	Effective intervention. Effectiveness is directly impacted by the concrete policy ideas and by the substantive arguments (with statistics/data) that ESI puts forward. Significant credibility based on approach, including concrete, innovative policy ideas and measures,

	project implementation and results?	Balkans and Turkey, specifically in contributions to public debate and in the provision of concrete policy ideas (and to what extent are these inclusive of a gender perspective)? Is the project helping political actors (politicians and those who shape policy debates such as diverse interest groups and civil society) develop substantive arguments based on evidence, an understanding of institutions and a grasp of practical challenges of implementation?	extensive and deep knowledge about what ESI does and what its results are from this work. • Project beneficiaries • Sida and Swedish Embassy representatives	substantive arguments, an evidence-based approach and an 'action orientation.' The EU-Turkey migrant deal - A significant achievement. The model which was proposed, and accepted, was compliant with human rights law and was humane, and was practically applied. Azerbaijan and 'caviar diplomacy'. Caviar Diplomacy addresses Azerbaijan's use of corruption (largely through gifts of caviar and champagne) to ensure a better international discussion on its approach to human rights. EU Accession. A number of issues and some results related to EU accession and the (related) formal relationship between the EU and Western Balkans states Very limited to no attention to furthering gender equality in project implementation and results.
Efficiency – How well are resources being used?	EQ4 To what extent have the project's systems of management, including planning and M&E, contributed to project effectiveness (outputs and outcomes)? EQ4a	Is there visible measurement of results against planned outputs and outcomes, including the use of indicators related to furthering gender equality? Are there examples of modification of approach/ activities to improve outputs/ outcomes, based on monitoring processes and feedback?	Data collection method • Document review • Key Informant Interviews Source • Project documentation • Project staff – key stakeholders, with extensive and deep knowledge about what	Management systems work well and provide strategic direction and organisational cohesion. ESI has a Theory of Change that permeates its thinking but how it describes its Theory of Change are inconsistent and do not provide the organisation with a clear expression of its strategic footing. The ESI Theory of Change gives no specific consideration of Sida's defined areas of cross-cutting importance: poverty, environment, gender equality.

	To what extent has the project's defined Theory of Change contributed to the project's day-to-day and overall implementation, as well as results and monitoring? EQ4b Does the project demonstrate an understanding and use of a result-based management perspective (logical result chain; focus on outcome and impact-level results)?	Is there a provision of quality reporting on approach, outputs and outcomes? How is the ToC used to inform ongoing implementation, reporting and modifications of approach?	ESI does and what its results are from this work. Sida and Swedish Embassy representatives	There is a lack of depth and detail in preparing funding proposals and reports for the donor. It is clear in reports what ESI is doing (the actual policy documents and papers and involvement with policy actors and in the media), but less well-discussed are the policy and strategy influences. The key aspect of this discussion is that current approaches are not sharing the story of what ESI is doing and what ESI is achieving in an effective way, neither for the benefit of ESI nor for the needs of the donor.
Impact: What difference does the intervention make? Sustainability: Will the benefits last?	EQ5 To what extent has the project initiated a change process that indicates a wider or longer-term impact? EQ6 To what extent are the outcomes of the project likely to continue?	What indications are there of 'political actors' developing (and using) substantive arguments based on evidence? What indications are there of 'political actors' applying a greater understanding of institutions and the practical challenges of implementation?	Data collection method - Document review - Key Informant Interviews Source - Project documentation - Project staff – key stakeholders, with extensive and deep knowledge about what ESI does and what its	The EU-Turkey migrant deal. The framework that was proposed and accepted is an area of impact. It also offers the potential for influencing discussions in other migrant crisis areas. Azerbaijan and 'caviar diplomacy'. Demonstrable potential for wide and long-term impact where strong evidence is coupled with well-focused advocacy and strategic use of civil society, media and political organisations. EU Accession. What ESI has contributed, and continues to contribute, to discussions around the accession of Western

			results are from this work. • Project beneficiaries • Other stakeholders, and knowledgeable non-stakeholders	Balkan states to the EU has had impact (progress reports and changes with regards to Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia) and continues to have impact potential. Much work remains.
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6.2 ANNEX B: LIST OF KEY DOCUMENTATION

The following documents were provided during the inception phase and have been used in preparing the inception report. They will be further analysed during the field phase, in the framework of the evaluation questions/ matrix.

- Appraisal of Intervention (Final) (Beredning av insats, slutgiltig)
- ESI-SIDA Grant Agreement 2015-2017
- Amendment no 1 to the Grant Agreement on Future of Integration and Enlargement Project (FIEP, 2015-2017) between Sida and the European Stability Initiative
- Amendment no 2 to the Grant Agreement on Future of Integration and Enlargement Project (FIEP, 2015-2017) between Sida and the European Stability Initiative
- Amendment no 3 to the Grant Agreement on Future of Integration and Enlargement Project (FIEP, 2015-2017) between Sida and the European Stability Initiative
- Amendment no 4 to the Grant Agreement on Future of Integration and Enlargement Project (FIEP, 2015-2017) between Sida and the European Stability Initiative
- ESI - Latest program document
- ESI - Original program document
- Sida Results strategy Eastern Europe, Western Balkan and Turkey.pdf
- 25 August 2021. ESI Outputs and impact 2015-2021. ESI.
- ESI Newsletters – from 2015 to August 2021-The evaluation team has analysed all newsletters related to the project.
- Project reports –
 - o Sida ESI narrative report 2020
 - o Sida ESI narrative report 2019
 - o Sida ESI narrative report 2015 – update
 - o Sida ESI narrative report 2016
 - o Sida ESI narrative report 2017 – final
 - o Sida ESI narrative report 2018-January 2019
- June 2021. Report of assessment of the internal control system of European Stability Initiative (ESI). Ernst and Young.
- Outputs and impact 2015-2021. ESI.
- Suggestions for the Inception Report Draft
- ESI-SIDA Project Prolongation 2021



Evaluation of the European Stability Initiative (ESI) Project 2015-2021

This evaluation focused on the project's overall Theory of Change, as revised from time to time during implementation. Analysis of and discussions about ESI's Theory of change were initially undertaken during the inception phase and as the evaluation progressed. The evaluation was undertaken with a phased approach. The inception phase was critical to the formulation of the evaluation team's understanding of the project and Terms of Reference requirements and to the detailed planning of the evaluation. Products included analysis of ESI's Theory of Change; stakeholder mapping; a detailed risk analysis; finalising the approach and methodology, including gender equality and utility/usefulness; analytical framework development, including evaluation question refinement, evaluation matrix development, detailed specification of data collection methods and defining the evaluation's approach to triangulation of data; finalising the proposed structure of the evaluation report and finalising the evaluation implementation plan. The field research phase involved document analysis and key informant interviews. The synthesis and reporting phase involved analysis of the primary and secondary data gathered in the field research phase against the evaluation questions and evaluation matrix. It is recommended that Sida continue providing funding to ESI. Included with this funding should be a requirement for ESI to be more aware of the intersection of its priorities and Sweden's, and that ESI is more visibly responsive to Sida's perspectives on poverty, gender equality and the environment.

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