

## **Gaslighting Democracy in the Western Balkans:**

# **Why Jettisoning Democratic Values is Bad for the Region and the Liberal World**

**DPC Policy Paper**

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**Sarajevo, Brussels, Berlin**

**March 2023**

<http://democratizationpolicy.org>



A report from  
Democratization Policy Council

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*This report was made possible with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The opinions and views of the authors do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Fund.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The second Summit for Democracy (March 29-30) takes place in a radically different environment from the first Summit in December 2021. Russia’s brutal and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine has prompted the West to rally to the cause of defending democracy and freedom against hostile authoritarian powers. A groundswell of solidarity with Ukraine has swept not only the Western world’s governments but its people as well. Arms are flowing into Ukraine so it can defend its people and reclaim its territory, and the European Union has extended a membership offer to the country, as well as to Moldova and Georgia, breaking with decades-old policy.

However, this policy reset around values of democracy and freedom has not reached the Western Balkans (WB), where the US, the EU and others are pursuing transactional, values-free policies with even greater vigor, in jarring contrast to their posture toward Ukraine. These cynical policies are not only hypocritical – they are also ultimately counterproductive if the goal is comprehensive security in a Europe whole, free, and at peace. The West cannot protect democracy at home, or preserve bandwidth for the challenges posed by geopolitical adversaries Russia and China, by embracing autocrats and oligarchs in the Balkans, where the West holds more leverage than in any other region of the world.

The West’s current policy in the WB is completely antithetical to liberal democratic values and other proclaimed commitments. Worse, it is actively working against the West’s strongest allies on values in the region, which frustrates them, demotivates them, and drives them to the exit. This benefits the EU, and especially Germany, which receives tens of thousands of the region’s most educated, motivated and liberal citizens as cheap labor every year and allows it to maintain the pretense that the WB6 are on a straight accession path. It benefits the US as it pursues its regional pacification strategy, with its echoes of the Cold War geopolitics used in Latin America in the 1970s and ‘80s, which relies on propping up illiberal leaders in Serbia and elsewhere at the expense of democratic development. It suits local elites, as those who stay behind are more dependent, more traditional, less tied to democratic values and more easily controlled through patronage and fear. The outcome is that optimism and hope in the future have evaporated for citizens of most of these countries – Albania and Kosovo being notable exceptions.

These results of a values-free Western policy came into sharp relief in the research for this report, which is based on a tour of the region’s six countries in February-March 2023 and interviews with dozens of civic activists, analysts, journalists, and others. It provides a bottom-up perspective on the high politics of Western approaches to the region. Time and again, we were asked why we – the US, the EU, UK and other established democracies – side with those leaders in the Balkans who *least* share democratic values, while leaving our true values partners in the cold. These potential allies, in turn, are buffeted by ever-changing donor funding fashions (currently, “malign influence” and “disinformation;” previously, “countering violent extremism and “independent media”) and scant attention given to communities outside the capital. Donors’ focus on projects (according to their recipes) militates against strategic coherence in the fight for societal progress, accelerating the process of turning civil society into service providers disconnected from the population. This policy brief offers a few core recommendations of how democracies can change course – before it is too late.

## RECOMMENDATIONS – POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC

**Rethink and reset the policy posture:** A wholesale re-evaluation of the democratic world’s policy toward the Western Balkans – as a whole and on each country – is long overdue. The West cannot protect democracy at home, or preserve bandwidth for the challenges posed by geopolitical adversaries Russia and China, by embracing autocrats and oligarchs in the Balkans. Legislatures are the most promising conduit to push for such a rethink and reset, as there is increasing parliamentary scrutiny of a failing policy. Legislatures need to endeavor even more than some already have to engage with demonstrated values allies in the WB6, particularly outside capitals, to inform their strategic policy reviews and recommendations to executives for a policy reset. The EU should insist on this, as the current posture will ensure dysfunction on its border for a generation – and prevent realization of the promise of enlargement for the region and the Union.

**Replace the tactical appeasement of illiberalism with strategic embrace of liberalism:** In spite of the wide-ranging critiques of Western policy heard, not a single interlocutor called on the EU, US, or others to go easier on governments for the purposes of EU integration. Interlocutors voiced frustration and anger that purported democratic values seemed to be an afterthought, at best. This undermines values allies and provides fodder for illiberal actors to label the West as hypocrites. The West should promote its democratic values, rule of law, and human dignity with the same self-confidence illiberal actors demonstrate in promoting their agendas, supporting the citizens and groups working for these values as their true values allies in the region. The holders of illiberal agendas and visions are working and learn from on another; those with liberal values must more effectively do the same.

**Radical transparency of all funds going to governments:** There was a profound sense on the part of civil society actors that their governments were effectively given a blank check, in terms of funding for purported reforms and infrastructure development. Governments and donors who proclaim the need for legal, political, and personal accountability need to demonstrate it themselves. The graveyard of abandoned projects and missing donor funds is breathtaking. Legislative inquiry into such projects, funding, and the lack of delivery is not only necessary to restore popular trust in the WB6, but to keep faith with donor country taxpayers. All foreign aid to governments should be transparent and available to citizens to review online. Further, any reporting requirements made toward CSOs should apply to governments as well.

**Admit that Albania is different:** Albania, while it suffers from many of the same syndromes seen elsewhere in the region, has a different popular dynamism and adherence to the concept of democratic values, in addition to a profound alignment with the West. It suffers from being lumped into “WB6” for EU convenience, and one could argue that its being grouped with the post-war countries of former Yugoslavia (including in the pernicious Open Balkan initiative) could unnecessarily hold the country back.

**Democratic success depends on the local and the periphery:** Given the centralized, personalized power rife in the region, a recalibration of the capital-centric policy (including by donor organizations) is essential. Forcing accountability on political power – and giving citizens avenues of agency and empowerment – requires opportunities to be available statewide. Localities can be laboratories of

democracy only if freed of the partitocracy and its vertical of power. Furthermore, while almost all interviewees spoke of the ongoing brain drain/human asset stripping, most noted that were dignity and a decent life (including basic services like education and healthcare) feasible at home, many people would prefer to stay.

***View civil society as a values partner, not technical implementation service:*** Civil society actors praised those few donors (EFB, EED, NED, and RBF were mentioned, along with several smaller grantors/partners) that give core rather than project funding, allowing civic actors to do the work that drew them to the civil sector – rather than constantly managing shape-shifting *projectitis*. Reporting should be proportionate and in line with what is expected of governments. The desire to minimize paperwork and support “ownership” feeds centralization and the reinforcement of existing power structures in the centers. Instead, a regularly assessed citizen advisory board should advise on policy and programming, and consulted with the same frequency, vigor and respect granted to institutions – not *pro forma* annual consultations.

## Introduction/Methodology

The questions underlying this research were simple: how do independent individuals in the six countries of the Western Balkans (WB/WB6) who, while not active political actors, are working for and aspire to a future for their country that is grounded in democratic values, assess the role of external liberal actors?<sup>1</sup> Are they indeed supporting the realization of those values in the region, and acting as the natural and primary allies to these individuals and their causes? What lessons and messages should be heard in advance of the Summit for Democracy if these values – the rule of law and independent judiciary, women’s rights and gender equality, independent media, accountable, decentralized, pluralist, and secular governance, meaningful citizen participation, etc. – are to be truly supported in the face of increasingly confident and collaborating *illiberal* domestic and external actors in the region and beyond?

DPC’s team spent two intensive periods in the region in the first quarter of 2023: a five-day visit to Kosovo (February 5-11) and a 15-day road-trip (February 28-March 14) through the other five countries provided an opportunity to observe in one concentrated period the mood among citizens, opinion-makers, civic activists, CSO representatives, and journalists, and brought into view the wider regional connections and trends. The road-trip took place against the backdrop of ongoing EU-led talks between Kosovo and Serbia; the run-up to the first round of presidential elections in Montenegro; the announcement of more EU infrastructure funding for Serbia; and the post-election, government formation period increasingly dominated by the common yet constant background noise of heightening tensions and renewed fears of secession threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).<sup>2</sup>

A total of 78 people (42 men and 36 women) participated in semi-structured interviews. Special attention was taken to hear voices from outside the capitals, and notably, marginalized locations such as Lezhë, Stolac, Vranje, or Gostivar. While many respondents noted they were happy to be quoted, to protect the privacy of others – particularly in smaller localities – such specific attributions have not been made.

Country	Number of interviewees	Locations
Albania	10	Lezhë, Tirana
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5 <sup>3</sup>	Stolac, Trebinje, Tuzla
Kosovo	10	Prishtina, North Mitrovica, Gračanica
Montenegro	15	Bar, Cetinje, Kotor, Podgorica
North Macedonia	13	Gostivar, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Skopje, Tetovo
Serbia	25	Belgrade, Bujanovac, Niš, Novi Sad, Preševo, Vranje

<sup>1</sup> Primarily the US, EU, and UK, but also Switzerland, Canada, Norway, Japan, etc.; the catch-all phrase “the West” is used for concision but does not connote any cohesive bloc.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that many of the comments heard and trends observed are reminiscent of research done in 2021 – though the sentiments and frustration have deepened. See *Sell Out, Tune Out, Get Out, or Freak Out? Understanding Corruption, State Capture, Radicalization, Pacification, Resilience, and Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia*. Available at: <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/sell-out-tune-out-get-out-or-freak-out/>

<sup>3</sup> Two of the DPC authors reside in Sarajevo, and their regular conversations across BiH have informed this paper as well.

This paper distills and synthesizes their contributions. Subsequent products will delve more deeply into various themes. However, it is important for the Summit for Democracy participants to be aware of how and where the West is undermining the values and the natural allies it should have, and how this weakens not only the countries of the Western Balkans but the interests of liberal democracies in the region and beyond. The ascendance of illiberal-strengthening short-term transactionalism will have a negative global impact for a generation.

## Findings: The Impact of Western Policy Support for Regression

### 1. Reinforcing Authoritarian and Autocratic Aspirations

Perhaps the most common question heard among democratic allies throughout the region was the question: if the West *truly* cares about the values it proclaims (democracy, rule of law, human rights and dignity, gender equality, etc.), then how can its policy rely so heavily and completely upon the most self-evidently autocratic leader in the region, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić? This was heard from people throughout Serbia itself, who often noted that the current period not only has echoes of the 1990s but in many ways is worse –the media were less completely controlled under Slobodan Milošević, there was a real opposition, and there was greater social energy and social space for genuine bottom-up and independent resistance.

This was also heard from interlocutors in Montenegro who, facing a season of multiple and consequential elections, are profoundly worried about what one respondent called the strategic “Bosnianization” of their country. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – including in the RS – activists fail to understand why the West is not only tolerant of but seems to *embrace* narrow, reactionary agendas of nationalist elites, who pursue their local spoils with the backing of neighbors seeking to fulfil their own predatory dominance. In North Macedonia, this bewilderment was framed in light of both the missed opportunities of the popular uprising and the 2017 transition as well as their sense of Western hypocrisy about its proclaimed values – in general and in terms of the narrow and parochial added demands from EU members states. In Kosovo, against the backdrop of an “agreement” that was announced and praised but neither clarified nor signed, respondents are bewildered by the fact that Western pressure leans heavily on the Kurti government, the party that has made a liberal democratic transformation of state and society the centerpiece of its government policy. Kosovo Serb respondents in the north and south continue to be frustrated that negotiations about their fate are taking place over their heads, ignoring citizens needs and interests, and instead focused on Vučić and his intermediaries on the ground. And in Albania, it was expressed through a grim amusement that this reliance on Vučić in turn undercuts their own democratic development as Prime Minister Edi Rama is strengthened and boosted as an essential partner to a regional Vučić-led agenda.

Some respondents noted that perhaps they should not be surprised about this short-term *realpolitik*; one noted that the US has a history of policy oriented towards very anti-democratic players. The comparison with Latin America in the 1980s was made. However, the fact that this is happening in Europe, in a place with a supposed “trans-Atlantic perspective” is (or should be) the key difference. How



can the US see this as good for the long-term health of NATO? And, putting the US aside, why would the EU support a policy that would leave weakened and increasingly illiberal countries on its doorstep, or indeed inside the Union?

## 2. Open Balkan – a Solution without a Problem

Virtually none of the values allies among the interlocutors think Open Balkan is a good idea. Albanian respondents especially find it odd to be squeezed into an unnatural economic block; they have always wanted to ease trade to and from Greece and Italy, not former Yugoslavia. Others noted that Open Balkan seemed redundant in light of the Berlin Process, noting that in some cases its terms could undercut or reverse reforms made already to prepare for EU accession. (This was particularly pronounced in “front-runner” Montenegro, though also noted with regard to North Macedonia.) The simple fact that Kosovo would not be able to enter into Open Balkan as an equal participant was noted by many as the elephant in the room. In that sense, Open Balkan amounts to Berlin Minus. Others also worried that this could represent a forever waiting room for countries that won’t ever join the EU as full members – a forever children’s table.

Beyond the technicalities, Open Balkan is seen by many as a cloaking devise for Belgrade’s ambition of *Srpski Svet*, with Rama an ostensible moderating counterbalance. Montenegrin respondents in particular see it as part of a wider Serbian play to *de facto* or even *de jure* absorb their country – an issue at the heart of the 2023 elections. One respondent noted that Serbia has a history of using Serb ethnic minorities in the region as a Trojan Horse for economic and political influence; others made comparisons to Russia’s aggression, not only against Ukraine but throughout the former Soviet space, in its pursuit of *Russkiy Mir*.

Neither *Srpski Svet* nor *Russkiy Mir* are compatible with democratic values as they are inherently based on retraditionalization, desecularization, repatriarchalization, and the subordination of “on the menu” countries in whole or in part through deals among unaccountable leaders.

## 3. Working in Effective Concert with Illiberal and Malign Actors

The second Summit for Democracy is taking place early in the second year of Russia’s neo-imperial war against Ukraine. This changes the context of the Summit from the first in 2021, when geopolitical alignment evidently trumped values as the criterion for inclusion. Among the values allies in the Western Balkans there was frustration and even bewilderment that the West is embracing authoritarian and irredentist agendas in the region at a time when it is animated about aggressive, authoritarian geopolitical rivals elsewhere.

Serbia is the hub for Russian and Chinese influence in the region – through investment, cultural politics, diplomacy, and media – and at the same time is the strongest regional ally of both Moscow and Beijing thanks to Vučić’s impressive ability to “sit on two chairs” (a phrase heard often). Yet Serbia remains viewed as the pivotal state for US and EU policy, in spite of the necessary contortionism. It was noted with irony that while in the past few years project funding has increasingly shifted towards disinformation and fact-checking, and that CSOs in turn recalibrate their programming to develop projects on this topic, the leadership is openly courting and actively facilitating the purveyors and

delivery systems of the mis/disinformation. (It was often also noted that these projects do little in the absence of genuine systemic education reform of a sector that has been purposely built to deter critical thinking or the fostering of critical citizenship).

Respondents – particularly but not only in Montenegro, BiH, and Serbia – noted that this policy approach means the West is effectively doing Putin’s work for him (e.g., support for Vučić in Serbia, the pro-Belgrade forces in Montenegro, and the pro-disintegration forces led by Dodik and Čović in BiH).

China may lack the cultural resonance that Russia and Putin can exploit, but it makes up for this with its economic penetration, which is simultaneously strategic in terms of Beijing’s long-term European interest, while also appealing to the flexible ethics and lack of transparency employed by local regimes. Individuals in Novi Sad involved in protesting a bridge being constructed with support from China, as well as other top-down urban development plans, noted as well the ferocity used against them by the police.

Though not at the same scale, an increasingly illiberal Turkey is actively pursuing its own interest using both soft power (e.g., investment, refurbishment of Ottoman heritage, and tourism) and constituency development by offering increasingly skeptical and Eurofatigued citizens in the WB another pole towards which to orient; something Putin’s *Ruskiy Mir* offers as well.

None of these illiberal actors can play a positive role in the region if the goal is truly integrating them into the EU and Euro-Atlantic democratic family of values. Their value sets are also diametrically opposite from those that envision a social foundation built on women’s empowerment, human rights, minority rights and freedom of expression. The traction that such illiberal geopolitical agendas are having today, 20 years after the EU’s Thessaloniki Declaration, stands as a damning indictment of two wasted decades of Western policy.

#### **4. Reinforcing Patriarchal Values and Further Marginalizing the 51%**

For over a generation the EU and US have supported efforts aimed at empowering women and girls in the region as an inalienable and nonnegotiable part of democratic values. This has also been viewed as necessary for the complete democratic transformation and consolidation of aspirational EU members states. Floors could be littered with the spreadsheets and logframes of projects aimed at women’s empowerment and gender equality; many of the interlocutors in this research have engaged on these projects. However, one need only look at the political class to see it has had little to no impact, because the regional regimes are inherently reactionary and, as party-dependent structures, create little to no space for independently minded women to rise to positions of influence. Vjosa Osmani, as the directly elected president of Kosovo, could be considered an exception that proves the rule – in the country that many interlocutors recognize as the most vibrant bottom-up democracy in the region. (Anyone who would point to the roles of Ana Brnabić in Serbia, or Borjana Krišto in BiH, as symbols of women’s empowerment are desperately grasping at straws, given their service to nationalist agendas.)

Far from ensuring that the EU accession process encourages the continued empowerment of women, the West’s support for illiberals instead makes it more and more unlikely that women will see their roles in the public space expand, deepen, and improve. The strategic degradation of the region’s secular

cultures was noted by many as preparing the groundwork for a continued rollback of hard-won rights and progress, with some respondents from the former Yugoslav space noting that the pre-war society was in many ways more meritocratic and offered more opportunities for women than any of the post-Cold War decades have done. Numerous discussions included reference to the decay of any sort of social contract in the countries – including basic public services such as health care, education, and child/eldercare – the lack of which invariably has an outsized impact on women who continue to carry a disproportionate amount of responsibility for these human needs.

Finally, the autocrat’s playbook very often relies on alliances with religious institutions to serve as a moral alibi for otherwise exuberantly amoral elites. Interlocutors in Montenegro spoke vociferously of their worries that their pluralist and diverse state is being subverted by an ever-stronger role by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which some respondents warned is more of a political actor than is commonly understood in the West. Such clerical retraditionalization is always accompanied by a rollback in rights and protections for women and girls, in a region where violence against women and everyday misogyny was reported as being on the rise in both personal behavior and ambient culture.

### **5. Replicating and Reinforcing Centralization**

The researchers made a dedicated effort to visit and meet people outside capitals, and especially in marginalized locations. Respondents noted consistent flaws in the West’s representation and funding approach, regionwide. Those outside the capitals observed that when their towns did receive international visits – an occasion that most found too infrequent – the pattern was that ambassadors met with mayors and other political powerbrokers, to the exclusion of civic and independent voices. Because of the top-down, party vertical nature of politics, this serves to further magnify and reinforce the leverage of the capitals. It also contributes to the unaccountable indifference of local-level potentates, secure in their party leaders’ crucial role to diplomats, allowing the gap between local leadership and their local constituency of citizens to widen.

A consistent theme heard from those outside capitals – and even within them, from donors and sub-grantors themselves – was that an overwhelming majority of CSO funding is sunk into capitals, leaving those working in the periphery (even major regional centers) with “crumbs.” Complicated funding mechanisms – particularly by the EU, and including substantial paperwork and co-funding requirements – reinforce the substantial advantage that large NGOs in the capitals (or those with required government/institutional partners) have over truly grassroots initiatives. Because of the false grail of “ownership,” reliance on domestic institutions (controlled by the same governments) for decisions on recipients and direction of funding contributes further to a center vs. periphery patronage juggernaut. When respondents were asked about the prevailing Western narrative that citizens voted for these same officials, they noted that the combination of election day malfeasance and everyday patronage dispels any notion that “elected” officials are accountable public servants. And decades of failed reform processes should make that clear to the West as well.

A female respondent noted that donors want to “minimize risk,” “minimize paperwork” and “minimize potential political exposure;” however, this mantra seems to be applied only to non-government actors.

## 6. Capitalism trumps Democratic Values

Throughout the region, examples of citizen agency and struggle against the pervasive gloom and abuse of power were often related to nascent yet growing environmental and development activism. These movements are grassroots by their nature – otherwise “tuned out” citizens have mobilized against industrial waste in their rivers; urban development plans that will destroy floodplains; or mine development that could bring toxic consequences. The victory (for now) of citizens working across borders to stop the Rio Tinto lithium mine exploitation was noted by many as significant and as an example of not only how people can mobilize but also of what to watch out for in the future as they widely expect that mine beneficiaries will regroup to achieve their aims when citizens let down their guard. A similar dynamic was evident in Novi Sad with regards to a contested bridge development and related urban plan that was described by one respondent as akin to a “Novi Sad na Vodi” vision.

The role of western companies is often hailed as providing employment opportunities to forestall rising emigration – especially in the IT sector. But this is contradicted by other policies, including aggressive labor recruitment – with Germany the most visible – which is impacting the society and economy. Respondents in Belgrade and Tirana in particular noted the influx of workers, inter alia, from Asia, taking on necessary jobs that otherwise remain vacant. Many interviewees saw western corporations coming to the region to exploit resources of any kind is, in the absence of an accountable democracy or social contract, as a new type of quasi-colonialist extraction. This is evident in terms of natural resources (hydroelectric plants, etc.), but also among human assets. A respondent in Serbia cited new research<sup>4</sup> demonstrating that European and North American corporations have effectively bankrolled the government’s media dominance through advertising. Western economies benefit by both ensuring low production costs in the immediate term and also contributing to hastened migration to Europe as brain drain (described more below) increases, funneling often skilled labor away from the societies that paid to educate them, and towards a West in demographic decline.

These economic trends are looked upon with frustration but not surprise by a population weary of a long political economic “transition” that they feel did little to benefit average people, increased inequality, has been values-free, and enriched a politically connected business class. Some respondents noted an initiative in North Macedonia to limit the opening of casinos closer than 500 meters from a school. However, they then noted that this initiative was challenged by EU lobbyists with significant interest in the casino business and potential expansion. The perception of these dynamics leads to further skepticism in the promise once held for democratic societies.

## 7. Unconditional Largesse vs. Punishment of Initiative

It’s no secret that over the past decades large funds have been transferred to the governments of the WB6 under the guise of structural reform, transition support and development. However, many citizens are asking where that money went. A number of interlocutors mused about how they need to provide stacks of paperwork, photos and other “measurably verifiable indicators” and evidence of proper audits for small donor funds (as small as \$250) while tens of millions seem to be given to governments and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/ard-western-companies-financing-anti-western-media-in-serbia/>

other institutions without similar attendant audits, or transparent paperwork.

In the course of this research, there were repeated encounters with billboards – often many years old, sometimes assembled in what amounts to project graveyards – announcing donor-funded projects that were ceremoniously launched, but never fulfilled. The transparency of the signs in noting the purpose, amount of funding and timeline for the development paradoxically speaks to the failure of these initiatives as they continue to stand watch over space on which the project was never achieved. This is a visible reminder to citizens in these locales of the false hopes and dashed promises, and again feeds the question – where did the money go? It also actively erodes trust in donors and the wider West – in general and among those activists who see the financial double standards that have become par for the course and are not even questioned in Brussels or Washington DC.

A respondent in North Macedonia noted a recent visiting parliamentary delegation observing that civil society seems to be doing the work of government and institutions – particularly in the social sphere. In other words, the government receives funds and neither implements its responsibilities nor reports on expenditures, while CSOs attempt to fill the void while simultaneously navigating a bureaucratic slalom of logframes and oversight. CSOs are forced to spend their time and energy meeting paperwork, accounting and branding requirements, while the governments are free from this time and accountability tax.

An additional issue is related to the identification of key donor interests or “flavors of the month.” While disinformation and media literacy are the current trends, many respondents could point to previous trends: countering violent extremism, gender, independent media, youth, Roma/national minorities, and so on. When a new trend is identified by donors, often a large part of the programming in a country is recalibrated to accommodate it, without any assessment of the needs of the previous thematic focus areas. Grantees are still dealing with the paperwork from the previous donor priorities while donors have moved on to inaugurate the new externally identified priority area. One respondent noted that rather than focusing on these minute thematic issues, it would be better for donor to simply ask, for example, “what kind of country do you want Montenegro to be, and what support can we offer to make it happen?”

#### **8. Driving – and Harvesting the Fruits of – Human Capital Flight**

Heavy and accelerating emigration came up as a perpetual theme and visible phenomenon throughout this research. This human capital flight results from a sense of hopelessness and perpetuated, institutionalized indignity under governance that repels agency and initiative. Numerous respondents in every country in the WB6 underscored the reality that far from merely being the incidental beneficiary of this trend, Western societies – especially Germany’s, capitalize upon it to remediate their own demographic and economic shortfalls. The resulting dynamic accelerates the societal death spiral in the WB6, assisting an overarching Western fixation on pacification, as well as reinforcing the unaccountable dominance of entrenched political and economic players.

Interlocutors repeatedly voiced a sense of despair and hopelessness; this was also palpable in the tenor of the interviews conducted. “Not only do we feel alone...we *are* alone,” one Serbian respondent

observed, noting the nearly full-spectrum Western governmental alignment behind the Vučić regime in Serbia as a direct and indirect driver of emigration. In North Macedonia respondents noted that the drop in enrollment in schools was visible after the return to school after this past winter break. One Montenegrin interviewee noted that the recent heightened polarization in that country – and the effect on schools and communities – is leading people to finally decide to leave, not wanting their children to grow up in such a toxic environment. In BiH, a respondent in Herzegovina noted this trend is blunted only by the ability of citizens to commute daily to work in the Croatian tourist economy.

Such sentiments – and the reality of emigration – redound to the benefit of established political power. But they also benefit external economic and political interests, some extractive and predatory, both emanating from the West, but also from regional and geopolitical illiberal powers. Furthermore, as a BiH interlocutor noted, those leaving depart with bitterness, feeling rejected and repelled by the prevailing dynamic where they otherwise would like to remain and build a future – a sentiment repeated across the region. The decay, social devaluation, and pervasive corruption noted in the public education and health sectors were observed with universality through the WB6 as propellants for human capital flight. Another evident result of this societal hollowing is the amplification of a sense of being cheated and humiliated by *all* established power (domestic and foreign), which occasionally manifested in expressions of nationalist resentment at the alleged (relative) beneficiaries of this process in their own societies. Some ethnic Macedonians outside the capital expressed such sentiments, while citing in convincing detail the economic and political indignities they had suffered; and these grievances are in turn used by certain political parties to stoke social divisions.

### **9. Despite its Big-Man Politics and Political Polarization, Albania is Different**

In the WB6, Albania feels like a country apart. The manifestations of this difference are evident throughout – and go beyond its being the only WB6 country that did not emerge out of Yugoslavia. Its undisputed geopolitical orientation toward NATO and the EU reflects not just a leadership decision – the popular dominance of this orientation has great depth. In this aspect alone, it stands out; Albania’s support to refugees from Afghanistan after the US withdrawal was noted as a “masterpiece;” another interlocutor noted the country doesn’t need a foreign policy as it will do what the West tells it. But even more importantly, the societal consensus on democratic values also seems unrivalled. There are no visible relevant competing narratives. The political agendas of authoritarian geopolitical players have little traction. In addition, religious differentiation among citizens does not serve as a salient social divisor – nor is this result merely because of any single religion’s dominance. Nor does nationalist irridentism have any evident societal traction in Albania.

Recognizing these advantageous distinctions does not give Albania a clean bill of health on a host of societal, political, and economic indicators; interlocutors underscored these in vivid detail, echoing their WB6 neighbors. These include a highly polarized and durable binary political ecosystem, a personalized vertical of power under Prime Minister Edi Rama that is manifest down to nearly every locality, a political-economic synthesis in service of private interests (domestic and foreign) and which incentivizes and rewards corruption, and the resulting regional phenomenon of human capital flight (and harvest). Again, erosion of public education and health care provision were cited repeatedly.

Yet Albania's differences with the post-Yugoslav WB6 – including its palpable social and economic dynamism, entrepreneurialism, diaspora engagement, in addition to the factors mentioned above (many of which it shares with Kosovo) – mean there is far more for citizens and the democratic West to work with toward realizing accountable democracy, shared prosperity, and human dignity. It seems nonsensical to rope Albania into regional initiatives that focus on a framing of “dealing with the past” and “social cohesion” that have different connotations where they were originally coined. There is no manifest popular enthusiasm for Open Balkan or economic integration with the WB6; Albania is more oriented toward Italy and Greece for trade and travel. Therefore, there is *even less* of an excuse for the West to pursue a pacification approach toward Albania, which could be part of the solution as a demonstrator, rather than increasingly becoming part of the problem with Edi Rama's growing ambition. One might argue that the WB6 frame has actually been *counterproductive*, encouraging leaders (first Berisha, now Rama) to play regional ethnic chieftain politics – now garnering Western backing for precisely that.

## Country Snapshots

These regional trends are manifest in different ways in each country in the region. The following – based on both discussions and observation – provides a synthesized snapshot of the impact.

### Albania

Albania, despite its being a lightning rod among many EU member states, demonstrated positive, youthful energy, massive construction in Tirana and elsewhere, and vibrant social life. Corruption is rife (as elsewhere), but people see regular manifestation of change; the at times seemingly zoning-free approach to development would be a libertarian American investor's dream. But despite various social and political maladies recognizable in the region (and indeed beyond), Albania lacks several others – manifest irridentism or separatism, crippling disputes with neighbors, a wartime legacy, or internal religious division (often instrumentalized elsewhere in the region for political gain). Consequently, there is greater grassroots space for advancement – and a rationale for giving Albania more opportunity.

But the benefit of such opportunity ought to be directed where the deepest repository of democratic values resides – Albanian society – rather than to the disproportionate benefit of PM Rama. He has played an increasingly unhelpful role regionally, including providing an outrigger for his Serbian partner Aleksandar Vučić's irridentist policies – for which there is no evident popular resonance among Albanians. Domestically, state capture is deeply advanced in Albania, sustained by profound and persistent binary political polarization. The media ranks poorly on a host of indicators; some observers noted that it is more subtle than the splashy over the top tabloid atmosphere in Serbia, but equally nefarious. And independent media are easily bought by businesses with political ties. (As one interviewee put it, “Even when you have the sparkle of independent media” it can be taken over.) It is in this country – more than any other in the WB6 – where the West walking its talk on values could be most beneficial in the immediate term.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

While DPC regularly reports on developments in BiH,<sup>5</sup> for this research it sought out interlocutors beyond the cities that attract the bulk of attention (Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar), to instead go to Stolac, Trebinje, and Tuzla. The picture was overwhelmingly negative. The country is shedding citizens (with Trebinje now an exception, due to employment in neighboring Dubrovnik, and, until a recent construction boom fueled by apartments sought by buyers from Banja Luka and Serbia interested in the proximity to the coast, affordable cost of living). People see potential but see no outlet or potential to get traction for it. Even the non-nationalist parties are seen as thinking more about the allocation of positions than an agenda for a new social contract.

There is no remaining hope in in the “international community.” Regionally, the West’s reliance on Belgrade is viewed as bad for BiH, in terms of nationalist agendas but also any hope for democratic accountability (let alone historical reckoning). There is frustration and bafflement with the deepening Western investment in the primary beneficiaries of BiH’s own institutionalized dysfunctional, unaccountable governance: party leaders. This has accelerated nationalist agendas of all who hold them throughout the country, as well as separatism (open in the case of RS, thinly veiled/effective in the case of HDZ-run areas of Herzegovina) and the irredentist beneficiaries next door (again, more open in the case of Serbia, but most energetic – although ostensibly EU-friendly – from Zagreb). The West is perceived as an absentee landlord throughout BiH, disinterested in the lives of average citizens. There may be visits for photo-ops, but no sustained attention at the local level. Diplomats will meet with local government officials but neither they nor donors engage strategically with local civic actors.

After a quarter of a century of donor engagement, there is no local strategy – a donor funds X here and Y there, with no bigger or coordinated cohesive picture (a phenomenon regionwide). Stolac interlocutors revealed that local overlords can even shrug off entreaties by American ambassadors without consequence. The crushing of civic initiative on an ethnic basis (in this case, HDZ Croat vs. Bosniaks and Serbs) is perhaps most stark there. Abuses of power by industry or other economic actors, usually politically connected, were evident at every stop. Despite the daunting political, economic, and social environment, there were still nodes of initiative, positivity, and hope. But in most aspects, the headwinds facing them are strong, and the individuals still trying to engage see few allies – so consequently develop self-sufficiency where possible.

## Kosovo

Many interlocutors in several neighboring countries noted that Kosovo is the most democratic country in the region if commitment to liberal values, popular engagement, political churn, an unshakeable Western posture, media pluralism, and a vibrant civil society are the benchmarks. Several (including in Serbia) also looked enviously at PM Albin Kurti as an example of uncorrupted, consistent leadership – and noted that this was why many in the West saw him as problematic or an impediment to transactional approaches. (The terms “stubborn” and “dogmatic” were often used.) Even an Albanian

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., DPC Policy Brief, *But Is There a Strategy? Defining a Transatlantic Consensus to Catalyze Progress in BiH*, available at: [www.democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DPC-Policy-Brief\\_But-Is-There-A-Strategy.pdf](http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DPC-Policy-Brief_But-Is-There-A-Strategy.pdf)



civic veteran critical of Kurti's recent political moves noted in closing that "Kurti is the what?... *The only uncorrupted leader in the Balkans.*"

In Kosovo itself, however, several interlocutors warned of the Kurti government showing signs of authoritarian behavior, corrupt rule and inconsistencies in the implementation of announced democratic and social reforms. They point to the traditionally vibrant civil society having by and large fallen in line with the government and of elements of government capture. These domestic developments, however, are largely overshadowed, and underpinned, by the externally imposed dominance of the political agenda by the EU-led dialogue with Serbia. All Prishtina-based respondents feel Kosovo is being unfairly pressured by the EU and the US compared with the indulgent approach to Belgrade and Vučić. Some respondents suggested this was partly retribution for the Kurti government's defense of liberal democratic red lines against Brussels and Washington – the first Kosovo government to do so. They ask why the West is turning the most pro-Western country and government in the region into the problem, while courting the most authoritarian regime in Belgrade.

Kosovo Serbs, particularly in the north, continue to find themselves in the most difficult situation since the start of the political dialogue a decade ago (something noted by all Serb interlocutors there – including south of the Ibar), and as a result of the escalation of the situation in the north and between Prishtina and Belgrade in the context of dialogue negotiations at the end of last year. With the December barricades in the north removed, Serbs having left Kosovo institutions, particularly police and judiciary, and majority Albanian ethnic special police deployed to the north, Serb citizens feel more insecure than ever, and betrayed by both Belgrade and Prishtina. As a result, trust in a West that has declared the Kosovo Serb issue the centerpiece of regional negotiations, is lower than ever. Civil society respondents complained about a massive spike in diplomatic visits to the north since November 2022, described by one interviewee as a "zoo," but which is more about PR and photo ops than listening to what people in these CSOs think. Serb interlocutors from the south, on the other hand, complain about again finding themselves totally marginalized by the West, Prishtina and Belgrade, and subject to discrimination by the north, a development established by the dialogue's focus on the north.

### **Montenegro**

The smallest of the WB6, this country was the most visibly, palpably, and worryingly polarized. It is also where the evident shift in Western disposition has done the most recent damage. Frustrating for those who hold democratic liberalism dear, there is really no *credible* liberal values exponent on the political menu. But many interlocutors, despite this grim fact, feel that even more existential issues are on the ballot – independence and Montenegrin identity itself. Respondents who had long hoped for an alternative to Milo Đukanović now feel compelled to support this most persistent Balkan political figure, leading them to wonder how a democracy – and European NATO member – can exhibit such one-party, one-leader rule for so long. The aggressive assertiveness of the Serbian Orthodox Church, backed by Belgrade, and manifest in several first-round candidates (including Đukanović's opponent in the April 2 runoff, Jakov Milatović of the Evropa Sad/"Europe Now" movement) in March 19 presidential elections, drove this conclusion. Parliamentary elections called for June 11 will offer another test for these competing political and social forces.

Inescapably, Đukanović helped set the stage for the current scenario: he never groomed an heir apparent, didn't really work to institutionalize democracy or rule of law, supported the role of the church when it suited him, and never worked to build a bottom-up popular sense of democratic values. The society was kept vulnerable, either by indifference or design. Some interlocutors opined that Đukanović made himself essential in every decision when he was dominant (through August 2020). He set the stage in 2019 with the law on religion for the subsequent political and ethnic polarization, instrumentalizing a policy of ethnic division aimed at halting the political decay of his regime, following on the policy vacuum that emerged after the 2016 entry into NATO. The miscalculations behind this move has had wide-ranging, unintended consequences – most notably ensuring an exceptional opening for Belgrade's invasive political interference – for the stability and future of Montenegro. The sense that there was societal forward movement in his time – EU candidacy and “frontrunner” status plus NATO membership – despite universally acknowledged corruption and self-dealing, was undeniable. Even more importantly, the sense of an *inclusive* Montenegrin identity did gain ground – a regional distinction. That has been largely undone by the combination of lack of inculcation of democratic values and institutionalization of practice, combined with a concerted effort by the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian government to “Bosnianize” Montenegro – inculcating Serbian identity, and generating the need for a coalition “peace cartel.” Western frustration with Đukanović helped feed deluded hope that Prime Minister Dritan Abazović would be a repository of liberal values in a coalition where far more numerous reactionary elements held sway. The sense of siege by self-identifying Montenegrins is palpable. And the Đukanović re-election campaign (slogan – “Milo... nego ko?”) effectively amounts to a defiant “How ya like me now?”

The West, now frustrated with Abazović, seems to hope that Evropa Sad and Jakov Milatović constitute a “third force.”<sup>6</sup> But his salability with self-identified Montenegrins seems low, given his direct engagement in the September 5, 2021 tear-gassing in Cetinje. The question therefore will be what happens if Đukanović does not win, and would some alternative President and new parliamentary coalition remain ideologically incoherent and open to interference by Serbia or Russia. Pronounced frustration, even outrage, at EU (and individual member states), US, and UK policy was voiced repeatedly by interlocutors. Montenegro, like BiH, shows that even countries once seen as “in the bag” can be lost – or at least put at grave risk – through insouciant, derelict, values-free policy.

### **North Macedonia**

Discussions throughout the country, and among both Macedonian and Albanian speakers, suggested a simple sentiment: we changed our name for this? Frustration with the EU process is palpable, with past delays related to Greece and the name change and France's anti-enlargement leanings now being compounded by Bulgaria's opportunistic demands related to the constitution and the very narratives of the country's history. While many feel the SDSM government had already demonstrated its unwillingness to make substantial domestic reforms, there is also worry that as this government sets out to “do the hard work” of talks with Bulgaria (through an ethnic Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs),

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<sup>6</sup> A term employed in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. See synopsis here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Quiet\\_American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Quiet_American)

that this will be used by VMRO as a part of their own, divisive future election campaign. The fact that former PM Gruevski remains in exile in EU state Hungary has not gone unnoticed, with respondents wondering how this blatant evasion of the law can be grounded in democratic values.

Anti-Western narratives have gained ground thanks to the West's goalpost-moving hypocrisy. Disinformation campaigns are evident, with a particularly pro-Russian flavor. The new radical-left Levica Party had originally been a focal point for disappointment with SDSM, but is now a weird terrarium of far-left, pro-Russia, hyper-nationalist sentiment. Observers worry that a return of VMRO will strengthen Levica and contribute to more polarization. The nature of the Ohrid constitutional set-up virtually ensures that the main Albanian party, DUI, remains a constant – in politics, patronage and business. Ali Ahmeti has reconsolidated its control. And the SDSM government relies on a collection of ethnic Albanian parties to remain in power. This feeds ethnic Macedonian nationalism and pro-Russian sentiment, which was heard by a grievance-fueled question posed to DPC: “why do Americans like Albanians so much?” especially since “they have all the power and money.” There is a growing fear of an ethnic carve-up, involving not just Albanians, but also Bulgaria. And no governing parties have helped try to bridge it. Former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's “One Society” campaign theme remained, sadly, just that – never a sincere societal project.<sup>7</sup>

Brain drain is evident in towns and schools, as people either move to the main cities (Skopje and Tetovo) from villages, or simply leave the country. Several people who simply don't think they should have to leave articulated a dogged determination – but expressed frustration at having to fight even more steeply uphill. A private university in Tetovo (established to promote Albanian-language higher education as well as multi-lingual learning) is adapting by increasing its student body with students from places as far afield as Pakistan and Tajikistan. A private university in Gostivar established through a private initiative of locals who wanted to keep their children in town now attracts students from the town, throughout the country and Turkey, offering instruction in a mix of English, Turkish, and Macedonian.

### **Serbia**

The energy in Belgrade masks the authoritarian creep. The tabloids are as sensationalist as ever on widely available street kiosks. Conversations often include the impact of the estimated 150,000 -250,000 Russians (and some Ukrainians and Belarusians) who have come to Belgrade and Novi Sad, with the language commonly heard on the streets and in clusters of Russian-speaking IT office space. However, the biggest frustration is the impact on real estate costs and rents.

People who have dedicated their lives to trying to push Serbia in a democratic direction are baffled by western support for President Vučić, with many comparing the situation today with the atmosphere in the 1990s, though seeing the past in starker black/white terms and the present in a more ambiguous grey. The outskirts are mostly ignored as people moving to Belgrade and Novi Sad leave behind emptier towns. And yet while many know people who have gone to work abroad as truck drivers, they also note

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<sup>7</sup> Kurt Bassuener, “Macedonia: A Happy Ending is Still Possible,” *The Cable*, March 2018. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/38866030/Macedonia\\_A\\_Happy\\_Ending\\_is\\_Still\\_Possible\\_Cable\\_March\\_2018\\_?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/38866030/Macedonia_A_Happy_Ending_is_Still_Possible_Cable_March_2018_?auto=download)

the importation of laborers and bus drivers from Southeast and South Asia, to provide a stream of critical labor.

The SNS controls the gamut: institutions (including coercive power), the media (public and most of the private spectrum), education (for the propagation of its chosen narratives – with evident impact among youth), the corporate spectrum – even much of “civil society.” The Western corporate-SNS synthesis is devastating. Serbia demonstrates as clearly as any country in the region that capitalism and geopolitical alignment trumps democracy in guiding Western policy. Independent-minded citizens feel completely abandoned and gaslighted (a term used by respondents) by Western policy. This amplifies, perversely, external authoritarian narratives (all geopolitical actors are amoral, pursuing their interests – the West are hypocrites), as there is undeniable evidence (lithium mining, for example).

There is brave and worthy activity going on in the periphery, by a handful of people who have not yet given up, sold out, or decided to leave. But the sense of siege and lack of backup by values allies is everywhere. While people in places such as Montenegro, BiH, and North Macedonia feel a sense of abandonment by the West, in Serbia the values allies don't understand how EU and US can at the same time talk about democratic values while supporting a government that has not given up on the ideology of Greater Serbia, now rebranded as *Srpski Svet*. Some interlocutors were very vocal that the West has chosen to back Vučić to the hilt – and that ambassadors and others are resistant to even hearing counternarratives. The failure to reckon at all with its recent and wartime past, or to rebuild institutions, or to address its own deep crime and corruption problems, perhaps make Serbia the country with the longest road towards values-based democracy, as a new generation of war criminal glorifiers, disinformation consumers, and retraditionalized culture warriors are not the exception, but simply the strongest signal in a population that polls show is increasingly anti-Western in its orientation. It is no surprise that EU member state Hungary would like nothing more than for Serbia to join its growing illiberal wing within the Union. However, the rest of the EU, and decision-makers in Brussels, Berlin, and Paris should finally see that admitting an unreformed Serbia – or continuing to reward it as if it were actually progressing toward membership – further devalues the EU as a values-based union.

### **Conclusion: Why this Matters in the Global Liberal/Illiberal Duality**

It is nearly a quarter century after the last violent conflict in the Western Balkans ended and the door opened to EU and NATO for the region. Those outside the region or not working on it might well wonder why – particularly in the midst of a European war even more brutal than those in the former Yugoslav space – developments in the political and social affairs in these countries holds consequence to the democratic world. The answer is directly tied to the wider social and geopolitical currents that compelled the Biden administration to devise and call the Summit for Democracy.

The first Summit followed less than a year after a violent coup attempt in the United States Congress. That established democracies faced internal political threats – and could regress socially into dangerous polarization – was undeniable. At the same time, the democracies and a world order of their design faced unprecedented challenge from aggressive, authoritarian geopolitical players, above all China and

Russia. That this poses an existential challenge to democratic governance, which demands broad consensus on its rules (though not its policies), was and remains indisputable. Russia's neo-colonial attempt to absorb Ukraine, and China's cautious, but important backing of this effort, has only highlighted the stakes. Taiwan's democracy has certainly gotten the message, as have those in Japan and South Korea.

And the commitment to democratic practice and principle that should be embodied in such a gathering cannot but come into question when "illiberal democracies," such as Prime Minister Modi's Hindu-nationalist government in India, are invited. The December 2021 gathering conveyed the overarching impression that the Summit was primarily about *alignment* of participating countries with established democracies – particularly the US – against authoritarian geopolitical challengers, as well as the mutual defense of established democracies against illiberalism at home, rather than a common defense of democratic practice in the world at large.

That tension remains evident, not just in terms of the Summit, but in the everyday policy practice of democracies. Perversely, the posture of the West in the Western Balkans has become more indulgent of autocrats and reactionary local agendas than they were before February 24, 2022. The rationale may well be to secure the alignment of the region, and particularly Serbia – whose President Vučić has further developed this lucrative business model of geopolitical arbitrage in the past year. The on-the-ground research effort for this paper demonstrates that this has boomeranged, alienating those who held hope that the US and EU would stand for democratic principle, and only reinforcing the conviction of those who repudiate these values that their resistance has proven successful. Illiberal actors in the Western Balkans and beyond demonstrate coordination with their allies in Moscow, Beijing, Budapest, and elsewhere (and indeed, a mind-meld on reactionary values), pursuing them on the ground, in capitals, and in international forums. These amount to worst-practices exchanges – and they include indeed "respectable" and clubbable political actors within the European party families, notably the European People's Party. The cohesion, sophistication, commitment and energy of the coordination among those struggling for democratic accountability, rule of law, and broader human dignity needs to rise to confront, match, and overpower these moral and philosophical adversaries.

The Western Balkans is therefore not a sideshow, but rather an early warning that societal values and social protections can indeed be thrown into reverse – with terrifyingly durable results. Western democracies have much to learn from those who have preserved the flame of human dignity against institutionalized reactionary, nationalist, patriarchal, anti-democratic currents.

But the region is also a tectonic front on which wider geopolitical projects and agendas clash. Sadly, instead of confronting those agendas with the West's strongest comparative advantage – its proclaimed democratic values – in word and deed, it has instead seemed to embrace, even *subcontract* to hegemonic regional geopolitical agendas for managerial simplicity, with the attendant delusion that it can thus defang them or reduce their toxicity. Given the West's predominant role in the region, and the leverage it holds to defend peace and affect political developments, this constitutes an entirely self-inflicted, unnecessary moral and policy failure. It is hard to summon a more damning indictment in the annals of post-Cold War foreign policy. And it has everything to do with a West that seems to have

abandoned its own proclaimed values – at least when it comes to those outside the proverbial tent (while it indulges those within its camp such as Poland or Hungary). Nobody should reassure themselves that such a moral defeat will not have consequences on the home front – and in fact, everywhere.

As the democratic world adjusts to a new age of geopolitical – and values – conflict, it's important to recall the moral baggage of the last one: the Cold War. While on the central front, in a then-more Eurocentric democratic world, the moral lines were generally clear, throughout the world the US aligned with authoritarians to confront the (sometimes real, sometimes perceived) Soviet challenge – in the same era as decolonization. The long-term legacy and impact of the embrace and support for illiberal leaders still shapes many countries, relations, and attitudes today, and ought to give pause to those who believe values must be ballast to the immediate-term exigencies of Manichean geopolitics. The West will carry that weight for a long time. Why add to it? And why add to it in a region where this is entirely unnecessary, even counterproductive just in terms of “stabilization” or “pacification?”

The main takeaway of this paper, beyond the lessons centered on the Western Balkans, ought to be this: defense of democracy and its values is too crucial a task to be left to the executive branches. It has to be an all-of-society effort. And this needs to begin, in the first instance, with legislative inquiry, scrutiny, and demands for a review, rethink, and reset of US, EU, and UK policy in the Western Balkans – where it has gone dangerously and shamefully astray. There are numerous values allies regionwide, though much of their energy remains only potential – and may dissipate through emigration, as they feel abandoned. These grassroots actors urgently need moral, political, and practical backup – as well as coordination with those in the West who get why this matters.