








DISCUSSION PAPER

**FIRST APPROACH TO IDENTIFYING
THE COMMON CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
AND EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	4
 A FRAGILE CIVIL SOCIETY ENVIRONMENT	5
 THE RISE OF NATIONALISM AND POPULISM	6
 GEOPOLITICAL PRESSURES	7
 REGIONS CHARACTERIZED BY INEQUALITY, POVERTY, AND BRAIN DRAIN	9
 WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION	10
 RULE OF LAW AND INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY	11
 THE EROSION OF MEDIA FREEDOM	12
CONCLUSION	13
PARTNERS OF THE PROJECT	14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ~ Civil society in the Western Balkans, as well as in the Eastern Partnership countries, has been weakened by underfunding, limited institutional support, and public mistrust, undermining its ability to advocate for democratic reforms and build trust in political institutions.
- ~ The rise of nationalism and populism is deepening societal divisions, undermining tolerance, and weakening democratic governance, posing a significant threat to democratic consolidation and regional stability.
- ~ Geopolitical pressures from Russia and China, as well as the EU and NATO, are creating a precarious tug-of-war.
- ~ Inequality, poverty, and brain drain contribute to societal tensions, making these regions more volatile.
- ~ Weak institutions, politicized judiciaries, and oligarchic influence perpetuate a culture of impunity where political elites and business leaders exploit state resources without consequence.
- ~ The systematic undermining of democratic processes and institutional integrity by political elites and oligarchic networks entrenches authoritarian tendencies.
- ~ The erosion of media freedom represents a severe threat to democratic governance and public trust.

INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Western Balkans (WB) regions are at an uncomfortable crossroads between democracy and autocracy. They share enduring structural challenges such as rule of law, economic regression, and ethnic tensions. The regions face security challenges, with external actors being both drivers of security and insecurity. These challenges are intertwined with each region's unique historical, political, and cultural contexts.

The WB and EaP play a significant role in Europe's geopolitical landscape, impacting security, stability, energy, and economic interests. Given their sensitive geopolitical location, ensuring stability in these regions is crucial for preventing the spread of conflicts and promoting peace in Europe.

However, when addressing these regions, European Union institutions and democracy support organizations work with them in an isolated way. They usually have specific areas to deal with the Western Balkans and others to deal with the EaP, sometimes even separating the regions geographically (Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, etc.). The project "Addressing the Common Challenges to Democracy in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership," supported by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), seeks to identify the common trends and difficulties faced in both regions.

This discussion paper aims to highlight some of the common challenges faced by the regions, providing a foundation for understanding how local and international democratic civil society can play a role in

addressing these issues. This perspective represents an added value of the project. Rather than examining these challenges solely through the lens of public policy, the focus will be on civil society's viewpoint, seeking to answer the question: "What actions can civil society organizations in these regions take to enhance their effectiveness and impact in strengthening democratic resilience and governance in their respective countries?"

This discussion paper is the result of a joint collaborative work by experts, journalists, and activists from both regions, who contributed with insights to shape its findings. Special thanks to Emin Aslanov (Abzas Media, Azerbaijan), Petr Čermák (AMO, Czechia), Stevan Dojčinović (OCCRP, Serbia), Dinko Gruhonjić (University of Novi Sad, Serbia), Zohrab Ismayil (Open Azerbaijan Initiative, Azerbaijan), Elira Luli ("Luarasi" University, Albania), and Victoriia Melnyk (Center of Policy and Legal Reform, Ukraine) for their time and contributions to this paper.

As a starting point for this discussion paper, we identified all the challenges and then tried to organize them in areas—such as civil society, nationalism and populism, geopolitical pressures, inequality, poverty and brain drain, weak institutions, and the erosion of media freedom—to make it easier to read and work with. These areas and their challenges are, of course, intertwined and do not represent isolated issues but need to be considered as a whole. As the project progresses, all the parties involved will develop ideas and recommendations to address the common challenges identified in this discussion paper.

A FRAGILE CIVIL SOCIETY ENVIRONMENT

The consolidation of a democratic and robust civil society in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries faces several interrelated challenges that undermine progress toward sustainable democratic development. One major obstacle is the fragility of democratic solidarity, which refers to the shared commitment to democratic principles among political actors, civil society, and citizens. Decades of Soviet and totalitarian rule have left a legacy of political repression, fear, and passivity, discouraging active citizen participation and undermining trust in political and civic institutions. Despite moments of unity, such as Ukraine's remarkable societal solidarity following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the region remains characterized by political fragmentation and widespread mistrust, hindering cooperation between political parties and civil society organizations.

Civil society also remains underdeveloped throughout the region, struggling with limited institutional support, insufficient funding, and a lack of public trust. A history of state control over social organizations has fostered political passivity and suspicion of independent civic actors. While countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have made significant progress, their civil societies still face challenges in building institutional capacity and effectively engaging the broader public. For instance, in Armenia, after the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 war, many Armenian civil society organizations (CSOs) were forced to shift to emergency and relief operations, a trend that is likely to continue considering the need to integrate the inflow of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Compounding these problems is the politicization of public administration. In many countries, civil servants operate under political pressure or are closely aligned with political parties, undermining their independence and compromising the impartiality and efficiency of state institutions. Reforming the civil service to ensure political neutrality is critical, particularly in Eastern Partnership countries like Georgia and Moldova, where pro-Russian forces exacerbate governance challenges. The success of these reforms is essential for maintaining stability and promoting democratic development.

Another major obstacle is the chronic underfunding of the civil sector and independent media. CSOs and journalists often lack the financial resources they need to hold governments accountable and provide citizens with unbiased information. In some cases, such as Serbia, government influence over the media

has increased significantly, compromising journalistic independence. Throughout the region, oligarchic and pro-Russian forces further undermine the credibility of both the media and civil society. Ensuring the sustainable funding and independence of these sectors is essential to strengthening democratic governance and countering authoritarian tendencies.

Civil Society Under Attack in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has experienced two significant waves of repression targeting NGOs and independent media. The first began in 2013 after the presidential election, with the arrest of the head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Study Center. This escalated into a broader crackdown involving criminal charges, frozen accounts, and tax penalties against domestic and international NGOs. Prominent human rights defenders, including Intigam Aliyev, Leyla Yunus, and Rasul Jafarov, were imprisoned. Although some political prisoners were released in 2016 and frozen accounts were restored, the government dismantled the institutional framework of independent NGOs through restrictive legal amendments, limiting access to international funding and local donations.

The second wave, ongoing since December 2022, has intensified the suppression of civil society. Authorities continue arresting civil society representatives, journalists, scholars, and activists on controversial charges such as money smuggling and laundering, further eroding the space for independent civic engagement and media freedom. As of 2024, more than 300 political prisoners were recognized by Amnesty International.

Distrust of civil society is further fueled by the rise of government-sponsored NGOs, which are perceived as extensions of state control. These entities weaken the credibility of grassroots organizations and contribute to public skepticism. In addition, pro-Russian forces use disinformation tactics to demonize independent civil society actors, portraying them as foreign agents. Direct attacks on activists, journalists, and anti-corruption advocates, particularly in Georgia, have escalated in recent years, threatening democratic progress and damaging the international reputation of these countries.

Public engagement in democratic processes is also declining. Disillusioned by corruption, economic instability, and political ineffectiveness, many citizens are increasingly disengaged from civic activities.

This apathy undermines the broader societal push for democratic reform and exacerbates existing challenges. At the same time, growing political polarization divides political parties, social groups, and even ethnic communities along ideological lines, making cooperation and consensus-building more difficult. This environment fosters the rise of populist leaders who prioritize short-term gains over democratic principles, posing significant risks for countries seeking European integration.

THE RISE OF NATIONALISM AND POPULISM

The rise of nationalism and populism in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries is reshaping the political landscape and posing profound challenges to democratic consolidation and regional stability. These movements are fueled by a combination of historical grievances, economic hardship, ethnic tensions, and political polarization, creating fertile ground for nationalist and illiberal forces to exploit societal divisions.

Nationalism, often paired with populism, thrives on patriotic sentiments born of conflict and social instability. These sentiments are often reinforced by fears of cultural and demographic change, leading to political radicalization and undermining tolerance and reformist initiatives. In Serbia, for example, ethnic nationalism continues to dominate both domestic and foreign policy, while in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, nationalist rhetoric is deeply intertwined with struggles over national sovereignty and territorial integrity, exacerbated by Russian interference. Throughout the region, frozen conflicts—such as the status of Kosovo or territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan—are exploited by nationalist leaders to rally support and portray themselves as defenders of national interests.

Political polarization further complicates the situation. The stark divide between populist-nationalist forces and pro-democracy actors leads to gridlock, undermines consensus-building, and weakens governance. Populist leaders in the region, often mirroring figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, reinforce this polarization by framing their agendas as a struggle between “the people” and “elites” or “foreign influences.” This rhetoric deepens societal divisions and hinders unity, making it difficult to address the needs of all citizens.

Ethnic tensions remain a persistent problem, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Ukraine. In the Western Balkans, the legacy of the Yugoslav wars continues to influence inter-ethnic relations, while

Restrictions on freedom of expression, particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ rights, further stifle the ability of civil society to advocate for change. While Ukraine and Moldova have avoided enacting laws that directly restrict these freedoms, discriminatory practices and disinformation campaigns persist, particularly in Moldova, where pro-Russian groups exploit these issues to undermine democratic values. Addressing these challenges is critical to ensuring tolerance, equality, and the protection of fundamental rights.

in Ukraine, the Russian-backed separatist conflict in the east has highlighted divisions between Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking communities. Similar dynamics are evident in Moldova and Georgia, where unresolved conflicts and minority issues dominate political discourse. Nationalist movements often exacerbate these divisions by stoking fears about minority rights and territorial disputes.

Government Formation Talks in an Orthodox Monastery – The Case of Montenegro

Following Montenegro's 2020 parliamentary elections, the government formation process unfolded in an unusual setting—within the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Negotiations, led by SOC Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović, highlighted the church's significant role in shaping the political landscape. The resulting government, under Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, aligned with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian ideologies, marking a shift where the SOC became central to state decision-making rather than solely a religious institution.

Krivokapić openly supported the SOC, and his administration deepened the church's influence in politics. Miloško Spajić, finance minister in that government and later prime minister, continues to symbolize the SOC's extensive reach across Montenegrin society, including its institutions, economy, and culture. The SOC's strong presence raises concerns about the balance between secularism and religious influence in a country aspiring to affirm its European identity. This situation is exacerbated since it also has contemporary geopolitical implications, particularly given Serbia's traditionally close relationship with Russia. Russia's influence is apparent through the SOC's rhetoric and political alignments, with the church often opposing Western liberal values and NATO integration—positions that align with Moscow's geopolitical strategy in the Balkans.

Disinformation is a key tool for populist and nationalist forces to manipulate public opinion and deepen distrust in democratic institutions. State-controlled or oligarch-owned media dominate many of these countries, creating an environment in which independent journalism struggles to thrive. Kremlin-backed propaganda campaigns exploit weak media landscapes to spread narratives that undermine EU integration and democratic reforms, particularly on issues such as immigration, national identity, and minority rights. These disinformation campaigns contribute to an anti-European narrative, particularly among rural and older populations, where fears of losing national identity and sovereignty to “EU dictatorship” resonate strongly.

Authoritarian tendencies are also on the rise, with leaders using populist-nationalist rhetoric to justify restrictions on democratic freedoms. In Georgia, for example, democratic standards are deteriorating, while in the Western Balkans, weak rule of law, state capture, and political patronage reinforce these tendencies.

GEOPOLITICAL PRESSURES

Geopolitical pressures from foreign powers, particularly Russia, the European Union (EU), and NATO, profoundly shape the political and democratic trajectories of countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. This interplay of influence creates vulnerabilities, stalls democratic development, and fosters instability. Russia’s malign influence, hybrid warfare tactics, and disinformation campaigns directly counter the EU’s efforts to promote reform and integration, creating a tug-of-war that impedes progress toward stable democracies.

Frustration with the EU integration process is growing due to delayed reforms, political opposition, and unclear membership prospects. In countries such as Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, stalled negotiations are undermining confidence in the EU’s commitment, breeding disillusionment and strengthening nationalist narratives. Weaknesses in the EU’s reform criteria allow for political manipulation, leaving citizens frustrated by perceived stagnation. This fatigue fuels skepticism about integration, creating an environment ripe for external manipulation.

In this context, some governments have passed restrictive legislation under the guise of protecting national sovereignty. “Foreign agent” laws, as seen in countries such as Georgia, stifle NGOs and independent media by imposing burdensome regulations. While framed as measures to limit foreign interference, such laws restrict freedom of expression, weaken civil society, and undermine democratic values. These initiatives

Leaders often frame these measures as necessary to defend against foreign influence, corruption, or internal enemies, further entrenching their power. Institutions such as the Serbian Orthodox Church play an important role in aligning with nationalist and populist agendas, particularly in Serbia, where its influence bolsters narratives around Kosovo and EU relations. The church’s ties to the Russian Orthodox Church also reinforce pro-Russian sentiments in the region.

Minorities, including ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, and migrants, are often scapegoated by nationalist-populist movements. Hate campaigns against these groups are used to mobilize the majority population by portraying minorities as a threat to national identity and security. In the Western Balkans, such campaigns justify restrictive immigration policies, discrimination against ethnic minorities such as Roma, and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights. This not only perpetuates inequality, but also undermines the development of democratic values.

are consistent with broader authoritarian trends that threaten democratic progress and, in the case of Georgia, jeopardize its pro-European course.

Russia actively exploits political and economic vulnerabilities to maintain its influence and prevent alignment with Western standards. It uses energy dependence, corruption, and weak institutions to destabilize governments, manipulate elections, and widen divisions. Disinformation is a key tool in this strategy, with Russian propaganda targeting Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia. By spreading anti-Western narratives, discrediting EU integration, and exploiting ethnic tensions, Russia is fostering instability and undermining confidence in democratic institutions. Fear is a key weapon in Russia’s arsenal, and its invasion of Ukraine is a stark reminder of the consequences of resisting Kremlin influence.

The EU’s approach to the region has been criticized for prioritizing security over democratic reform. While countering Russian influence and managing migration are legitimate concerns, overlooking corruption and human rights abuses undermines the EU’s credibility. This pragmatism risks alienating reform-minded actors and allowing authoritarian tendencies to deepen, especially in countries like Serbia. By compromising on democratic principles, the EU inadvertently creates opportunities for pro-Russian forces to gain traction.

Russia’s hybrid aggression combines military intervention, economic leverage, and political

manipulation to maintain its sphere of influence. Its actions in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea and support for separatists, are destabilizing the region and impeding democratic progress. Beyond military tactics, Russia uses financial support for pro-Russian groups, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns to undermine democratic institutions and promote instability. These strategies are particularly dangerous for countries like Georgia and Moldova, where democratization efforts directly challenge Moscow's geopolitical interests.

Exercises of Russian Paramilitary Formations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska)

In October 2024, Moldova's security service revealed that pro-Russian Moldovan citizens trained in camps linked to Russia's Wagner Group in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). These activities, coordinated by Russian nationals Konstantin Goloskokov and Mihail Potepkin—an associate of Wagner's late founder Yevgeny Prigozhin—highlight Russia's growing influence in the Balkans. Potepkin, under international sanctions, is linked to destabilizing efforts in Moldova and now operates globally through the organization "AKSON," aiming to expand Russia's geopolitical reach.

In BiH, the presence of Russian paramilitary-linked activities, particularly in Republika Srpska, poses a serious threat to the region's fragile stability. Divisions between pro-Western and pro-Russian factions in BiH could be exacerbated, complicating security operations and hindering the country's progress toward EU integration. These developments echo Russia's tactics in Ukraine and Moldova, raising concerns about potential regional destabilization and the involvement of NATO or other international actors. As BiH navigates these challenges, maintaining peace and advancing its European aspirations remain at risk.

The regions face a precarious balancing act between aligning with the EU and NATO or maintaining ties with Russia. This geopolitical tug-of-war exacerbates reform fatigue and risks democratic backsliding. While Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia tilt toward the West, others maintain stronger ties with Moscow.

Russia's promotion of authoritarianism and anti-Western sentiment clashes with the EU's push for democratic reform, complicating efforts to build stable, resilient democracies.

The Serbian Equilibrium

Under Aleksandar Vučić's leadership, Serbia has pursued a multivectoral foreign policy aimed at positioning itself as a regional power. Belgrade has balanced its orientation between the West—seeking EU membership and maintaining relations with the U.S.—and the East, fostering strategic partnerships with Russia and China. However, this balancing act was challenged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Western powers pressured Serbia to align with EU policies against Moscow.

Despite the pressure, Serbia has maintained its broad geopolitical strategy. Domestically, state-controlled media promote pro-Russian narratives, and some of Serbia's top officials frequently visit Moscow. Internationally, Vučić has taken a more cautious stance, with Serbia's arms industry reportedly supplying Ukraine indirectly through Western channels. This approach appears calculated to enhance Vučić's leverage, particularly in negotiations with the West.

In 2024, this strategy yielded significant results. Serbia finalized deals with key Western actors, including energy cooperation with the U.S., a military agreement with France, and a particularly controversial lithium mining deal with the EU and Germany. The lithium project sparked widespread public outcry over its potential environmental impact, leading to mass protests. Critics argue that by engaging with Vučić, the EU has inadvertently legitimized his regime, limiting its ability to address democratic backsliding in Serbia.

As a result, the credibility of European integration has waned, even among Serbia's traditionally pro-Western factions. Meanwhile, state-controlled media have intensified pro-Russian messaging. Vučić's adept exploitation of geopolitical volatility has reinforced his position, but at the cost of growing skepticism about Serbia's democratic future and its European aspirations.

REGIONS CHARACTERIZED BY INEQUALITY, POVERTY, AND BRAIN DRAIN

The economic challenges facing Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the South Caucasus are both profound and interconnected, shaped by structural inefficiencies, political interference, and external pressures. These regions struggle with persistent poverty, growing inequality, and the erosion of human capital through migration and brain drain, all of which hinder their progress toward sustainable development and democratic consolidation. The interplay between economic priorities and governance often leads to trade-offs that weaken institutions and exacerbate instability.

State intervention in the economy remains a major obstacle to private sector growth and competitiveness. Governments in these regions often control key sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and media, while economic power is concentrated among oligarchs and politically connected elites. This dynamic distorts competition, encourages corruption, and stifles innovation. In countries like Azerbaijan and much of the Western Balkans, state-owned enterprises and favoritism toward influential businessmen perpetuate inefficiencies and create an economic model driven by patronage rather than market forces.

Western countries and democratic alliances sometimes prioritize economic agreements with autocratic regimes, prioritizing stability and investment over democratic principles. In the Western Balkans, foreign investment from powers such as Russia, China, and the EU has often come at the expense of democratic reforms and governance standards. This pragmatic approach empowers autocratic leaders while creating tensions between the pursuit of economic growth and the consolidation of democratic values.

Poverty is another pressing issue, with many citizens in these regions facing high unemployment and limited access to education, health care, and opportunities. Rural areas are particularly affected, with inadequate infrastructure and public services contributing to high poverty rates. While countries such as Azerbaijan have benefited from oil wealth, the benefits have

been unequally distributed, leaving large segments of the population in poverty. In Ukraine and Moldova, political instability, corruption, and conflict exacerbate these economic hardships.

Inequality compounds these challenges, with stark urban-rural divides and a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Crony capitalism and corruption have entrenched economic power among elites, limiting social mobility and fueling discontent. This widening gap between the elite and the general population breeds social unrest and undermines political stability, as seen in Moldova and Ukraine, where oligarchic control of key sectors exacerbates inequality and discontent.

External powers also use economic tools to exert political influence, undermining sovereignty and stability. Russia uses trade restrictions, energy dependency, and economic manipulation to destabilize countries and hinder their efforts to integrate with the EU. Similarly, China has expanded its influence by investing in infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania. These economic ties often come with political strings attached, compromising the independence of recipient countries and aligning them with the foreign power's strategic interests.

The public sector in these regions is further weakened by underfunding, corruption, and a lack of qualified professionals. Civil servants struggle with low salaries, poor management, and politicization, undermining their ability to implement effective policies or deliver essential services. This lack of capacity is particularly evident in Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans, where unfinished public administration reforms exacerbate inefficiencies and limit progress toward EU integration.

Migration and brain drain pose additional challenges as young and skilled professionals leave for better opportunities abroad. This exodus weakens domestic labor markets, reduces the talent pool needed for reforms, and exacerbates demographic pressures.

WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION

Corruption remains a pervasive and entrenched problem in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the South Caucasus, undermining democratic development, economic progress, and public trust. Weak institutions, compromised judiciaries, and a pervasive lack of accountability have allowed corruption to flourish and often become institutionalized within state systems. While some countries have undertaken reforms and established anti-corruption mechanisms, political elites often exploit their positions for personal gain, ensuring that the rule of law is applied inconsistently and that progress remains limited.

Institutions designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and good governance are often ineffective. In many countries, political patronage, systemic inefficiencies, and a lack of professional civil service standards hamper their ability to hold corrupt actors accountable. In the Western Balkans, fragmented institutional frameworks—often divided along ethnic or political lines—create an environment in which policies cannot be uniformly enforced. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia are examples of such challenges. Meanwhile, in countries such as Azerbaijan and Moldova, state institutions remain deeply influenced by oligarchic networks, allowing government officials to act with impunity under the protection of powerful patrons. Even in Ukraine, where important anti-corruption institutions such as NABU (National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine), SAPO (Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office), and the HACC (High Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine) have been established, political influence and a lack of political will undermine their full independence and effectiveness.

A weak judiciary and inconsistent application of the rule of law are critical enablers of corruption. Throughout the region, courts are often beholden to political or business elites, making it difficult to prosecute high-ranking officials or business leaders involved in corrupt practices. In Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro, judicial appointments are often politicized, resulting in a system where loyalty to political factions trumps adherence to the law. In Azerbaijan, the judiciary is seen as a tool of the ruling elite, with little recourse for citizens facing corruption. Judicial reforms in Ukraine and Moldova represent progress, but remain incomplete. Ukraine's establishment of a High Anti-Corruption Court marked progress, but public skepticism remains due to continued inefficiencies and allegations of judicial corruption. Moldova's progress in cleaning up its judiciary is promising, although the mechanisms for appointing judges need improvement. In Georgia, reforms have stalled and opaque judicial appointments continue to undermine confidence.

Lack of accountability is a key factor in perpetuating corruption. Public officials and political elites often escape prosecution for corrupt acts because of their political connections or influence on the legal system. This culture of impunity undermines trust in government institutions and perpetuates a cycle in which corruption thrives unchecked. In authoritarian regimes such as Azerbaijan, corruption is institutionalized at the highest levels, with the ruling elite actively suppressing investigations and avoiding scrutiny. Similarly, in countries like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, state resources are often captured by political and business elites, further entrenching corruption in the political system.

Oligarchs play a significant role in perpetuating corruption, exerting considerable influence over both the economy and the media. Their close ties to political leaders ensure that corrupt practices remain entrenched. In Ukraine and Moldova, oligarchic control over key sectors of the economy exacerbates inequality and limits progress toward reform. Azerbaijan's elite control much of the country's wealth, fostering a system in which economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few and ordinary citizens are unable to escape entrenched networks of corruption.

Public trust in government institutions in these regions is alarmingly low. Citizens often view the legal and political systems as serving the interests of the elite rather than the broader population. This widespread disillusionment fuels voter apathy and disengagement, while some turn to authoritarian leaders who promise to root out corruption, even if their methods threaten democratic norms. Ukrainians, for example, express frustration with the slow pace of reform and the persistence of corruption despite the creation of a significant anti-corruption infrastructure over the past decade. In Moldova and Georgia, public dissatisfaction with systemic corruption is a serious obstacle to investment, democratic consolidation, and international cooperation.

While progress has been made in some countries, anti-corruption efforts remain incomplete. Ukraine's achievements in building anti-corruption institutions show the potential for reform, but further action is needed to establish a zero-tolerance culture. Moldova's progress demonstrates the importance of sustained political will, but a comprehensive approach to eradicating corruption is still needed. In Georgia, judicial corruption continues to hamper progress. Similarly, in the Western Balkans, corruption remains one of the main obstacles to development and EU integration, making citizens skeptical about their governments' commitment to reform.

RULE OF LAW AND INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY

In many countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the South Caucasus, political elites and oligarchic networks systematically undermine democratic processes, weaken the rule of law, and restrict political pluralism, creating systems in which state institutions serve the interests of the few rather than the public good. Elections are often marred by vote-buying, fraud, and manipulation, ensuring the entrenchment of ruling elites. In Azerbaijan and parts of the Western Balkans, elections are often little more than a formality, with outcomes predetermined by voter suppression and media control. Georgia's recent parliamentary elections were marred by allegations of vote rigging, while Ukraine continues to struggle with local manipulation by oligarchic interests, despite progress toward transparent elections. The continued imposition of martial law in Ukraine has further delayed democratic processes and raised concerns about the integrity of post-war governance.

When institutions are captured, the rule of law becomes an uneven tool, selectively applied to silence dissent and protect elite interests. In Serbia and Azerbaijan, legal systems are often weaponized against opposition figures while shielding political allies. Efforts to reform the judiciary in Moldova and Ukraine are hampered by entrenched opposition from political elites, leaving these systems vulnerable to manipulation. Georgia's opaque judicial appointment process undermines public confidence, while in Azerbaijan the judiciary functions primarily as a mechanism to reinforce the control of the ruling elite.

A Joke or a Warning? Edi Rama's 100-Year Power Claim for Albania

During his speech at the Electoral Congress of the Socialist Party in July 2024, Albanian Prime Minister and Socialist Party leader Edi Rama did not hesitate to make jokes about his election opponents (the opposition). However, these jokes were also linked to the future continuation of the Socialist Party in power beyond his own tenure. In one particular segment, while discussing the agenda for 2030 and the continuity of power through the new generation, he articulated his thoughts with clarity by saying: "Why do you predict we will remain in power for only 50 years? Why not aim for 100 years? Who has the power to stop us?"

Informal governance exacerbates these challenges, as oligarchs and political elites use personal networks to shape policy in their favor. In Moldova and Georgia, oligarchic dominance stifles democratic institution-

building and limits economic reform. Ukraine faces significant lobbying pressures from business elites that complicate governance, while in Azerbaijan governance remains almost entirely dominated by a small circle of oligarchs and the ruling family. Similar patterns of patronage are evident in Serbia, Bosnia, and Albania, where informal networks of power impede progress toward democratic reform.

Government by decree further consolidates executive power, sidelining elected representatives and reducing accountability. In Azerbaijan, emergency decrees are used to prioritize elite interests and undermine democratic oversight. In Moldova, tensions between the president and parliament over the use of executive orders to accelerate reforms have raised concerns about the erosion of checks and balances. Georgia and Ukraine face similar risks as the centralization of executive power weakens the independence of the legislative and judicial branches.

Institutional capture also stifles political pluralism, as opposition parties are marginalized or suppressed and public discourse is dominated by ruling elites. Nationalism is often weaponized to rally support for autocratic leaders, divert attention from economic problems, and legitimize repressive policies. In the Western Balkans, ethnic divisions are exploited to consolidate power, limiting political alternatives and democratic debate. Moldova's polarized political landscape between pro-Russian and pro-European forces limits voters' choices, while Georgia's ruling party actively undermines opposition voices. In Azerbaijan, state-controlled media leave little room for diverse perspectives, further limiting public debate.

The absence of effective checks and balances allows the executive to dominate, undermining democratic accountability. In Serbia, the legislative and judicial branches are manipulated to reinforce the ruling party's dominance. Moldova's parliament often acts in accordance with dominant forces, while Georgia's ruling party uses its majority to make unchecked decisions. Ukraine's reform efforts, while promising, are hampered by slow progress and entrenched opposition. Over time, captured institutions erode public trust and make the state increasingly unresponsive to citizens' needs. In Ukraine, the war has further strained institutional capacity and created fiscal and governance challenges. In systems where the state no longer functions in the public interest, public disillusionment grows, exacerbating political instability and the risk of social unrest.

Justice on Trial: The Politicization of Georgia's Judiciary

In Georgia, the judiciary presents a facade of robust legal frameworks and principles that, in theory, should ensure impartiality and justice. However, the practical implementation of these statutes starkly contrasts with their intended purpose, revealing significant flaws in the system. This discrepancy between the law on the books and the law in action undermines public trust in legal institutions and raises serious concerns about the rule of law in the country. Politicization of the judiciary allows the ruling party to leverage legal processes against political opponents, creating an environment where legal decisions are perceived to be guided more by political convenience than by justice and fairness.

A striking example is the case of Nika Melia, the chairman of the opposition party United National Movement (UNM). In February 2021, Melia was arrested following a highly controversial court ruling that accused him

of violating bail conditions related to his participation in protests against the government in 2019. His arrest occurred amid rising political tensions and was widely viewed as a politically motivated move by the ruling Georgian Dream party to silence dissent. While Melia was eventually released as part of an EU-brokered agreement, his case remains emblematic of how Georgia's judiciary is weaponized to target opposition figures, raising serious concerns about the impartiality and independence of the legal system.

Additionally, there is a troubling pattern where courts consistently satisfy every request made by the police and prosecutors, regardless of the legal merit or the rights of the defendants. This apparent rubber-stamping of law enforcement actions portrays the judiciary not as an independent arbiter of justice but as a complicit tool in political persecution, further straining the public's faith in the state's commitment to upholding democratic norms and human rights.

THE EROSION OF MEDIA FREEDOM

In many countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the South Caucasus, media freedom is under serious threat, transforming a critical pillar of democracy into a tool for political control, propaganda, and the suppression of dissent. Media independence is increasingly compromised as outlets come under pressure from political and economic elites. Journalists critical of the government often face legal harassment, intimidation, and financial restrictions, while media pluralism is stifled. In Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, significant parts of the media landscape are controlled by political forces, and journalists face threats and even physical violence. In Ukraine, despite progress in countering pro-Russian narratives, independent outlets struggle financially, limiting their reach. Moldova's media sector remains dominated by oligarchic interests, while in Georgia, pressure from political parties continues to undermine the credibility of independent journalism.

Controlled media and propaganda campaigns have become commonplace, with governments using the media to shape public opinion and maintain power. These outlets promote government-approved narratives, often suppressing dissent and obfuscating facts. Russia's influence exacerbates this trend, with pro-Kremlin narratives frequently appearing in media outlets in Serbia and Bosnia. Such disinformation campaigns destabilize European institutions and fuel divisions within societies. In Ukraine and Moldova, Russian media influence spreads fake news and conspiracy theories targeting European reforms and democratic processes. In Georgia, the ruling party exerts significant control over media content to support its political agenda, further undermining trust in information sources.

Russian-Led Disinformation Campaigns in Moldova

Moldova has become a battleground for Russian-led disinformation campaigns that exploit societal vulnerabilities to maintain influence and undermine European integration. During the winter of 2022, pro-Russian media amplified fears about rising energy costs, portraying EU alignment as a path to freezing winters without affordable Russian gas. Ads depicted families huddled in cold homes, resonating deeply with low-income and elderly citizens. In contrast, pro-European outlets countered with campaigns highlighting EU subsidies for heating and renewable energy initiatives, framing energy independence as a solution to long-term stability.

In the political realm, disinformation shaped election campaigns, with the Bloc of Socialists and Communists warning of empty supermarket shelves and economic collapse without Russian support. Messages like "Without our friend in the East, we starve" targeted older generations nostalgic for Soviet times and rural areas dominated by Russian media. Pro-European candidates emphasized EU investments in health care and infrastructure, but the campaigns underscored Moldova's deep societal divide between historical ties to Russia and aspirations for a European future.

Authoritarian control extends to all forms of media, from television and print to digital platforms. Governments in countries such as Azerbaijan and Belarus tightly regulate major outlets, leaving little room for independent journalism. In Ukraine, martial law has imposed restrictions on certain media activities, while in Moldova and Georgia, government-controlled outlets are closely aligned with political interests. This centralization of media power fosters an environment in which dissenting voices are marginalized and public discourse is heavily skewed in favor of those in power.

The targeting of journalists, professors, and intellectuals is a particularly troubling aspect of this media environment. These individuals often face harassment, threats, and

CONCLUSION

The challenges facing the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans highlight the complexity of fostering democratic resilience in the face of entrenched corruption, economic inequality, media repression, and geopolitical competition. These regions stand at a critical crossroads, where progress toward democratic consolidation, economic reform, and social inclusion is hampered by institutional weaknesses and external pressures.

International actors, in particular the EU, face the difficult task of balancing security priorities with an unwavering commitment to democratic principles. While initiatives to promote integration and reform have made some progress, perceptions of inconsistent support and pragmatism over principles risk alienating reform-minded actors and emboldening autocratic regimes.

A comprehensive and consistent approach is needed—one that prioritizes not only stability but also the core

values of democracy. Civil society has an important role to play in addressing these challenges, while facing many of its own.

even violence from state authorities or pro-government groups. In Belarus and Azerbaijan, journalists face relentless intimidation, while in the Western Balkans, such as in Serbia and Albania, smear campaigns and physical attacks are common. Pro-European journalists in Ukraine often face disinformation campaigns orchestrated by pro-Russian forces. In Armenia, since the Velvet Revolution, press freedom has improved significantly, but the media environment has become increasingly polarized, mirroring the political and social polarization.

This pervasive erosion of media freedom not only stifles independent journalism but also undermines public trust in information and democracy itself.

This initial approach has been important in identifying the common challenges that these countries face in terms of democratic consolidation. It is now up to us as a group to work on identifying possible solutions. Solutions that should not focus exclusively on what other actors (politicians, foreign forces, international organizations) can do, but more fundamentally on the changes that can and should come from civil society in the countries concerned. Thus, we aim to present the position paper “Addressing the Common Challenges to Democracy in the WB and EaP from a Civil Society Perspective” in the second half of 2025, building on the inputs gathered through this discussion paper. So, we invite readers to send their thoughts, comments, and suggestions to contribute to the discussion and development of ideas.

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