

“The center went right a long time ago”

**Voices heard on the road from
Sarajevo to Thessaloniki**

DPC Policy Note #19

by Kurt Bassuener & Valery Perry

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	1
THE DOMINANCE OF THE CAPITALS	1
NO POLITICS IS LOCAL	2
ELECTIONS AND THE PERPETUATION OF KLEPTOCRATIC DYNAMICS	4
RESOURCE EXTRACTION	6
ZOMBIE DIALOGUE ENTRENCHING THE STATUS QUO	7
BALKANS FATIGUE, VALUES FATIGUE	9
LABOR MARKET DYNAMICS IN FLUX	10
CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS	11

“The center went right a long time ago”¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over six days in early June DPC Senior Associates Kurt Bassuener and Valery Perry did a week-long road trip passing through Novi Pazar, North Mitrovica, Prishtina, Tetovo, Skopje, Veles and Strumica. They spoke with 20 people, including civil society professionals, activists, researchers/academics, people with current or past experience in international organizations and others. The aim was to take the pulse of these communities by engaging in very open discussion.

The broad trendlines summarized in the March 2023 report [Gaslighting Democracy](#) have continued on their negative trajectory:

- The overwhelming political, economic and international focus on the capitals saps potential from the periphery, adding to the demographic death spiral of emigration and development neglect, and reinforcing centralizing tendencies among elites.
- The structure and culture of political parties and big-man leader systems results in a lack of any local government autonomy, as well as agency and accountability more broadly. This weakens citizen hope and belief in democracy as a system, and strengthens non-democratic instincts in the center.
- Recent elections in Serbia and North Macedonia have not brought hope for positive change. In Serbia, there is low faith in the system itself, and the results further strengthen SNS’s control. In North Macedonia, there were no criticisms about the integrity of the vote, but the results brought a backlash against SDSM and DUI that has brought reactionary nationalists back. Elections to be held in Kosovo in the next year are viewed as driving Kurti’s often counterproductive choices.
- Resource extraction – particularly mining – is on the radar screen in Trepça (Serbia/Kosovo) and Rogozna (Serbia), though to date there is little high-profile coverage in Serbia, as opposed to the popular response to the proposed Rio Tinto lithium mine, or to various projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- The Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue is neither moving nor making a positive contribution in terms of regional dynamics. It has long since become a shield behind which Vučić deepens his malgovernance in every aspect of Serbian life and politics. It has also led to intransigence in Prishtina.
- Respondents sense that the region has entered a values-free zone of transactionalism, despite continued lip service by local politicians and the EU alike to EU accession reforms and potential.
- There is awareness that the outcome of the US presidential elections will have a potentially major impact.

¹ Lament from female activist in North Macedonia.

Recommendations

These discussions included many echoes from the even more extensive field trip in March 2023. A [review of that report](#) and the six recommendations reveals that there has been little positive change, and in fact some of the trendlines have deteriorated.²

The following serves as a reminder of what DPC recommended in March 2023, together with a brief assessment.

Recommendation	Trendline	Assessment
Rethink and reset the policy posture	☹️	There has been no policy reset, and the continued autopilot is reinforcing the negative dynamics of the status quo
Replace the tactical appeasement of illiberalism with strategic embrace of liberalism	☹️	The trajectory suggests a doubling-down on Belgrade-centric transactionalism, perhaps most evident through the recent Germany-Serbia lithium deal
Radical transparency of all funds going to governments	☹️	No such transparency or requirements have been announced; to the contrary, public or public-private deals being made point to <i>more</i> opaque finances
Democratic success depends on both the local <i>and</i> the periphery	😞	No change; there is a continued focus on capitals, and on funded and empowered intermediaries in the capitals identifying partners/sub-grantees elsewhere
View civil society as a values partner, not a technical implementation service	😞	No change; the extent to which civic voices are being ignored (for example, including protestors in Serbia) shows a willingness to take the word of elites

As DPC has noted many times in the past, there is no place on Earth where the liberal West has more influence to encourage and strengthen responsible good governance, democratic participation and a values-based approach to comprehensive security. Yet values-free transactionalism, often for short-term ends, is winning. This is an enormous waste, as the popular dissatisfaction with the political players and structures on offer is deep enough to drive emigration regionwide. Instead of capitalizing on its proclaimed democratic and humanistic values through consistent and credible policy action to make common cause with those who want dignity and progress, the West caters to and reinforces the *drivers* of despair. To quote one respondent, “If you don’t have a critical mass of good people to demand better, you will not be able to make it better; and the exploitation will enrich everyone but the people here.”

² The recommendation pertaining to Albania is omitted here as the team did not visit Albania on this trip.

Introduction

Over six days in early June DPC Senior Associates Kurt Bassuener and Valery Perry did a six-day road trip passing through Novi Pazar, North Mitrovica, Prishtina, Tetovo, Skopje, Veles and Strumica, en route to a conference in Thessaloniki. Along the way, they spoke with 20 people, including civil society professionals, activists, researchers/academics, people with current or past experience in international organizations and others. In place of a rigorous set of pre-planned questions, the aim was to take the pulse of these communities by engaging in a very open discussion, often starting with, “How are things?,” before raising themes topical and relevant throughout the region to gauge their resonance. Some subsequent probing questions included:

- Are you seeing any changes in the way external actors are engaging in your community/country/the region?
- Are you observing or hearing of any new trends related to natural resources extraction and exploitation (mining, hydro-electric, etc.)
- What are your thoughts on the recent elections (in Serbia and in North Macedonia)? What do they portend?
- What messages would you like to send to a Western policy audience?

This policy note is aimed at sharing some of the key impressions and messages.³ The broad trendlines summarized in the 2023 report [Gaslighting Democracy](#) remain, or have continued on their negative trajectory.

The Dominance of the Capitals

The focus on the capitals continues, expressing and reinforcing a self-harming cosmopolitan prejudice. While in Prishtina, when mentioning plans to spend a night in Veles, North Macedonia, the idea was met with incredulity and the question “but why?” (by foreign diplomats and some Macedonians alike). There is little appreciation for what could be learned from non-capital/non-urban areas, or how strengthening democratic norms and institutions from the bottom-up could perhaps help to reverse years of top-down failure.

While Novi Pazar is the largest city in Sandžak, and is immediately adjacent to the perennial flashpoint of Kosovo, regular visits and substantive engagement by diplomats and others are rare. This prevents the acquisition of new perspectives and insights, and reinforces the Belgrade-centric lens and bias. Discussion with a local civil society veteran illuminated that when money was flowing for P/CVE⁴ activities and the parts of the country with Muslim populations were viewed as at risk/a potential threat, a real opportunity was missed to begin to shift power dynamics; the concept of a “whole of

³ It can be read in tandem with Kurt Bassuener’s personal blog on the trip, available at <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/southern-balkan-roadtrip-reflections/>

⁴ Preventing/countering violent extremism.

society approach” was instead (predictably) sidelined by centralized processes that further funded and prioritized central institutions like the Ministry of the Interior. This dynamic serves Aleksandar Vučić’s centralizing, increasingly authoritarian agenda.

Domestic politicians habitually ignore the periphery as well; this tendency seems particularly evident in Sandžak, where there is an exacerbating history of dismissive regard for that part of the country by Belgrade. When asking a respondent about the pace of construction of a promised highway through Sandžak to connect Belgrade with Montenegro, it was noted that a few years ago Vučić came for a photo opp to launch construction (before elections), but then nothing more happened. This is yet another example of the lack of investment of infrastructure that hampers development in Sandžak and makes it difficult to attract investment as there is no access. The closest airport is two hours away, in Prishtina. The many visitors who only ever fly to Belgrade and see the emerging Belgrade Waterfront skyline fail to see that this comes at the expense of needed infrastructure upgrades elsewhere – access roads, bypasses, parking, etc. It was noted that in Novi Pazar the cracks in the infrastructure can be ignored/smoothed over somewhat because so many people have left, but are painfully evident in the summer when diaspora returns.

This bias is amplified by a growing dismissive tendency toward the smaller countries in the region, with a stronger focus on the aspirational hegemony as key nodes. A respondent in Kosovo said, “it seems like the United States wants to look at the Western Balkans through Croatia, Serbia and Albania; the others are seen as extra, and this decreases their agency.” This mirrors comments heard in 2023, where the smaller countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia are not only ignored, but perennially on the menu of covetous neighbors’ leaders, their parties, and nationalists more broadly.⁵

No Politics is Local

For all the talk about the value of local government and citizen participation in their communities, municipalities have little agency in a regional political system characterized by partitocracy. The lack of genuine and accountable democratic practice in Serbia is evident in general, but particularly in Sandžak, where the political actors have remained the same for a generation. Kosovar Serb and Albanian respondents agreed on at least one thing: that mayors in Kosovo (northern Kosovo and Kosovo in general) don’t do anything without party approval. In the case of northern Kosovo, Bassuener reflected on the fact that northern Kosovo Serbs weren’t represented before or after the (largely boycotted) local elections for new mayors; they did not enjoy true representation from Belgrade-run Srpska Lista; and they don’t feel represented by mayors elected [in a boycotted election with 3.5% turnout](#).

In North Macedonia, some activists noted that they are trying to engage more at the local level; but that this is challenging as the municipalities are “starved;” because there has been no fiscal decentralization (as envisioned in the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement), the municipalities can’t get the resources

⁵ As we noted in *Gaslighting Democracy* in 2023, the evidence for popular resonance of regional agendas among Albanians seems thin. It seems concentrated with Prime Minister Rama himself.

needed to provide the services. This contributes to villages and smaller towns dying. *Mesni zaednici* (MZs, a sub-municipal unit of local organization that is a legacy of Yugoslavia) are informal; and in any case, politics and parties have taken control of them too, with party representatives controlling the MZs.

In the absence of functional local governance/governance and the provision of basic public services, “the majority of the population is pushed either to the church or political parties,” as one interlocutor in Skopje related. (Perry later reflected on the echoes of the right in the United States; starving the government whether intentionally in the service of an ideology or unintentionally due to negligence, [so you can “drown it in a bathtub,”](#) naturally leads to a situation where there is no commons, and no civic space. People are left to opt in to a tribe, often in the guise of religious, nationalist or political party agendas.) In such a political ecosystem, gender equality suffers and declines in general. At the local level, this is even worse; women continue to be excluded and marginalized. Most activists we spoke to working on the promotion of women in political life in North Macedonia harbor little hope that having a female president will lead to any progress, as her party is at its core a reactionary one.

One respondent noted that North Macedonia has legal provisions for holding local referenda on issues, as in Switzerland. However, citizens generally are unaware of this – and unlike in Switzerland, there is little budgetary decentralization let alone the financial means to devote to local priorities, however they might be determined. People are so burdened by politics they don’t know these basic things, and therefore don’t take advantage of a potential opportunity to have more direct impact. Instead, as noted by an interlocutor, “participatory democracy at the local level is almost nonexistent.”

While in North Macedonia, DPC heard an indicative example in how politics squeezes out initiative at the local level, and in turn sends a message that citizens have little to no agency. In Tetovo, a group of young people (those who have not joined the vast numbers of young people who have left to work abroad) renovated an old, disused space that had once been used by Radio Tetova to create a community center. It was ultimately called “[Social Cultural Space Tetova.](#)” They saw the need, volunteered, found funding, put in the sweat equity, and got it running. A lot of people began to use it, and it was described as very successful, open 24/7. However the local government at the time then took over the building from the youth who were using it; the mayor (Bilall Kasami, Besa) accused them of engaging with minors without parental consent, and even propagating pornography among children – for having held a teach-in on menstruation for teens. The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) had provided some of the money, so the youth tried to engage with them to get the government to reverse this; without success. EED later helped them to move. They reached out to embassies, the EU delegation; everyone was on their side and citizens filed complaints as they all worked their way through the activism playbook. After the new authorities threw them out, the building is now not being used. An optimist would wonder if the government will be tossed out in the local elections next year for a move so reactionary and punitive. The pessimist would wonder both whether the lack of positive political options can lead to any change, and whether there will be enough young people even left to affect the vote. That said, the activist who related this episode – a native and local patriot of Tetovo – was easily the most optimistic and energetic (and also most likely the youngest) of our interviewees in the country.

On a related point, when speaking with a resident in Novi Pazar and asking if he sees benefit from EU or other investment, he said that he sees some, but that the companies that are actually doing the work are not local, so the money doesn't stay in the community or region.

Elections and the Perpetuation of Kleptocratic Dynamics

The elections in Serbia both showed the success Vučić has had in reinforcing his dominance in society, while also showing there is some fight left in citizens unhappy with what they have seen happen to their country. The Vučić/SNS coalition has successfully consolidated partners and cadres in every part of the country, effectively marginalizing, co-opting or eliminating opposition. This has resulted in a situation where there is effectively no local governance as decisions are made by or in close cooperation with Belgrade. As noted in a conversation in Novi Pazar, you can't talk about anything related to the mayor, for example, without talking about Vučić. For a place like Sandžak, which has suffered from under-investment and democratic deficits for decades, the lack of real local accountability to local constituents is evident in the non-existent urban planning and poor and strained infrastructure.

Just as there is little hope for the possibility of accountable local officials, there is also no effective opposition in Novi Pazar; the SDA, the party of Sulejman Ugljanin, is formally considered to be opposition, but this is really only because Vučić doesn't want him in the coalition, not because the party ran on a platform incompatible with being an approved subcontractor SNS can control. As a respondent said, "We just have Vučić. He runs ALL... We have no opposition here." However, he went on to say it was good to see that [the opposition in Niš won](#), in spite of electoral count games that began immediately after results became clear. (This cautious optimism was dashed by [post-election engineering](#), as in fact in the end official election results registered an opposition win [only in Medijana](#), one of the five municipalities in Niš – in all of Serbia.) An optimist could hope that this will energize people in any remaining opposition (for example in Čačak and some of the Belgrade municipalities); as a respondent put it, to "speak out more, fight more, vote differently next time.....we are starting to unravel the sweater, as we say."

In North Macedonia, Macedonian and Albanian interlocutors noted trepidation about the return of the VMRO-DPMNE government that had held power for so long, being ousted after a showing of people power. However, we were repeatedly told that everyone was disappointed with SDSM, which had not shown themselves to be very good at running the government. The government eschewed the systemic domestic reform which had motivated many of its voters in 2016, knowing the international focus was overwhelmingly on achieving the Prespa Agreement to end the name dispute with Greece – an undeniably heavy lift. After making this deal, there was *still* no real payoff in terms of moving closer to EU membership. Furthermore, the country was subjected to yet another neighbor's agenda, Bulgaria's demand to include the Bulgarian minority in the constitution, a proposal announced by French President Emmanuel Macron and [adopted by the EU and the US](#). One respondent noted that SDSM did not do a good job of selling some gains they could have highlighted, like getting into NATO, joking that had VMRO-DPMNE done this, it would have been a national holiday.

Basic incompetence was demonstrated by the [passport/ID card fiasco](#), which was noted repeatedly. Following on Prespa, there was a need to change documents to reflect the new name of the country; this was a deadline known to be coming. Yet no action was undertaken until the last minute. In late 2023, the rush began to issue documents as Greece was abiding by the agreement terms that new documents needed to be in use by February 2024. People who had been issued documents just a year earlier with the old name needed to apply for new ones. As around 700,000 people were suddenly rushing for documents, it was impossible to get an appointment for the official photos (which needed to be taken in government offices). People waited hours on the phone and then weeks or months for appointments. Not only did this show technocratic and logistical incompetence, but as one respondent noted, “it was political suicide to do this in February” prior to elections.

One interviewee noted that [after 20 years](#), she was glad that the ethnic Albanian DUI would be in the opposition. In 2024, DUI’s vote share dropped by half. Back in 2017, numerous Albanians voted for SDSM, which helped secure their ascendance – and compelled DUI to align with them. In 2024, a backlash was apparent. She noted that when the Social Democrats came to power in 2017, there was energy and optimism as Macedonians were glad to see the change. [For North Macedonia’s Albanians, DUI remained dominant](#) – despite party leader Ali Ahmeti’s role as deputy to Nikola Gruevski.

Several interlocutors expressed fears that Levica, a hard-core leftist party, has been gaining support; the party previously had two MPs, it now has six. Levica has openly stated that it would enter into a coalition only if there was a promise to not have an Albanian as the head of government. One person described the party as very dangerous and strategic; while their name implies that they are “left,” their actual positions demonstrate a synthesis with the far-right and hardcore Macedonian nationalism. [Levica](#) is assertively [pro-Russia](#), anti-European Union, and anti-NATO. They garnered a lot of youth support, as young people saw them as a third option, other than SDSM or VMRO-DPMNE.

People who follow politics expect to see more fragmentation, like during the Gruevski era, and a division of people into “traitors” versus “patriots;” a return to divide and conquer politics among the elites. DUI’s post-election prospect – emerging following our visit – of re-arranging internal governance demonstrates that this old game continues. The electoral campaign didn’t include platforms or statements of values such as freedom of expression. In these elections people were mostly voting *against*. One respondent observed that the new parliamentary majority proposed a re-organization of the entire government, including new ministers, lines of responsibility, etc. This [passed via urgent procedure](#) – foreclosing adequate debate and public discussion – [the day following our meeting](#). This was viewed with trepidation as regardless of the parties that win, there has been no good governance or justice dividend; as a respondent put it, “there are no boundaries between the state and party interests.” The government of VMRO-DPMNE leader [Hristian Mickovski was formed on June 23](#). One civil society veteran shared his hope that – paradoxically – Mickovski’s government might even “fulfill the wishes of the Colorful Revolution” in terms of reforming governance and justice structures. But this was an outlier view. There will be local elections in 2025, so people will be able to vote after seeing what it’s like having VMRO-DPMNE in power again, one interviewee observed. There could be different outcomes at the local level. However, a generation of experience shows that parties have captured the system

vertically and horizontally; it is hard to imagine change from the bottom-up in such an ecosystem.

Notably, no respondents in Kosovo or North Macedonia mentioned problems with the voting/ electoral process itself, while in Serbia there is little confidence in the process.

Resource Extraction

Comments on resource extraction were heard in Serbia and in Kosovo, which broadly mirrors the anticipated geological opportunities. Not much was noted by respondents in North Macedonia; near Strumica there are copper reserves, and firms (including one from [Canada](#)), have been prospecting there. In Novi Pazar, a respondent noted that [Rogozna](#) mountain is mentioned with respect to [possible gold mining](#). However, he noted that there is very little information about what is happening or the potential. He wryly noted that local politicians don't seem interested in discussing this, and that is has only been because of the work of some journalists that people are starting to know more. "People don't realize that prospecting means that there is a reason to believe that there is something there."

DPC pondered aloud how much of any of the money would remain in and around Novi Pazar; the respondent immediately replied that it's not a question of how much money would stay there, but how much would stay in Serbia *at all*. The fact pattern of the past years shows that Aleksandar Vučić doesn't sell such resources but "*gives them away,*" a strategy that creates licensing opportunities for him/his party, but also insulates his regime from opprobrium from Europe and the wider West regarding the nature of his rule. This business plan sounded familiar, given what has been detailed in [The Moneywasting Machine](#) by Dusan Pavlović. While the respondent didn't have more details, a simple search revealed that Belgrade has [signed a deal with a company](#) from Australia to prospect in Rogozna, but also three other locations, including Trepça, in Kosovo.

Later, in Kosovo (North Mitrovica and Prishtina), the issue was noted primarily with regard to the massive mining complex at Trepça, a now mostly moribund complex that once employed up to 30,000. Trepça boasts 17 minerals, including (according to a local expert) "lead, zinc, copper, cadmium, bismuth, nickel (a little), and antimony." According to her, the mine reflects the north/south divide – Serbia works in the north, and Kosovo in the south; there are two different entry points, and two different headquarters; there is more lead in the north, and more zinc in the south; but the zinc extraction in the south is not working right now. Mining and some small processing is happening (crushing, floatation to concentrate the metals) in Leposavić in the north. Miners in the south are protesting. She added that there are ownership questions about a mine started nearly a century ago as a British company that was later nationalized during Tito's rule. Loans have been taken out, and Serbia has been paying the interest and principal. Serbia claims that it is owned by the Serbia Fund for Development, and as noted above seems to be agreeing contracts that touch on the site.

This same expert noted that with modern methods/technology, it would be possible to in addition extract valuable minerals from waste products/secondary sources such as gallium and cadmium. However, a lot of money needs to be invested to get at it and extract it commercially. The respondent noted the need for a serious study and in-depth analysis on the potential. "Where there is silver, there

is gold.” However, to date any work that has been done has been non-transparent. She and another sectoral expert noted that the environment is a common interest and this should be an opportunity to support community building, local governance and civil society/citizen engagement around the issue of potential and also related environmental considerations, including opportunities for alternative energy production sources.

Zombie Dialogue Entrenching the Status Quo

The overwhelming focus and energy placed on the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue has sucked the oxygen out of reform and progress in general – including in places and on issues *not* related to the dialogue. In a place like Sandžak, in Serbia, the overwhelming focus on and deference to the dialogue has enabled an even more vivid policy of neglect. A respondent observed that diplomats who have a lens that is focused solely on “dialogue” means that they don’t understand, the emerging dictatorship in Serbia – the lack of human rights, minority rights, accountable governance, freedom of speech, etc. However, it’s likely worse: that these values have been *willfully* sidelined in the (vain) hope of achieving an arrangement between Belgrade and Prishtina, while at the same time pursuing other transactions such as the [pursuit of critical raw materials](#).

The dialogue is a distraction from other issues in Kosovo as well, and there is a broad sense among Serbs and Albanians and there will *never* be an agreement, as neither Vučić nor Kurti want to resolve anything through the dialogue or move on *anything*. This is a process that serves and involves only the elites; as one respondent said, the EU-facilitated dialogue “is the least transparent process I have ever seen.” Another respondent said it had become increasingly removed from the actual concerns of ordinary people, pointing out that 10 years ago, when it was launched in 2013, the line was that it was “designed to meet the needs of ordinary people.” In the last three years, such ordinary benefits for ordinary people are basically unheard of.

One interlocutor in Prishtina said that, “Europeans are in their comfort zone with the status quo.” Another person there opined that perhaps the West thinks that if an agreement is signed by two of the most “radical” politicians, that they could kill two birds with one stone, because if they get an agreement, then Vučić would probably lose and be off of the scene (this person was unsure if in such a scenario Kurti might ultimately lose too.) In the meantime, the facts on the ground are taking on their own dynamics. Kurti and Vučić, described by a respondent as “control freaks and different kinds of populists,” are playing off of each other and having an impact on relations on the ground, and in bad ways.

Following the thwarted Banjska attack⁶, one respondent noted that no one should be surprised about the negative reaction in Kosovo. The scale of the planning was “a big shock,” and the Kosovo government has used this to its tactical advantage to strengthen its posture and assert sovereignty in the north. However, this has had a negative effect on its relations with key Western powers. Kosovar

⁶ Two highly informed interlocutors pointedly noted that British MP and then-Foreign Affairs Committee [Chairwoman Alicia Kearns’ assessment](#) during the 2023 unrest and Banjska was proven correct.

Serb and Albanian respondents noted watching with alarm as steps seem to be taken without regard to the rule of law. Most noted was expropriation of land in the north by the Kurti government to ostensibly facilitate border control through checkpoints. This process continues (primarily in Zvečan and Leposavić) as a part of the effort to take down the parallel structures. In addition, while some would argue that it was a long-known possibility, the decision [banning the use of the dinar](#) was rolled out quickly, having a real and negative impact on the lives of people in the north, further corroding space for trust, and placing the reinsurers of public security – EULEX and KFOR – in an (often very short-term) reactive posture.

Some reflected that these steps were probably done quickly because of elections coming up in the next year; Kurti wants to strike while the iron is hot, and may recognize that he has not delivered much domestically. One person described a well-worn regional political tactic; every few months he will do something related to the north. This tempo seems to be accelerating. To paraphrase a respondent, if you keep people in fear, you can control them. The focus on these games related to status and dialogue mean that very little is being done in terms of domestic policy in Kosovo; one person noted that for a self-proclaimed social democrat, his social, health, and welfare policies are seemingly nonexistent – evincing no coherence or vision. The same person wondered why there are not more people out in the streets protesting such a status quo.

Even further, visiting shortly after the country failed to secure a membership in the Council of Europe meant that this was a topic on the minds of many. While many people note that Kurti is seen as a principled and clean strongman in a region full of corrupt strongmen, interlocutors reflected frustration that his dogmatism meant a real lost opportunity. Some questioned why he didn't, for example, simply take the independent [FES draft statute](#) early on, or use it as a starting point to defining terms – and submit a draft into procedure to try to clear this hurdle for membership. In this view, it then would have been up to Kosovo's Constitutional Court to determine its constitutionality, and while the EU may have preferred its own draft, this would have showed readiness for compromise and progress. Other interlocutors doubted that such a move would ever have satisfied the Quint, [whose own proposal was leaked](#) in November 2023. Several questioned whether the Quint's draft would have passed the Court unscathed. A few questioned why Kurti had never developed his *own* proposal, as the Association was first agreed to in 2013 – albeit in a highly different context, when the dialogue was still relatively new and pursuit of mutual recognition (as opposed to “normalization”) was understood to be a central goal of the process.

Discussions often included joint pondering on why Kurti doesn't realize that he would gain strategically by demonstrating support for minority rights. Instead, his single-minded focus produces many own goals, which impact regional and foreign relations. One activist noted that now, “neither Serbs nor Albanians are happy to meet, unless there's a project. It became a market.” Serbs are afraid, and this is leading to more self-segregation. Serbs are leaving, so the ethnic structure is changing. One person in northern Mitrovica framed this by pointing out that the pressure on Serbs is so bad that Serbs are not moving to some “democratic Kosovo,” but to an “autocratic Serbia,” his tone making clear he was using common terms in air quotes.

These dynamics provide ample fodder for Serbs in the north to be critical of the government in Prishtina. Two respondents in northern Kosovo challenged DPC's [assessment early last year](#) that, by many measures, Kosovo was perhaps the healthiest democracy in the region. While the neighborhood has set a quite low bar for comparison, measures such as those taken by Kurti in the past year have done little to make Serbs think he has *any* interest in an integrated Kosovo – including its entire resident population.

While from a different perspective, numerous interlocutors in Prishtina also critiqued not only Kurti's outlook and political orientation ("a populist...he thrives on conflict"), but noted his total dominance of Vetëvendosje, leading to no critical voices in his inner circle – and therefore enabling poor decisions. One said, "By failing to follow the rule of law (by delivering an ASM statute), and by playing the victim card, Kurti has put himself into a position where he wants to make demands without doing what he needs to do."

This works to Belgrade's advantage. A respondent said, "it's easy now for Vučić to say, look, he's crazy... I can't work with him." A veteran Kosovar Albanian civic interlocutor explained that "the last elections changed the dynamic in society. We are not an ordinary captured state; but we're not necessarily moving forward. We are probably the only country in the region that still discusses values. It may not be *a la mode*, but there it is. By and large it is still an open society; one can contradict the government narratives very strongly. But it is not as easy to contradict the level of stupidity – we can see that more broadly, it's a challenge *everywhere* – which suffocates the discussion on values."

Finally, the American presidential elections were recognized as an ambient political risk by all interlocutors in Prishtina. Many noted with incredulity that Kurti does not seem to understand how the situation could change if there is a Trump win in November. Kosovar Albanian respondents noted that the current political and negotiating environment with the Biden administration is far better than would be possible under a possible second Trump administration. One said that Biden is "the last of the Mohicans of the politicians who remember the Balkans. It won't get better."

Balkans Fatigue, Values Fatigue

There is a widespread sense that the West/EU has Balkans fatigue. There is some understanding about competing priorities like Ukraine, but one respondent stated, "they should be able to do two things at once," given the West's considerable advantages in the Balkans. And in general, policy towards the region needs proper coordination and direction. As an interviewee opined, "there's a need for a strict and prompt carrot and stick policy. 'Here are the rules, cause-and-effect.'" He explained further that "instead we've seen years of a 'hot and cold' approach. There is no constant approach; one day there are threats of sanctions; the next day a diplomat is giving away \$100 million for something. They don't really *mean* it. So, after 30 years, our politicians know how to play that game the best." This interlocutor went on, reminding that the West spent billions in the region, and it's precisely because the West has invested so much that it should "go all the way; see it through and not pull out when they lose interest. Why lose the Balkans?"

Another respondent in Kosovo said his main frustration, “is that in a multi-polar world, if you would pick just one region in the world where values matter, it’s the Western Balkans; the West has leverage, but does not use it.”

Further, in spite of much talk about candidacy and negotiations and progress, the EU is losing the values and branding war. [Polls have long showed support slipping](#); either as citizens (particularly in Serbia) lose a membership perspective, but also as people in places like North Macedonia feel that the goalposts just keep moving for them.

The EU also still does not understand the way politics need to be played. One example of the EU being beaten at its own game was offered in Serbia. Anyone who has received funds to organize an event, or to support a CSO project, knows that there are onerous and strict requirements to ensure that EU or other donor logos are prominent and omnipresent. This can move beyond tasteful plaques at a space, or at the entrance of an exhibit or event; stickers can be required on every table and chair. Even a small donation can therefore end up making an event look like a humanitarian version of football jerseys with donors competing for logo placement.

Yet once again, the requirements of CSOs are vastly different than those expected of government partners. (This mirrored observations heard in 2023 about the difference in financial and reporting requirements.) There was an interesting anecdote about substantial EU funds being spent to build apartments for Serbian refugees from Croatia. Presumably in the interest of “partnership” an [EU representative agreed to go on TV with Vučić](#) to promote this expenditure of EU citizen money. However, Vučić’s full-spectrum dominance of the media means that this was parlayed into a win by and for Vučić, with little to no sustained attention on the role – or money – of Brussels. While in theory the EU and others should be driving the process and benefitting from the messaging of their investments, in practice they are, once again, being effectively played by local politicians who have and know how to use the political technology at their disposal.

Labor Market Dynamics in Flux

Strange labor dynamics are evident in the region or explained by people living through it. While brain drain from a place like Novi Pazar is considerable, with people going to work in Germany and elsewhere, local people trying to start businesses struggle to find workers. Because of the inability to find a waiter, a respondent noted planning a self-service system for his snack bar. At the same time, he noted women from Bangladesh coming to work in low-wage jobs there. One must wonder about the intermediary agencies on *both* sides – those bringing people from Bangladesh, Nepal, etc. to the Western Balkans, and those taking workers from the western Balkans, and placing them in Europe.

Similarly, in North Macedonia while there is brain drain, they still can’t find enough people to do construction work, etc. One respondent said that Indonesian workers have come to Macedonia. The South East European University in Tetovo is educating [students from Tajikistan and Pakistan](#); an interlocutor related that it is not only very hard to secure their visas, but nothing has been done to try to find ways to keep them in the country once they have been educated and at least partially acculturated.

While in North Macedonia, it was interesting to hear that the country’s reputation for IT skills continues. One respondent noted needing to hire someone in Bitola, where many young people work in call centers. They are not interested in working in the field of activism; they’re working online for foreign clients. “They don’t even want to think about paying taxes to the state; working online is easy money.” The youth have managed to successfully insulate themselves from the vagaries of employment by local bodies or businesses, while also shielding themselves from the bureaucracy. One can imagine the long-term impact of funding for needed social services, let alone broader social solidarity and cohesion.

Conclusions / Recommendations

These discussions included many echoes from the even more extensive field trip in March 2023. A review of that report and the six recommendations reveals that there has been little positive change, and in fact some of the trendlines have deteriorated.

The following serves as a reminder of what DPC recommended in March 2023, together with a brief assessment.

Recommendation	Trendline	Assessment
Rethink and reset the policy posture	☹️	There has been no policy reset, and the continued autopilot is reinforcing the negative dynamics of the status quo
Replace the tactical appeasement of illiberalism with strategic embrace of liberalism	☹️	The trajectory suggests a doubling-down on Belgrade-centric transactionalism, perhaps most evident through the recent Germany-Serbia lithium deal
Radical transparency of all funds going to governments	☹️	No such transparency or requirements have been announced; to the contrary, public or public-private deals being made point to <i>more</i> opaque finances
Democratic success depends on both the local <i>and</i> the periphery	😐	No change; there is a continued focus on capitals, and on funded and empowered intermediaries in the capitals identifying partners/sub-grantees elsewhere
View civil society as a values partner, not a technical implementation service	😐	No change; the extent to which civic voices are being ignored (for example, including protestors in Serbia) shows a willingness to take the word of elites

As DPC has noted many times in the past, there is no place on Earth where the liberal West has more influence to encourage and strengthen responsible good governance, democratic participation and a values-based approach to comprehensive security. Yet values-free transactionalism, often for short-term ends, is winning. This is an enormous waste, as the popular dissatisfaction with the political players and structures on offer is deep enough to drive emigration regionwide. Instead of capitalizing on its proclaimed democratic and humanistic values through consistent and credible policy action to make common cause with those who want dignity and progress, the West caters to and reinforces the *drivers* of despair. To quote one respondent, “If you don’t have a critical mass of good people to demand better, you will not be able to make it better; and the exploitation will enrich everyone but the people here.”