

D6.1 Background paper



Hybridity and Hybrid Regimes in the Western Balkans in a Time of War and Increased Geopolitical Tensions



Project acronym:	RE-ENGAGE
Project full title:	Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions
Grant agreement no.:	101132314
Type of action:	HORIZON-RIA
Project start date:	fixed date: 1 January 2024
Project duration:	36 months
Call topic:	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Project website:	https://re-engaging.eu/
Document:	Background paper
Deliverable number:	D6.1
Deliverable title:	Hybridity and Hybrid Regimes in the Western Balkans in a Time of War and Increased Geopolitical Tensions
Due date of deliverable:	30 September 2024
Actual submission date:	30 September 2024
Editors:	Diana Mishkova
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Participating beneficiaries:	Whole RE-ENGAGE Consortium
Work Package no.:	6
Work Package title:	Western Balkans
Work Package leader:	Diana Mishkova
Work Package participants:	CAS, EUT, ICH, UNSA, NUPI, SSSA
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	2
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	Demonstrator
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	77
Keywords:	Hybrid regimes, informality/informal practices, neopatrimonialism, state capture, trust, resilience



BACKGROUND PAPER

D6.1 Hybridity and Hybrid Regimes in the Western Balkans in a Time of War and Increased Geopolitical Tensions

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SUMMARY

This paper is the first in a series of background papers aimed to survey the existent capacities and deficits for cultivating democratic resilience in three Western Balkan countries – Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Albania – starting with a dissection of the hybrid governance structures that characterize the political regimes in these countries. The first part of the paper makes a succinct assessment of the long-term legacies of authoritarian pre-communist and communist regimes in the region and the present-day political contexts in the three countries. It also evaluates the capacity of these regimes, following the reforms of the late 1980s and the 1990s, to deliver basic security as well as jobs, predictable livelihoods, and inclusive economic growth, on the premise that this capacity is key if democracy is to become resilient against attempts to undermine it as a system of rule. The second, and main, part of the paper elaborates on several key dimensions of hybridity, namely (the defining characteristics and present condition of) the electoral system, political parties, judicial system, media freedom, and civil society. The third part relates these diagnoses to the potential for democratic resilience in these societies in terms of



vertical and horizontal trust. In the final analysis, the paper aims to improve our understanding of the variation in the level of effectiveness of EU democracy promotion efforts in the immediate vicinity of the EU, as well as of how to increase the likelihood of success for such efforts



Introduction

The purpose of this paper ensues from the primary objective of the Re-engage project, namely to inform the ongoing revision of the enlargement process in a context of radically altered European security following Russia's war on Ukraine. Such revision should proceed from identification and analysis of the mechanisms reinforcing the capacities for democratic resilience, within and on the fringes of the EU, in the face of geopolitical crises and hybrid warfare. The Re-engage project is based on the premise that increased societal resilience in the EU's neighboring countries, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood in particular, will increase the resilience of the extended European community (see Buras, Dumoulin, Kelmendi, Marx 2024). This, in turn, implies that "we must understand the level of hybridity and the degrees of horizontal and vertical trust in a society to know which means are needed to reduce the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by negative internal and external influences in obstructing the EU's democracy promotion efforts" (Bøås, Giske, Osland 2024). Such an approach is intended to improve our understanding of the variation in the level of effectiveness of EU democracy promotion efforts in the immediate vicinity of the EU, as well as of how to increase the likelihood of success for such efforts.

This paper is the first in a series of background papers aimed to survey the existent capacities and deficits for cultivating democratic resilience in three Western Balkan countries – Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Albania – starting with a dissection of the hybrid governance structures that characterize the political regimes in these countries. The first part of the paper makes a succinct assessment of the long-term legacies of authoritarian pre-communist and communist regimes in the region and the present-day political contexts in the three countries. It also evaluates the capacity of these regimes, following the reforms of the late 1980s and the 1990s, to deliver basic security as well as jobs, predictable livelihoods, and inclusive economic growth, on the premise that this capacity is key if democracy is to become resilient against attempts to undermine it as a system of rule. The second, and main, part of the paper elaborates on several key dimensions of hybridity, namely (the defining characteristics and present condition of) the electoral system, political parties, judicial system, media freedom, and civil society. The third part relates these diagnoses to the potential for democratic resilience in these societies in terms of vertical and horizontal trust.

In the course of the following analysis we take on board the key analytical terms that frame the discussion on hybrid regimes (see Bøås, Giske, Osland 2024), such as hybridity/democratic-authoritarian dynamic equilibrium, state capture, neopatrimonialism/clientelism, democratic resilience and democratic backsliding, horizontal and vertical trust. We define *hybrid regimes* as combining some aspects of democratic rule, authoritarian tendencies, and the instability of a conflict-prone state. Such varying “blends” suggest unsettledness – a dynamic democratic-authoritarian equilibrium, which opens the state’s institutional apparatus to informal entrepreneurial activities. The notion of *informality/informal practices* has an ambivalent analytical meaning. It carries positive connotations and effects when referred to survival strategies in a situation of recurrent institutional breakdowns, social crises or political transitions – in brief, frequent regime change as has been the case in the Balkans during the last two centuries; or where certain informal ways of decision-making ensure the efficiency of the politico-administrative system and are smoothly integrated into formal, democratic processes. But where the administration, judiciary and/or legislature are subordinated to informal decision-making and private interests, the state is neither able to effectively fight corruption nor to act as the legitimate representative of the citizens (Pech 2009). We define such form of governance as *neopatrimonialism*, a dualistic system of social hierarchy where patrons use state resources to secure the loyalty of clients in the society. It paves the way to *state capture* and, in some cases, criminalization of the state. The term “state capture” refers to processes whereby state institutions and intermediary actors, such as political parties or parliaments, become hijacked or infiltrated by clientelist networks who lend their informal ways of decision making, including corrupt practices, a formal mantle (Richter and Wunsch 2020). The complex entanglement of formal and informal and patron-client constellations impact the *level of trust*, which is a crucial indicator of democratic consolidation. Vertical trust signifies the citizens’ trust in the state institutions and the political leaders; horizontal is the trust between individuals and groups in a society. *Resilience*, on the other hand, is taken to denote the ability to both withstand and cope with challenges and undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair and democratic manner – in other words, resilience can indicate capacity to maintain/persist and capacity to adapt/transform in the face of uncertainty and change.

In what follows, this set of concepts will be scrutinized against the backdrop of the political developments, and their explanatory and operational value tested against the extant reality, in the three case countries. As a paper aimed at providing background information about these different contexts, it engages primarily with

existent research literature, recent analyses, reports and surveys, to serve as a starting point of our in-depth comparative work “on the ground.”

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND GENERAL CONTEXT

Legacies: layers of authoritarian governance

A common denominator across the WB countries is the long *durée* of political hybridity and state capture, whereby “progressive” outer forms ensure power reproduction through informal mechanisms of maintaining control over state institutions and various aspects of public and social life. The very existence of such a “prehistory” requires certain adjustment of the key concepts used to assess democratic resilience. The notion of democratic backsliding, for example, suggests, not simply a dissipated democratic “horizon of expectations,” but a pre-existent state of more or less entrenched democratic institutions and procedures – a condition that barely applies to our three countries. Similarly, to what extent these states were recently captured, and to what extent state capture passed on from one authoritarian or hybrid regime to another is a question that can barely be convincingly answered. Put succinctly, authoritarianism/illiberalism, clientelism/neopatrimonialism, state capture, vertical and, not infrequently, horizontal distrust are not phenomena engendered by the latest, defective neoliberal transition; these are phenomena that tap into a respectable local tradition and time-honoured practices. Thus, *what we are faced with may well be defined as the resilience of deep structures, where resilience operates to maintain the status quo.*

The convolutions of belated nation building in this part of Europe since the nineteenth century resulted in various forms of façade democracy and, as they came to be called, “forms without substance” – that is, institutions democratic in form and undemocratic, authoritarian or clientelist, in function. Between the two world wars, authoritarian regimes and outright royal or military dictatorships were the rule across the region. The communist period in the history of these countries took different turns – Albania and the Yugoslav federation both split from the USSR but headed in different direction. Albania suspected not only the Soviets, but also China of revisionism, and was growingly inward looking. Yugoslavia, targeted as revisionist by Stalin, developed a unique system of internal democratization within the frames of communist ideology and one-party system and limited market liberalization (Rusinow 1977; Bešlin 2022). This *sui generis* democratic socialism

developed by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia was taken as a model of internal democratization by various Marxist parties around the world. In reality, however, it was suffering from major deficiencies, as informal power brokers and hierarchies established through patronage networks were the prime beneficiaries of the ambitious institutional reforms (Jović 2009, Filipović 2022). After the death of Josip Broz Tito and the beginning of the economic crisis in 1980, clans of communist bureaucrats were increasingly competing for control over the state institutions. Most of them used the rising appeal of nationalism against their opponents, which would turn the crisis into dissolution, paving the way toward the wars of Yugoslav succession (Kuljić 2010, Korica 2016, Petrović 2022). In discussing political hybridity and state capture in countries like Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, therefore, one should also take into account the specific dynamic of nation-state building in the wake of the collapse of a supra-national federation.

The regime of Slobodan Milošević (1987–2000) in **Serbia**, only reluctantly reinstated multi-party system and political pluralism in the late 1990. At the same time, his ruling Socialist Party of Serbia combined elements of communist authoritarianism and nationalist populism. He used the fog of war to exert control over almost every aspect of social reality through overt clientelism, which made Serbian sociologists describe Serbia as a “captured state” as early as 2001 (Antonić 2001, Bakić 2011). While publicly adhering to the principles of democratic governance and rule of law, Milošević’s regime engaged in crushing the protests and controlling the nominally independent media and even orchestrating assassinations of political opponents and journalists. Economic liberalization allowed for the creation of the first private enterprises, but their owners almost exclusively belonged to the new class of financial oligarchs close to the regime (Nikolić 2022). Milošević administration, therefore, may well be defined as the first post-communist hybrid regime in Europe, albeit in many respects it drew upon established authoritarian practices (Antonić 2001). Such practices lingered during the chaotic transition that followed Milošević’s downfall in October 2000, which nonetheless opened up the prospect of the country’s European integration (Spasić 2001).

Since 2012 Serbia has been a candidate country for membership in the European Union. So far, 22 out of 33 chapters of negotiation about Serbian acceptance into EU have been opened, yet there has been little progress in moving forward towards closing them (EU 2024). At the same time, there is an increase in anti-EU sentiment, and this trend is soon likely to match the level of resentment towards the EU of the late 2000s, in the aftermath of massive demonstrations against the independence of

Kosovo, when nationalism and right-wing populism soared (CPJ 2008). Serbia's relations with NATO can at best be described as ambivalent, as a consequence of the 1999 bombing (Fridman 2016). Serbia maintains close relations with Russia and China and pursues a policy of military neutrality, drawing on a foreign policy doctrine of balancing between Eastern and Western powers, once followed by Tito's Yugoslavia.

According to the Constitution of 2006, Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with elements of semi-presidential system that are steadily on the rise (Jovanović 2022). The website of the President of the Republic asserts that, "The Republic of Serbia is a democratic state based on the rule of law and social justice, principles of civil democracy, human and minority rights and freedoms and adherence to European principles and values" (Presidency 2024). Reality, however, is significantly different. Even EU reports on the situation in Serbia, which used to emphasize the fact that "small but significant" progress was made in Serbia during certain periods of the previous decade, have begun paying more attention to corruption in state institutions, irregularities in electoral procedures, and a decline in measurable indicators of the freedom of the media (EC 2023). According to Freedom House Nations in Transit report for 2024, there is a significant decrease in Democracy Score and Democracy Percentage compared even to the 2023 assessments (from 46 to 43), and all indicators such as Electoral Process rating, Independent Media rating and Judicial Framework and Independence rating (to be examined in some detail below), have been on a string of continuous decline for years (Freedom House 2023-4).

The post-1989 trajectory and political complexity of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (BiH), on the other hand, are closely related to the existence of several ethnic and religious, as well as many minority groups within its borders. In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina was among the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In this socialist framework, different ethnic groups could live together in peace under a system perceived as being based on unity and federalism. The most numerous three were Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats (Catholics), and Serbs (Greek Orthodox). The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s set off a chain of conflicts in the area, among them the Bosnian War that ravaged it from 1992 to 1995. The country was swept by horrific ethnic violence during that period, marked by genocide, large-scale forced migrations, and immense human suffering. The intensification of ethnic boundaries occurred as each group vied for supremacy and the autonomy to rule itself within the republic.

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), concluded in December 1995, effectively brought the Bosnian War to an end. The agreement was brokered by the international community, in the first place the United States, with the goal to establish a working mechanism for peace and security within BiH. The country received a complex constitutional make-up with two autonomous regions: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), with a majority of Bosniaks and Croats living there; and the Republika Srpska (RS), with a clear Serb majority. Additionally, the district of Brčko was established as an autonomous administrative unit. The DPA developed a consociational political system in order to facilitate power-sharing among the three prominent ethnic factions. The initiative involved establishing a tripartite presidency consisting of one representative from each ethnic group: Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Additionally, a sophisticated legislative framework was implemented, operating at different levels of administration, including national, regional, and municipal.

The political system under the DPA is characterised by a significant degree of decentralisation, granting notable autonomy to the two entities and the Brčko District. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into ten cantons, each with its own governing council that exercises self-government and legislative authority. An Office of the High Representative (OHR) was created with the purpose of supervising the execution of the Dayton Peace Agreement. The OHR is endowed with sweeping powers, which go as far as the power to dislodge any elected official from power and to make laws to guarantee continued adherence to the Peace Agreement. The justification for this unlimited mandate was that transition into a workable and sovereign political structure would require and could accommodate ample scale assistance. Immediately after the war, BiH faced one of its greatest challenges: reconstruction of a country deeply divided by war and building effective administrations. These political systems combined a nominal democracy with informal power structures strongly affected by ethnic differences and patronage networks. The decentralized and consociational system led to a duplication of almost everything and many layers of administration enough to bring about inefficiencies and administrative complications. Sometimes, the need to have concurrence among many ethnic groups leads to political paralysis. Political parties in BiH are usually organized along ethnic lines, with each party firmly advancing its group interests. This coalition strengthens ethnic divisions and thwarts initiatives for a common national identity. Emphasising ethnic inclusion often effectively disempowers the establishment of merit-based governance and, on the contrary, further encourages clientelist practices. The existence of OHR and international

actors has had a double effect: stabilizing, on the one hand, and destabilizing, on the other. International control has prevented the recurrence of conflict, but it has also diminished the sovereignty of BiH and established dependency on external intervention. In sum, the DPA created a decentralised and consociational political framework to accommodate the ethnic variety of the country and prevent any single group from exerting dominance over others. However, governing through a system marked by entanglement between democratic institutions and informal power and hierarchies involving patronage networks and corruption impedes the progress towards establishing a political system that is both transparent and accountable.

From a historical perspective, hybrid governance structures in **Albania** can be better understood as the result of five main layers of political and societal organization of the state. 1. The deepest one goes back to the roots of five centuries of Ottoman rule where society was organized more along tribal lines, and the state was struggling to emerge, amidst a particularly dynamic geopolitical situation of the region (Vickers 1999). 2. The post-Ottoman era was characterized by efforts to build up the political and bureaucratic foundations of the first Albanian state, and various political fractions were competing for power, giving birth to a system of clientelism and political and informal fractions (Barbara 1999). The first two eras fostered a culture of legality which is far from a Western approach to the foundations of a democratic political system. 3. Furthermore, the communist era was characterized by the personality of a brutal dictator and a handful political actors, isolating the country for over half a century, thus giving birth to a self-help social system that eradicated individual liberty and entrepreneurship. 4. The post-communist period saw the chaotic revitalization of informal economy, the outburst of black economy and uncontrolled privatization, all of which culminated, during 1994-1997, in the uncontrolled burgeoning and strengthening of financial pyramids, followed by the total failure of all state and political structures, a stateless (similar to the Hobbesian State of Nature) nearly three-year period (1997-2000). 5. The following period was characterized by efforts to build the first modern democratic institutions, in the absence of previous democratic culture to draw upon. This brought about serious challenges originating from informal structures and endemic corruption permeating nearly all institutions, which hampered economic development and seriously endangered the democratic foundations of the state. Especially during the last decade, the incapacity of Albanian political elite to deal with widespread corruption is being increasingly coupled with the penetration of organized crime in the political sphere, thus adding another informal structure to the hybrid governance of the country, with the potential to overtake state institutions and state

capture. This faced Albania with the most serious security threat in the post-communist era, undermining democracy and causing a series of other deficiencies, such as increasingly unaccountable governance, curbed media liberties and, generally, decrease in the democracy index (TI and EIU Indexes 2010–2021).

Aftermaths of the socio-economic “transition”

Importantly, democracy as a system of rule must also, in order to achieve legitimacy among its citizens, deliver basic security as well as jobs, predictable livelihoods, and inclusive economic growth – dimensions considered crucial if democracy is to become resilient against attempts to undermine it as a system of rule. In this respect, the Western Balkan countries exhibit notable deficiencies. The so-called transition from state-led planned economy to market economy in these post-communist societies, designed and monitored by the EU and other international actors, turned out to be a socially painful, often brutal and deeply destabilizing process, producing economic shrinkage, poverty in large segments of the population, criminalization of the public space and, in consequence, widespread insecurity. It has been argued that these effects of the economic transition have been amplified in the Western Balkans by an early conflation (in contrast to most of the Central European post-communist states) of political reforms/democratization and liberalization/privatization which, as in the cases of Serbia and BiH, took place in a fragile post conflict context simultaneously with comprehensive efforts at state-building. This convergence, the argument goes, facilitated the emergence of informal networks with political clout: “The absence of well-developed regulatory frameworks enabled a small elite of economic actors to secure considerable private monetary gains, build up strong clientelist networks and systematically increase their influence on politics” (Richter and Wunsch 2020: 47–48).

This argument will be tested in the course of our empirical research. For now, and acknowledging the critical socio-economic dimensions of any democratic system of rule, we will briefly survey the post-1989 economic reforms and their social effects in the three Western Balkan societies under examination.

Human Development Index trends, 1990–2017

	<i>Serbia</i>	<i>Albania</i>	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>
HDI 1990	0.718	0.645	/
HDI 2000	0.711	0.669	0.672
HDI 2010	0.759	0.741	0.713
HDI 2012	0.768	0.767	0.739

HDI 2014	0.775	0.773	0.754
HDI 2015	0.780	0.776	0.755
HDI 2016	0.785	0.782	0.766
HDI 2017	0.787	0.785	0.768
Change in HDI rank 2012–2017	0	0	7
Average annual HDI growth % 1990–2000	-0.11	0.37	/
Average annual HDI growth % 2000–2010	0.66	1.02	0.60
Average annual HDI growth % 2010–2017	0.52	0.83	1.07
Average annual HDI growth % 1990–2017	0.34	0.73	/

Source: Dasic et al. 2020

Prewar Yugoslavia, and **Serbia** in particular, experienced a stark economic crisis during 1980s, with fall in productivity and GDP, a foreign debt exceeding 20 billion USD, hyperinflation and unemployment of 15% (OECD 1990). The program of economic reforms initiated by the federal prime minister was undermined, especially in Serbia where 1,5 billion USD in 1991 were siphoned towards wartime economy. The war brought further devastation, aggravated by international sanctions, which stimulated state-sponsored smuggling, informal transactions engulfing the lion's share of the economy, widespread criminalization and hyperinflation that set a global record (Avramović 1998). The long term consequences of maintaining war economy under sanctions are the key factor that distinguishes the Serbian economic transition from that in the majority of former communist countries (Palairt 2001, 903-919). Selective privatization benefitted Milošević's cronies, although the majority of companies remained in the state's hands, with workers receiving minimal wages or being forced to take temporary leaves (Lazić 2000). An additional blow to Serbian economy was inflicted by the NATO bombing in 1999, rounding the perception of the 1990s as an apocalyptic decade, which has basically devastated the middle class by melting away their savings in a situation of high inflation and pyramidal banking schemes (Dinkić 1997).

Normalization and inclusion of Serbia into global economic currents occurred after the fall of Milošević in 2000, but did not level the field. Selective privatization persisted, it is still rampant today, and corruption continued to reign (Đukić 2018). Constant increase of social inequalities was not followed by rise of the general living

standards (Arandarenko 2017), as was expected by Western political elites at the beginning of post-communist economic transition (Hoen 2012, 43-58). The war enhanced the culture of informal relations in that it made possible the empowerment of a new financial oligarchy and the implication of the political class in countless corruption affairs and irresponsible usage of state funds (Radvansky 2016; Pavlović 2018). During the 2000s and 2010s, the financial elite recruited mainly from political allies of Milošević's regime was beefed up by new tycoons coming from the ranks of entrepreneurs who gravitated around the democratic coalition or the Serbian Progressive Party (Uvalić 2020, 33-65). The economic interests of the financial oligarchy thus formed, together with those of foreign investors, continue to play a major role in directing Serbian politics and social reality.

According to the World Bank data, in 2024 Serbia, a country of 6.6 million citizens, has a GDP of \$75.5 billion, or \$11,278.8 per capita (World Bank 2024). Although the GDP has been on a constant rise since 2020, so is the foreign debt that reached its all-time high of 45 billion EUR in 2024 (Trading Economics 2024). Current unemployment is 9.4%, whereas unofficial labor force (precariat and gray economy) is estimated at 43.8% (Statistical Office of RS 2024).

Serbia is a country of great economic inequalities, with the GINI Index of 39.8, considerably higher than the average for the EU countries of 29.6 (Statista 2024). Net current transfers from abroad are estimated to have slightly declined in the course of 2023, from more than 60 to 59.1 billion USD, but have risen again to 60.9 billion in 2024 (Trading Economics 2024). Yet how much of these are directly channeled into the economy is unclear, since the biggest infrastructural projects involving private investments (such as the Belgrade Waterfront, Expo) and the largest privatization deals (such as Fiat or Air Serbia) are not only non-transparent, but the respective contracts are declared a state secret.

Foreign direct investments in Serbia are on constant rise from slightly over 1 billion euros in 2012 to 4.5 billion EUR in 2023 (Veljković 2024). Exactly the same sum of 4.5 billion EUR are the personal remittances from the Serbian diaspora. As in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is indicative of the gravity of a demographic crisis. Serbia's population (without Kosovo) dwindled from 7.8 million in 1991 to 6.6 million in 2022. Low birth rates and huge emigration, especially among the workforce, is an abiding trend, whereas the average age has increased from 40.2 to 43.8 between 2002 and 2022 (Statistical Office of RS, 2022). According to a report presented to the European Commission, the old-age dependency ratio (20-64) will reach 42.8% in 2035 (Stokic 2021). As average life expectancy in Serbia is 72.7 years, Serbian

sociologists estimate that pensioners are at the mercy of the will of the government to continue with the cycle, whereby pension funds are replenished from the taxes paid from the currently employed, because previous retirement taxes were spent out during the transition of the 1990s. The pension fund, once squandered to finance the wars, will likely continue to be a subject of manipulations (Matković 2020).

The economic crisis in Yugoslavia in the 1980s was a prelude to a broader socio-political and security crisis in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, too, marked by the collapse of the system, the violent disintegration of the state, and a war led by the ethno-national elites (Glaurdić, Filipović and Lesschaeve 2022). Bosnia and Herzegovina (often called "Yugoslavia in miniature") paid the highest war price of this sweeping crisis between 1992 and 1995. Tragic suffering, crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass persecutions, and displacement of the population, as well as significant material destruction disrupted the social structures and ties and set the country back in every sense.

The pre-war decision to begin the socio-political and economic transition from self-governing socialism to a liberal democratic and market system came into effect during the war and the immediate post-war period. After the transformation of the so-called system of "social ownership," bequeathed by socialist Yugoslavia, into state property, a massive and rapid privatization began. However, it was anything but a regular process. Economic transition, especially in its initial phase, is mainly associated with wartime looting and profiteering; it contributed to the further collapse of the surviving institutions and the general mistrust of the population.

Post-war reconstruction primarily relied on donations from the international community. The general non-transparency of the process is very present in the segment where international aid was inadequately used and implemented and often ended up in the pockets of private profiteers. The non-transparent socio-economic transition, steeped in clientelism and corruption (Transparency International 2009), resulted in unequal and unfair economic development and gave birth to a new political-economic class of wealthy tycoons, creating a deep gap with numerous unemployed people. Total unemployment in 2023 was 10.7% (Country Profiles Ilostat 2023), and the average deprivation score among people living in multidimensional poverty was 37.9 percent (Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023).

Remnants of "socialist mentality" and reliance on donations have resulted in political elites "buying" peace with social benefits, introducing rights, and mobilizing specific populations and categories into their electorate. At the same

time, numerous other groups, such as national minorities, civilian victims of war, and prisoners of the camps, and other vulnerable and marginalized groups, are all still neglected. It should be emphasized that a significant part of the population lives on large direct remittances from the numerous BiH diaspora worldwide. B&H Central Bank reports that the total current transfers in 2023 amounted to 5.26 billion KM and are 307 million KM higher than in 2022. Out of the total amount of current transfers, remittances from abroad, i.e., personal transfers, are 3.79 billion KM and are higher by 203 million KM compared to the previous year. Other current transfers amount to 1.48 billion KM, of which the most significant part, 1.36 billion KM, refers to overseas pensions (Paragraf 2024).

Furthermore, during the last decade, we have witnessed a worrying trend of emigration of young people and entire families, primarily to the countries of the European Union. This massive emigration wave coupled with the continuing negative demographic trend threatens the pension system with collapse because the number of pensioners and employees has been nearly equalized – the ratio of workers to pensioners is currently 1.2, i.e., in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina there are 549,000 workers and 415,000 pensioners (Radio Sarajevo 2024). The lack of political will to agree on the remaining reforms and laws that would enable Bosnia and Herzegovina to access the EU Growth Plan, and to open of EU accession negotiations risk leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina in the hinterland of the countries of the Western Balkans region. The lack of progress on the road to the European Union cements the political status quo and is a serious obstacle to economic development and social justice.

HDI Western Balkans (2016)

	HDI	IHDI	Coefficient of human inequality (%)	Inequality in life expectancy (%)	Inequality in education (%)	Income inequality (%)	Birth-rate inequality index	Gini coefficient (2010-2015)
Serbia	0.776	0.689	11.1	7.9	8.1	17.4	0.185	29.1
Albania	0.764	0.661	13.4	9.9	11.9	18.3	0.267	29.0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.750	0.650	13.1	6.7	12.5	20.2	0.158	33.8

Source: UNDP. Human Development Report 2016

Since the early 1990s, when **Albania** began its difficult transition towards an open economy, socio-economic development in Albania has had a wide impact on vertical inequality (between social-economic groups) and horizontal inequality (between

different geographical areas of the country). While according to all indicators, economic growth and improved living standards have been achieved in recent years (World Bank 2024), several factors contribute to persistent inequalities in terms of regional development and the concentration of investments in the areas around Tirana and Durres, of access to education and health, social protection system and issues such as widespread corruption that hinders development and distorts wealth distribution from development across the population, concentrating it among elite groups. According to one of the widely accepted indexes of inequality, the Gini Index for Albania has been first officially published by the National Institute of Statistics INSTAT in 2018, in the “Report on the Living Conditions in Albania”, estimated to 35.4% (decreased by 1.4% from 2017)¹. According to the latest estimation for Albania by the World Bank, this indicator has decreased to 29.4 in 2020 (World Bank 2020).

Economic development in Albania has not been uniform across the country. Urban areas, especially the geographical axis between Tirana and Durres, have experienced more rapid growth compared to rural regions (INSTAT, Census 2023). Rural communities, especially remote and mountainous ones, are characterized by a narrow economy based mainly on agriculture, livestock, tourism, forestry and related activities, and limited social life. Also, over the years, the economy and social life have always suffered a decline (Azizaj, IDM: 2024). The local population’s opportunities for employment are few and the income generated is low. The trend of young people leaving these areas is ever increasing, causing the population that remains in the communities to be small in number and aging. Public social and economic infrastructure is weak and public services are inadequate or absent. The lack of access to resources, services and opportunities is evident causing poverty and social exclusion of the population of these areas. Major demographic changes in the rural population, especially the ever-increasing trend of young people leaving these areas, is threatening the sustainability of agricultural and livestock activities, food security, community life and the preservation of biodiversity and the natural landscape (Azizaj 2024).

Based on the latest estimations of INSTAT that measure living conditions, relative poverty and material deprivation, poverty rate in the country is estimated to have significantly declined compared to the previous period, from 34.4 in 2022 at around

¹ Gini coefficient measures the inequality in income distribution, where 0% expresses the perfect equality where everyone has the same level of income, while a Gini coefficient of 100% expresses full inequality where only one person has all the income. <https://www.instat.gov.al/media/6544/income-and-living-conditions-in-albania-2017-2018.pdf>

22% for 2021 (INSTAT 2022 & World Bank 2023). Unemployment rate is officially calculated at around 11% (INSTAT 2022), despite the widely spread unofficial unemployment, particularly among rural populations and youth and women. High youth unemployment over the long-term period of 2010–2020 has contributed to a widespread frustration among young people and to huge migratory tendencies, particularly in the remote rural areas, with multiple effects in democratic resilience, in a shrinking middle class of the country, and in the political polarization.

II. STATE OF DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

In this section we undertake an analysis of the main ingredients of the political structure, such as electoral system, party politics, the rule of law, the media system and civil society, where we will seek to identify occurrences of hybridity and trace their origins, development, and effects. The kind of governance these elements of the system deliver accounts in great measure for the levels of both vertical and horizontal trust in the three societies, hence for the strength or vulnerability of these states to withstand corrosive foreign interference.

II.1 Electoral systems and practices

A generally acknowledged key requirement for a resilient democratic society is a representative system built on universal suffrage and parliaments elected in free, transparent and fair, hence credible elections. Whereas the formal structuration of the electoral systems in our three countries is geared towards compliance with these requirements, the actual electoral practices and functioning of the system signal major deviations, therefore hybridity.

Serbia

Serbia forms one electoral unit where MP's are elected "by proportional electoral system, by voting for election lists, and by distribution of MPs mandates in proportion with the number of votes that the lists received" (National Assembly 2004). Voting rights are guaranteed to all able citizens over 18 years of age, and the electoral process is conducted by Republican Electoral Commission. Yet the "free and fair" character of the elections is highly questionable. Indeed, there is a broad consensus among social scientists and European observers that Serbia falls into a category of hybrid regimes, where a democratic façade is maintained through regular elections in which political parties are competing, but the influence of the ruling political oligarchy is maintained through informal mechanisms of control over state institutions (Anđelić 2023, Fiket 2020).

Some of the measures the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has used to secure its dominance are within the limits of the law, such as lowering the election census from 5 to 3% in 2020, which effectively splintered and fragmented the opposition. Other more ominous aspects are the untransparent financing of the electoral campaigns of the government, the pressure exerted on employees of public institutions, and the uneven media presence of the candidates, persistently favoring President Aleksandar Vučić and slandering his opponents. Protests demanding the annulment of Serbia's general elections in December 2023, which international observers as well defined as marred, and accusing Vučić of rigging elections through intimidation and pressure on voters were squashed through a combination of propaganda warfare and police action (CNN 2023). Against the backdrop of growing evidence about various election irregularities, there is constant expansion of the sphere of unconstitutional acts such as violence, threats, bribery, and above all blackmailing people to vote for the ruling party with threats of losing their jobs in the public sector, which is under the formal or informal control of the regime, or the private sector under the control of the financial oligarchy close to Vučić (Bursać 2001).

Election irregularities came to a head at the local elections of 2023. Anticipating a defeat in Belgrade, the regime organized bussing in voters from other parts of Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and secured their access to polling places by issuing overnight confirmations of residence in Belgrade. As the result was still a draw, the local elections were simply nullified and rerun, securing a victory for the coalition around the SNS not only in Belgrade but in the largest part of Serbia's municipalities. These events, however, are only partially reflected in the electoral reports of OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) (OSCE 2023). In reality they could easily be described as "free, but not fair" (Milačić 2024).

Thus, the uninterrupted rule of a single party, the Serbian Progressive Party, since 2012 and the equally firm grip of its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, on both the party and the state puts Serbian democracy in danger and its European accession under a huge question mark. Some analysts assert, however, that the Serbian state had already been captured before Vučić came to power, and that his rule has simply directed the inherited hybrid regime toward more overt dictatorship (Antonić 2001; Stojanović 2016; BCSP 2022).

BiH

The electoral system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, too, is deeply intertwined with the hybrid political order that, in this case, emerged from the post-conflict peacebuilding efforts following the Bosnian War. This hybridity, a product of the Dayton Agreement, encompasses a blend of local networks, religious elites, ethnic and national components, and both legal and illegal structures operating within a seemingly legitimate power-sharing political framework. While this complex system was intended to ensure proportional representation and peace among the country's major ethnic groups—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats—it has also entrenched divisions and significantly impacted governance and overall development. Annex 4 of the Dayton Agreement defined the new institutional architecture of a “democratic state” composed of “two entities,” the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, as its constituent parts (Dayton Peace Agreement 1999:50). This, to paraphrase the famous German geographer Karl Ritter, turned the geography of violence into the ongoing future of (post-) Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The consociational model introduced by the Dayton Agreement, which aimed to provide balanced ethnic representation, has inadvertently hindered effective decision-making and governance. The emphasis on proportionality often leads to consensus-breaking rather than consensus-making, as political actors are incentivized to prioritize ethnic and nationalist agendas over broader national interests. This system has resulted in a fragmented political landscape where the electoral process reinforces the separation of ethnic parties, instead of fostering a unified, multi-ethnic democracy (Banović et al. 2021, 67-72). The constitution defines Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs as constituent peoples, while residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who do not belong to or identify with these three ethnic groups, are categorized as “Others.” The term “citizen” is mentioned only in the preamble of the Constitution, effectively denying these individuals the opportunity to participate in the newly established power-sharing system in Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One of the most glaring issues within Bosnia and Herzegovina’s electoral system is the process for selecting the three members of the presidency, which undermines the principle of “one person, one vote.” The election law discriminates against individuals who do not belong to the three constituent ethnic groups, a situation that has been highlighted by the European Court of Human Rights but remains unaddressed by the Bosnian electoral framework (Tolksdorf 2015; Džankić 2015). In

this context, professor of law Edin Šarčević noted that the Dayton Constitution is characterized by a particular “type of authoritarianism that places ethnic interests above all others and excludes a whole range of different interests from state power that do not stem from ethnicity, but represent equally legitimate reasons for political association. All of these, however, remain outside the interests of these unusual constitution-makers” (Šarčević 1997:55). The hybrid political order, while originally designed to maintain peace, now serves as a significant obstacle to the country’s democratic development and effective governance.

Albania

Since the demise of the communist dictatorship, Albania has approved and used seven different electoral systems. Art. 64 of the Albanian Constitution provides a four-year mandate for 140 elected representatives in the Parliamentary Assembly (Article 64, Albanian Constitution). The enacted electoral changes, however, covered almost the full spectrum of possible electoral systems. No other European country has experienced within a period of two decades such extreme electoral patterns – from pure majoritarian system to a mixed system with majoritarian preponderance to a proportional electoral system (Krasniqi 2012). Each election was accompanied by changes in the system and in the formula of translating it into parliamentary seats, thus changing the ratio between majoritarian and proportional mandates, the threshold for gaining a parliamentary seat, as well as the formulas of calculating proportional votes into mandates. Furthermore, the respective system could facilitate or severely hinder the legal and administrative space for independent candidates, new political forces or small political parties (Krasniqi 2012). Following the last changes of the Electoral Code and the Amendments to the Constitution adopted in October 2020, the system was modified to a regional proportional representation system, where voters are able to cast their votes for individual candidates from party lists (Constitutional Amendments, Oct. 2020). This practice was largely disputed by the opposition parties, who accused the ruling Socialist Party and its leader of autocratic tendencies and lack of party democracy.

In the recent history of Albanian democracy, many electoral processes and results, particularly during the period 1995-2013, have been contested by the political parties. On the other hand, the reports from main international electoral observants, such as OSCE/ODHIR, EU and CoE Election Observation Missions, have brought about generally regular processes, despite allegations and/or indications of vote-buying, voter intimidation, misuse of public resources (from the political party in power and illegal personal data usage for electoral purposes (CoE 2022; OSCE 2022;

NDI 2021; EU). These aspects have marked all electoral cycles in the country with a very tense atmosphere in the pre and post run-up periods.

The last parliamentary elections of 2021 were marked by distortions as a result of the interference of the public administration in favor of the ruling party, the imbalance in the numbers of electoral colleges between the regions and the exclusion of emigrants from electoral rights (Kalemaj 2021). Furthermore, they were followed by allegations, supported by prosecution interventions, of organized crime interfering in the process through voter-buying, intimidation, one killing linked to a political rally in Elbasan, etc., thus making the outcome largely contestable.

II.2 Political parties

Political pluralism and the introduction of multi-party political systems were among the first reforms undertaken by the Western Balkan political elites, simultaneously with market liberalization. Through mirroring EU liberal policies and abiding by EU conditionality they hoped to gain and later maintain financial support, as well as to keep the prospect of future EU membership alive. New political parties did emerge and assumed power, however, they became hijacked or infiltrated by clientelist networks – a process that enabled these networks to strengthen their grip on power while lending their informal ways of decision making, including corrupt practices, a formal mantle.

Serbia

According to Freedom House reports in 2023 and 2024, Serbia falls into the category of “partially free countries,” with its index of political rights dropping from 20 to 18 and the index of civil liberties from 40 to 39 within only one year (Freedom House 2023, 2024). The party-political trajectory of contemporary Serbia since the fall of Milošević, the emergence of strong partocracy in particular, are among the main causes for the declining indicators of civil rights and liberties, as well as of the individual freedoms in Serbian society, flying into the face of the government’s claims that the country is approaching the EU standards of a free society (Vuković 2022).

The Democratic Party, led by Zoran Đinđić since 1994, was the first in recent Serbian history to formulate a program of swift reforms which included the conception of democratization as not just a political process, but also a structural change of social reality, insofar as it emphasized the importance of enforcing the rule of law,

implementing meritocratic criteria for advancement in both public and private sector, and improving standard of the population, deemed to be crucial for participation in a democratic system (Dimitrijević 2023: 198–202). During Đinđić’s premiership between 2001 and 2003, however, most of these intended reformist policies were not introduced, mainly due to the lack of control of the new administration over the internal structures of state institutions. The new government proved unable to even initiate the process of “reclaiming the state” from the remnants of Milošević’s regime. Despite his reformist agenda, the first democratically elected Serbian prime minister was lacking robust popular support, which forced him into compromises with remnants of the old regime that still held power in the structures of the military, police, and organized crime. This however did not ensure even his physical survival, though, as after barely two years in office Đinđić was assassinated by an active officer of the secret service (Nikolić 2023, Vasić 2005).

This transitional period following the fall of Milošević’s dictatorship is of crucial importance for understanding the current state of facade democracy in Serbia. No mass trials or truth commissions took place. Several transitional justice mechanisms were implemented, but not consistently, and sometimes even at cross-purposes (Petrović 2017). Save for partial reckoning with the previous regime’s involvement in war crimes, there were no significant efforts by the new government to distance itself from large parts of the old regime’s legacy (Teokarević 2011). At the same time, a corrosive message was sent to younger generation of Serbian politicians that one can engage in an unconstitutional and illegal power struggle with impunity (Mišić 2021). The gradual reforms intended to curb the informal mechanisms through which both old and new elites controlled the state institutions, were only partially implemented and proved to be easily reversible following the murder of Prime Minister Đinđić in 2003.

Although some of the most extreme elements of the amalgam of secret service and drug cartels were purged after Đinđić’s assassination, political life in Serbia in the following years, 2004–2012, was characterized by awkward coalitions between the main political parties (Democratic Party, Democratic Party of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia), which administered their “assigned” ministries as feuds, reducing state bureaucracy to subservience and opening the way to partocratic governance (Pavlović 2020). Blocking the reforms while exploiting nationalist appeals in various degrees was the lowest common denominator of the cooperation between the parties, with token commitment to the European integrations of Serbia. There was

also the consent among these parties to isolate the most rabid nationalists gathered around the Serbian Radical Party, which would routinely have significant electoral showing, but was kept out of power.

That was about to change, as the Radical Party split in 2008. One fraction, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), assumed more moderate rhetoric, which propelled it to power in 2012. Ever since, Serbian politics has been dominated by the SSP, whereas the party itself is dominated by a single person, Aleksandar Vučić, Serbian Prime Minister in 2014–17 and President since 2017. Ever since the SNS came to power in 2012, the political clan gathered around him is strategically strengthening the grip over the country, starting with security structures and the economy (Stojanović-Gajić 2021; N1, 2023). President Vučić also presides over the governing coalition, always keeping the Socialist Party of Serbia as its junior partner and the controlling package firmly in his hands, so much so that other parties, movements and political organizations in this coalition are barely recognizable.

In retrospect, Vučić and his political clientele have been more successful in exerting both formal and informal mechanisms of control over the party and the state institutions than it was the case with their predecessors after 1989, Milošević included. They have achieved almost unprecedented control over the media and almost unrivaled dominance of the entire public sphere, all the while claiming to rule “by the will and in the name of the people” and increasingly branding those who oppose the regime and Vučić’s presidential authority as “traitors,” “foreign agents” or “terrorists” (Kulić 2022). Thus, an argument can be made that the current Serbian regime is moving further away from the patterns of behavior expected from a hybrid regime, which implies at least certain formal recognition of and respect for the democratic process and values, towards those patterns that exhibit the characteristics of a dictatorship (Mišić 2022).

BiH

Despite differences in constitution and trajectory, the political landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits fundamental similarities with the one in Serbia, in that it is profoundly affected by the lack of integrity and independence among the political parties, contributing to the country’s classification as a hybrid regime. Political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina are widely recognized as corrupt entities, with their leaders more focused on maintaining power than upholding democratic principles (Vučen 2023). This pervasive corruption has resulted in the capture of state institutions by political elites, leading to a crisis of legitimacy within the

government. The lack of public trust in the democratic process is exacerbated by clientelism, where political parties mobilize voters through promises of personal gain rather than policy-based appeals. This environment has undermined the ethical foundation of the political system, leading to a widespread perception that political parties are the most corrupt social institutions in the country (Hogić 2021).

The legal framework that governs political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina is another significant factor contributing to the weakness and lack of independence within the political landscape. The absence of a comprehensive register of political organizations and the outdated nature of existing laws on party financing create a lack of transparency and accountability. The legal provisions for regulating party finances are vague and inconsistently enforced, leaving room for significant financial misconduct. Despite numerous recommendations to strengthen these laws and introduce effective sanctions for violations, little progress has been made. The Central Election Commission, tasked with overseeing party finances, lacks the necessary capacity to audit and control the financial activities of political parties effectively, further weakening the integrity of the political process.

Ethno-nationalism plays a central role in the political dynamics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with politicians exploiting ethnic divisions for electoral gain. In Republika Srpska, ruling elites have consistently undermined the constitutional order, challenging state-level decisions and promoting a nationalist agenda. Similarly, Bosnian Croat parties have pushed for ethno-territorial autonomy that exceeds what is constitutionally guaranteed, further deepening divisions within the country. The lack of consensus-building among government entities highlights the inability or unwillingness of politicians to form multiethnic coalitions or agree on fundamental policies. This fragmented political environment empowers anti-democratic actors who hold significant veto power, while marginalizing reform-minded politicians who seek to promote a more inclusive and democratic political system.

In response to these challenges, there have been increasing calls for reforms to strengthen the integrity and independence of political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Civil society organizations, the international community, and some political actors have advocated for establishing minimum standards of internal party democracy to improve transparency and accountability. Proposed reforms include amending laws on political party financing to increase transparency and strengthen sanctions for violations. Additionally, there is a push for broader constitutional reforms to enable Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration into the

European Union, as outlined in a joint declaration by civil society organizations, political parties, academia, and other stakeholders. However, the entrenched flaws in the political system, as demonstrated by the 2022 elections, underscore the significant challenges ahead. Without substantial reforms, Bosnia and Herzegovina will probably remain trapped in its current status as a hybrid regime, where political interests continue dominating the democratic process.

Albania

Political parties in Albania have closely followed the creation of the Albanian state and its path towards consolidation. Their internal organization has reflected their origin and the predominant ideology of the time. But the most important determinant factor has been the Albanian context itself with its history, culture, norms and values (Krasniqi, FES, 2016).

It was only after the changes of 1990 that the political organisations in Albania could develop and exercise their functions freely. In the very first stages, during 1990–1991, political pluralism in the country was slowly emerging under the vigilant observation of the single-party regime of that time.

In 1992 the Democratic Party of Albania took over power, ruling as a dominant actor until the short civil war and state collapse in 1997. The successor to the communist Party of Labor, the Socialist Party of Albania, formed in 1991, re-entered office from 1997 to 2005, and again since 2013. The two parties formally represent two different ends of the ideological spectrum, though they primarily mobilise votes through clientelist networks (Bieber 2020).

The current party model displays many features indicating disregard for transparent and democratic functioning, dichotomy between the legal base and its implementation, and disproportionate power that the political parties exercise on the political decisions and on the constitutional, public and political institutions. The unconsolidated democratic culture and the misunderstanding of the role of political parties in a democratic socio-political environment, has built the perception that political parties are nothing but a source of power and privileges. This has contributed to a distorted citizens' perception of the parties, transferring to them the monopoly of decision-making under a strict and increasingly unaccountable leadership (Krasniqi, FES, 2016).

In the Albanian political system, the parties' support bases are partly regionally centred, the Democratic Party maintaining its base in the north and the Socialist

Party in the south of the country. Although the regional divide is not entirely clear-cut, government alternations are evidently accompanied by regional shifts in the allocation of social assistance and appointments of public officials (Gërzhani and Schram 2009: 308). Both parties are extremely leadership-centred and disciplined. Almost 80% of the smaller parties emerged as splinters from either the Democratic or Socialist Party, usually resulting from disciplinary expulsions of defiant party factions (Krasniqi, 2017: 59–60, 65). The two major camps display partial cooperation in maintaining their “duopoly [...], both in freezing other parties out of the system and ensuring strong party control over the state” (Bieber 2020: 76). Only the Freedom Party, formerly known as the Socialist Movement for Integration, a splinter of the Socialist Party, managed to establish itself as a third player, functioning as a junior partner to whichever of the two major parties wins the elections (Krasniqi 2017: 65). Since 2017, the political system has been dominated by the Socialist Party, while the opposition has suffered from severe internal divisions.

II.3 Rule of law / independence of the judiciary

A key criterion of a democratic society, yet one where the “Europeanization” of the Western Balkans has been found most wanting, is the state of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The latter is closely linked with the quality of government that the purportedly democratic institutions produce, respectively with the general population’s perception of imposed justice or absence thereof, especially as regards fighting corruption, and with the level of trust these institutions enjoy.

Serbia

The division of power and the principle of checks and balances is seriously disturbed in Serbia, with the executive usurping the prerogatives of the legislative and judicial branch, whereas the presidency is holding sway over an entire executive. This trend is to some extent expressed in changes of the legal framework, but is mostly exercised through informal influence. For instance, although the independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by the constitution, it is largely emptied of substance (Stanković 2018; Jovanović 2022) The reform of the judiciary was supposed to be the key legacy of the Democratic Party cabinet (2009–2012). Its stated intention was to produce impartial professional institutions which would guarantee the quality of judicial work and its independence. Those were created indeed – Vrhovni savet sudstva (The Supreme Council of Judiciary) and Državno veće tužilaca (State Council

of the Prosecutors), alongside with the Judicial Academy (Pravosudna akademija) and other educational mechanisms. However, the activity of these bodies met with low trust – only 25% of the population had any faith in their judiciary (World Bank, 2014). Theoretically aimed at purging Milošević's judges, this process was so untransparent that it was nicknamed “pocket lustration” and has further damaged the very cause it was supposed to uphold – the rule of law. It was heavily criticized by the Venice Commission and largely reversed by the Constitutional Court in July 2012, leaving the judiciary in disarray exactly at the time of the advent of the Serbian Progressive Party (Rakić-Vodinelić 2012; Petrov 2023).

Consequently, there was little, if any, judicial resistance to SNS's completion of state capture. Within the system, only lone figures, such as the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance Rodoljub Sabic and the Ombudsman Saša Janković, put up some resistance. They were, however, not reelected to those positions, thus bringing the dissent from within the system to an end. Instead, under the influence of the SNS, another type of judicial reform was enacted through a change in the Constitution in January 2022 (Bošković 2018; Bataveljić 2018). Paradoxically at first sight, it was the SNS-dominated Parliament that made a breakthrough possible by loosening the law on referendums so as to facilitate constitutional changes. Among these some that formally strengthened the independence of the judiciary were introduced. In practice, however, the most visible change was related to the names of the institutions, whereas public trust into judiciary apparently sunk even lower, to 15% according to a recent survey (Čelić 2021), in the face of unresolved cases, public scandals and general absence of judicial dignitaries from the public sphere, which is so striking that at a certain point an opposition leader reported to Interpol the Serbian head prosecutor as a missing person. In practice, the kind of “judicial reform” enacted boiled down to cementing the obedience of judicial system to the regime and creating legal uncertainty for the citizens who are not politically connected (Pejić 2022). Despite these alarming trends, the Council of Europe keeps channeling various support projects to the Serbian judiciary, which puts off national reform strategies capable to reduce popular mistrust (CoE 2024; Serbian Justice Ministry 2019).

This latest constitutional/legal issue hooks to the broader one about the mechanisms used to promote the rule of law in Serbia under the surveillance of the EU. The last two decades did witness some significant formal steps towards EU accession and some concrete breakthroughs, such as Stabilization and Association Agreement (2007), visa liberalization (2008) and even EU candidacy (2012).

However, each of these achievements came about as a result of uphill struggle. The road has been paved not with enthusiasm, but through a carrot-and-stick policy. On the “carrot side” were restructuring of Serbian foreign debt and different forms of financial aid and preferential treatment on the European market. The main “stick” was conditionality policy, which linked the accession stages with the measure of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (Ostojić, 2014). That pressure eventually led to arresting and transferring to The Hague all the indicted war criminals, including Radovan Karadzic (2008) and Ratko Mladic (2012). However, “exporting” the process of transitional justice diminished Serbia’s capacity to face the grimmest sides of its recent past. The political price was mostly paid by different interim democratic parties, whereas the SNS waited out this period in opposition, slowly moderating its anti-Western stance toward some sort of eurorealism fused with national interest. Coming to power after the biggest bone of contention have been removed (2008 Kosovo independence and completion of cooperation with the Hague Tribunal), it was able to stabilize this position in the Serbian public opinion. This was not followed by change in the national narrative, which continued to popularize war criminals, especially after 2015 (Trbovc 2017). At the same time, ambivalence toward the EU was cultivated through hardening of Serbia’s stance over issues of national importance, such as the Kosovo question. Most alarmingly perhaps, there is evidence of growing euroscepticism among the younger generation coupled with a conservative turn in their worldview – tendencies that contrast those in the other Balkan countries (Petrović 2017; KOMS, 2024).

BiH

The judicial system in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is deeply connected to the country's intricate political landscape, reflecting a highly decentralized political framework, with four tiers of government—state, entities, cantons, and municipalities—each possessing independent legislative authority (Bonifati n.d.). While this fragmented structure was intended to preserve peace among the country's ethnically diverse population, it has significantly compromised the cohesion and functionality of the judiciary (Bonifati n.d.). The Constitutional Court of BiH, a hybrid institution composed of both domestic and foreign judges, epitomizes this complexity (Dicosola 2020). Originally intended as a transitional peace-building mechanism, its mixed composition reflects ongoing attempts to balance ethnic interests while striving for judicial impartiality. However, the multi-layered governance and divided judicial frameworks continue to hinder the

harmonization of legal standards across BiH, leaving the rule of law precariously balanced (Bonifati n.d.).

One of the most pressing issues within this fragmented judicial landscape is the challenge to judicial independence. The selection process for domestic judges in the Constitutional Court, conducted by entity parliaments, has been criticized for perpetuating politicized and ethnicity-based appointments (Abazović and Mujkić 2015). The assumption that domestic judges align with the interests of their nominating entity or ethnic group rather than upholding judicial independence undermines the integrity of the judiciary. Specific incidents, such as the dismissal of a judge in 2010 for perceived political disloyalty and the resignation of another in 2023 due to external pressures, highlight the fragility of judicial independence in BiH (Katana 2010; Kovacevic 2024). Despite extensive EU support for rule of law reforms, the persistence of such issues underscores the lack of sufficient domestic political will to implement necessary changes, reflecting deep-seated institutional resistance and marginalization of civil society in the reform process (European Commission 2022).

The role of foreign judges in the Constitutional Court remains a contentious issue, particularly as BiH progresses on its path towards EU integration. Initially envisioned as a temporary measure to ensure impartiality in a divided society, the presence of foreign judges is increasingly being questioned, particularly by Serb politicians who view their continued involvement as an impediment to full sovereignty (Bonifati n.d.). However, the premature removal of foreign judges without first reforming the domestic appointment processes could exacerbate existing problems. The foreign judges have often played a crucial role in politically sensitive cases, where domestic judges tend to vote along ethnic lines. The European Commission and other international bodies have repeatedly stressed that the judiciary in BiH remains at an early stage of development, with serious concerns about its independence and effectiveness (European Commission 2022). The ongoing debate over the future role of foreign judges is emblematic of the broader struggle to establish a fully independent judiciary in BiH.

Public trust in the judiciary is another significant concern, with surveys consistently showing low levels of confidence among the BiH population. The judiciary is perceived as one of the least accessible and most costly public institutions, with public confidence steadily declining over the past decade (Abazović and Mujkić 2015). This lack of trust not only reflects the judiciary's loss of credibility but also has far-reaching implications for the rule of law. Judges and prosecutors, already

vulnerable to political pressures, are further weakened by the erosion of public support, making them more susceptible to external influences within the judicial hierarchy (Schwartz and Murchison 2016). Without significant reforms to restore public confidence and ensure true judicial independence, the rule of law in BiH will remain fragile, and the country's path towards full democratic consolidation and EU integration will be fraught with challenges. Meaningful change will require sustained political will and a genuine commitment to addressing the deep-rooted issues that continue to undermine the judiciary in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Abazović and Mujkić 2015).

Albania

In a discussion of the frequent violations of rule of law in many formally democratic countries in the early 2000s in the Balkans, Latin America, Africa and Asia, Kmezić (2019) emphasizes the realization among democracy scholars that it is precisely the degree to which the democratic rule of law exists in a given society that reflects the democratic quality of the entire regime (Linz and Stepan 1996). Longstanding challenges to the rule of law in Albania (and the Western Balkans in general) have already been highlighted by the Freedom House Reports throughout the years (2015-2023), indicating its absence and an increase in patronage networks and clientelism, which threaten democratic institutions.

In the case of Albania, the heavy legacy of its communist past and the lack of democratic resilience at both societal and institutional levels reflected in low standards regarding the rule of law and an accountable political system. The EU Commission has persistently connected the enlargement perspective for the region and Albania with a functional rule of law system. The strengthening of the rule of law, fighting corruption and organised crime are the cornerstones of the EU-Western Balkans strategy of 2018 and the new accession talks framework of 2020 (Hoxha 2020). Albanian democracy is seriously hampered not only by the widespread corruption but also by the incapacity of its judiciary and executive branches to confront it, as propounded by numerous EU Progress-Reports for Albania (2010-2020). The EU has repeatedly acknowledged that the countries of the Western Balkans should address “clear elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests” (EU Commission Report 2016).

This is why, since 2016, Albania has embarked on implementing a substantial judicial reform, whereby the entire justice system has been restructured and the vetting of all judges and prosecutors has aimed to strengthen accountability across all the political and institutional spectrum (EU Commission, Rule of Law Report, 2024). Before the ongoing judicial reform, the judicial system in Albania was perceived as being highly corrupt, with very close links to politicians and organised crime networks (Hoxha 2020). As a result, in each annual progress report since Albania was granted the EU candidate status in 2014 the EU identifies the judicial system as one of the most corrupt public sectors. The Commission has repeatedly suggested that if Albania fails to reform the judicial system in line with the Copenhagen criteria, it is unlikely that accession talks will be open between Albania and the EU (Vurmo 2020). As a result of the EU conditionalities and internal political pressure to make progress in opening accession talks with the EU, the Albanian Parliament appointed, in November 2014, a special committee with a mandate to make proposals for the reform of the justice system in line with the EU conditionalities and the Copenhagen criteria.

The new legal framework has been conceived in line with the international standards and best practices geared towards strengthening the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and justice in general. However, as a result of the political environment in the country, its implementation in practice remains a challenge, also due to difficulties in finding candidates for the new justice institutions who can meet the criteria and enjoy high moral and professional integrity, but also due to difficulties to have specialized human resources that facilitate the work of the new justice system officials (AHC 2021). Still, judging from the rising level of trust in the Albanian judiciary (see below, p.28), the system seems to fare better than in Serbia and Bosnia.

II.4 The media

In the age of post-truth and cyber and information warfare, access to alternative sources of communication, freedom of speech and media independence are moving more and more towards the center of the discussions about democratic resilience. As elsewhere, media in the Western Balkans, where sources of financing are often concealed and where so-called “regulatory bodies” are seized by the informal networks gravitating around those in power, is among the most powerful tools for manipulating public opinion, exerting information control and suppressing dissent.

Serbia

In the Serbian case, it is worth emphasizing that the current President's first governmental position was that of minister for information back in 1998–2000, during the ultimate decadence of the Milošević's regime. He was presiding over the information war with NATO, introducing heavy fines to independent media, was known both for his intimidation techniques and thorough understanding of the importance of control over this sphere for political survival (Jovanovic 2019). Following his advent to power, therefore, it was only expected that the chief editorial posts and boards of the public broadcasters, such as Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), should be filled by his loyalists. It was equally expected that he would be overrepresented in the coverage, almost without exception in a positive light, with no objection from the Regulatory body for Electronic Media (REM). What was unexpected was that private media, especially televisions with national frequency (like 'Pink,' 'Happy') and most circulated tabloids (Kurir, Informer) would follow such party line with even greater zeal. Together with the digital media and the army of bots on social media, these are the pillars of Vučić's propaganda fortress (Milojević 2023; CRTA: 2022).

No less striking is the intensity of Vučić's self-promotion. His appearances in different talk shows, scripted performances such as saving a child from a storm snow, disciplining his own officials in front of the cameras, bringing TV into his daily life, wrapping himself in the Serbian flag during UN sessions, showing food items at discount prices and literally getting out of a refrigerator (N1 2022; Hajdari 2023) – such tasteless and tireless media strategy was not seen before, and was initially discarded. Once it has proven effective, the opposition was virtually unable to respond, all the more so as independent media in the full sense of that word was reduced to a handful of outlets with limited outreach (N1 television, daily Danas, the Balkan Investigating Network) supported by a thin layer of associations such as the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia or CRTA. In contrast to Milošević's period, when Western funding for such activities was lavish, investigative journalism at present is both underfunded and dangerous. Journalists trying to record evidence of election irregularities are frequent victims of intimidation or physical violence, especially on the part of supporters of the SNS and the infamous "men in black," traditionally monitoring the voters brought to the polling stations in buses and trucks owned by the ruling party. Violent assaults on journalists became most conspicuous during the elections of 2023 and 2024, coupled with the use of

police force and secret service in efforts to break the demonstrations against growing election frauds (N1 2023)

Even so, it needs to be stated that, in terms of engaging in acts of resistance, in demanding the rule of law and a legislation that protects basic human rights and liberties, as well as in terms of informing the public and the international institutions about the corruption within Serbian government and its connection to organized crime – – in all these respects independent journalists from Serbia have accomplished much more than all the political parties that represent the institutionalized opposition (RFE 2020, MFRRMR 2021). Consequently, independent journalists in Serbia have been the target of violent attacks, threats, and numerous more subtle forms of intimidation tactics to a much greater extent than it is the case with the political leaders of the opposition. Although the attempts at silencing journalists have not been fully successful, numerous foreign surveys indicate that almost every television company that possesses a national frequency and almost all the major daily newspapers in the country are now firmly under the control of the political clan gathered around Aleksandar Vučić (EPRS 2019). In reaction to such reports the government came up in 2020 with a Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia, however, fears that it presents a smokescreen have proved justified (Štjepić 2022). Regardless of their structure of ownership, Serbian media remain vulnerable to a combination of political pressure and economic incentives through advertising. Back in 2016, Reporters Without Borders ranked Serbia 66th out of 180 countries in terms of media freedom, in 2019 it backslided to 93th position and is on 98th in 2024 (RWB 2024; KAS 2021).

BiH

The level of media freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, too, has deteriorated significantly in recent years, largely due to the country's complex hybrid governance structure and the increasing political influence exerted over the media landscape (Orme 1997). As a hybrid regime, Bosnia and Herzegovina's media freedom oscillates between limited independence and overt control, influenced by the competing interests of political factions within its two autonomous entities (IPI 2024). This environment has resulted in a worrying trend of backsliding in media freedom, marked by restrictive legislation, hostile rhetoric from public officials, and systemic challenges to the independence of public service media (Public Media Alliance 2023). The European Commission and other international bodies have repeatedly expressed concerns over this decline, emphasizing the need for urgent

reforms to safeguard media independence and protect journalists from intimidation and harassment (Article 19 2023).

One of the most concerning developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been the introduction of restrictive legislation that severely impacts media freedom. In Republika Srpska, for instance, the reintroduction of criminal penalties for defamation in 2023 marked a significant regression in the protection of freedom of expression (Article 19 2023). This legislation, coupled with proposed laws targeting civil society groups and imposing sanctions for disseminating so-called "fake news," has created a chilling effect on independent journalism in the entity (IPI 2024). The Sarajevo canton is also following a similar path, with proposals to sanction the spread of "fake news," further exacerbating the already restrictive media environment (Public Media Alliance, 2023). These legislative measures have been widely criticized by media freedom organizations and the international community, as they pose a serious threat to the fundamental right to free expression in the country (Orme 1997).

The hostile environment for journalists, particularly in Republika Srpska, further complicates the situation. Journalists in this entity face poor working conditions and are often subjected to intimidation and harassment, both from public officials and through a pervasive culture of self-censorship (IPI 2024). President Milorad Dodik's use of hostile rhetoric to denigrate journalists and stigmatize critical reporting has contributed to an atmosphere of fear, making it increasingly difficult for journalists to operate independently (MFRR 2024). The influence of external factors, such as Russia's war against Ukraine, has also heightened the pressure on journalists, leading to further self-censorship and a decline in the quality and independence of media coverage (Public Media Alliance 2023).

In addition to these challenges, Bosnia and Herzegovina's public service media face a dire financial crisis and ongoing political interference. The independence of public broadcasters is compromised by politically controlled steering boards, which undermine the ability of these institutions to operate free from political influence (IPI 2024[2]). There is a growing risk that Bosnia and Herzegovina could become the only country in Europe without a state-level public service broadcaster, a development that would have serious implications for media pluralism and democracy in the country (Public Media Alliance 2023[3]). Without significant reforms and support from both national and international actors, media freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue to deteriorate, further undermining the

country's democratic institutions and its prospects for European integration (MFRR 2024).

Albania

Free speech and media freedom as such are constitutionally protected in **Albania** and invariably recognized by politicians. A press law, a law on audio-visual media as well as a law on access to information serve as further guarantees for media freedom (KAS, Balkan Media Report). The European Commission's 2020 Progress Report for Albania concludes that "As regards the freedom of expression, it is moderately prepared (to start negotiations)." Although the basic legal regulations are in place, however, media in Albania is under the pressure of the economic and political elite, as demonstrated by numerous reports of (governmental and nongovernmental) international actors (Freedom House, Freedom Press Index, 2015-2020).

According to the National Barometer of Media Freedom of 2020 (AHC 2020), data shows deteriorating state of the freedom of expression over the past years, as measured in annual reports by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders. Attempts to impose laws that restrict freedom of expression (such as a law package proposal on anti-defamation brought forward by the government), media responsiveness to use reports on political rallies previously contrived in political parties' offices and other coverages linked to protests are mentioned particularly as signs of waning of media freedom.

According to the latest reports of Reporters Without Borders (2024), press freedom and media independence in Albania are threatened by conflicts of interest between the business and political spheres, a flawed legal framework and partisan regulation. Journalists are victims of acts of intimidation by politicians and organised crime (RSF 2024). On the other hand, according to RSF reports, the most influential Albanian private media are owned by a handful of companies linked with ruling politicians in highly regulated sectors such as construction. While there are hundreds of online media outlets in the country, only a small number have a sustainable business model with transparent funding. Major media outlets include the public broadcaster RTSH, Top Channel, TV Klan, and RTV Ora (RSF 2024). While it cannot be argued that these public media are fully under political control, there are increasing concerns that their independence is seriously threatened.

Election periods witness increased political pressure on reporters and journalists. Politicians curb editorial independence by interfering with the media regulators and appointing political cronies and/or affiliated individuals as managers of the public

media, as when the ruling Socialist Party appointed its protégé and a former member of the parliament, Alfred Peza, as the General Director of the Albanian Public Television (RTSH) in 2023. Thus, it can barely be claimed that editorial independence of media outlets has been fully established in Albania, although media laws are technically of a high standard (IREX Media Sustainability Index Albania 2019).

Critical journalists are often subjected to attacks designed to discredit them by both the government and the opposition, particularly when they bring before the public issues of corruption or inappropriate links between politicians and organized crime. They have trouble obtaining information from state institutions, access to which could be even more restricted by the recently introduced centralisation of government communications. Although Albania's constitution and international legal commitments guarantee press freedom, protection for the confidentiality of sources is insufficient. It was notably flouted by the seizure of investigative journalist Elton Qyno's material in 2023. As a result of a prosecutor's controversial decision, the media were banned from covering the repercussions of a 2022 cyberattack on state institutions (RSF 2024), thus displaying serious lack of transparency and governmental accountability.

Journalists investigating crime and corruption are especially targets of threats. Women journalists, who make up the majority of the profession, face online harassment and in some cases gender-based discrimination within news organisations, although there has been progress in this area. Self-censorship is widespread, but media outlets have nonetheless created a platform for ethical self-regulation, the first of its kind in Albania. Reporters covering demonstrations and police operations are sometimes victims of police violence. Still, organised crime represents one of the biggest threats to journalists' safety. Although the police recently took steps to investigate attacks against journalists, the impunity for these crimes, combined with political attempts to discredit journalists, has created a climate likely to encourage further attacks. In March 2023, Top Channel headquarters were the target of an unprecedented attack with automatic weapons that killed one of its security guards (RSF 2024).

II.5 Civil society

It has been widely held that thorough democratic transformation in the countries of the Western Balkans, with their meagre legacy of civic action, requires comprehensive empowerment of civil society actors as a counterweight to dominant

executives. As of the present time, however, an empowerment of different, “compliant” kind of civil actors can be observed as governments have started to create their own “civil sector” charged to promote their own political agenda and safeguard the regime’s perpetuation.

Serbia

An important source of resistance against the growing authoritarianism of the current regime in Serbia had been the non-governmental organizations and, to a lesser degree, the citizen initiatives or human rights activist groups. According to recent surveys, most citizens of Serbia do not distinguish between these different forms of civil society activism, and a large portion of the population perceive them all as opportunistic agents of foreign influence (Grødeland 2006). It is interesting to note that as early as 2005, during the Democratic Party’s government and the implementation of its reformist program formally defined as intended to lead towards democratization, social science researchers registered a decline in both popularity and financial power of the non-governmental organizations, especially those engaged in defending human rights, freedom of media and social policies. Factors that may have influenced this seemingly sudden change are the reemerging power of nationalism, coupled with social tensions engendered by the radical expansion of economic inequalities at the time, as well as the loss of interest previously demonstrated by the democratic coalition to support non-governmental organizations (Stoiljković 2016). Participation in such forms of social and political activism and the influence of non-governmental organizations generally saw a peak between 2002 and 2004 and is steadily declining ever since.

Already during the first few years after the SNS came to power, authors of a large scale research of non-governmental organizations, conducted between 2014 and 2018, registered a decline in civil initiatives (Popović 2018). Simultaneously, participation in civil initiatives became increasingly branded by the media close to the SNS as being either associated with radical ideological tendencies or financially supported by the opposition and protagonists of foreign interests. During this stage of the gradual “state capture,” the SNS was forging narratives that aimed at discrediting civil initiatives, mostly by attributing to them the same controversial connotations that were previously associated with non-governmental organizations (GI 2024). In time, however, this pattern evolved into the custom of underlining the difference between “good,” that is those willing to cooperate with the government, and “bad” civil initiatives. The path was thus paved for a new phenomenon in the relations between the government and civil society.

Especially since 2020, there have emerged non-governmental organizations set up by public figures known to be open supporters of the ruling party or financial oligarchs close to the inner circle of the president – a process that replicates the earlier one of “absorbing” the trade unions and that signals the rise of an illiberal civil society (Mreža 2005). And if the presence in media of human rights activists and representatives of citizen initiatives has been maintained throughout the years, albeit at a relatively low degree, this could be explained at least to some extent by the regime’s gradually taking over not just the state institutions, but all forms of opposition as well. Especially during the last few years, when debates on new human rights movements in Western Europe and the US began to increasingly influence the public sphere in the Balkan countries, there have been numerous examples of government-influenced media providing space for those experts and activists who over time grew close to the ruling political establishment, while denying space for those experts and activists who criticize the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party and speak openly about the negative effects of government’s policies, especially on marginalized social groups (Prokscha 2023).

Thus, Serbian regime is not only aiming to create opposition parties under the firm control of the ruling party, but also to “devour” the civil society by forging its own non-governmental organizations, human rights activists and civil initiatives (Popović 2018). It is important to note that the majority of leading figures in the civil sector are veterans who once fought against Milošević’s authoritarian system. In that fight they enjoyed the moral, political and financial backing of the West. This is much less the case in their present-day attempts to curb Vučić’s authoritarianism. Hence civil society remains vulnerable, disoriented, divided and unable to productively confront hybridity. A huge potential for political and social change was exhibited in 2023 during the mass protests against violence. However, in the absence of internal guidance and external support, that energy was squandered, and alarmingly huge number of citizens are opting for “voting with their feet” through emigration or simply losing interest in politics (Judah 2019).

BiH

The strength of civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the context of hybridity reveals a complex and challenging landscape. Civil society in BiH operates in a hybrid political order, where the state is neither fully democratic nor entirely autocratic, resulting in a blend of formal and informal practices. This hybridity has both constrained and shaped the development of civil society.

On the one hand, civil society organizations have been instrumental in promoting democratic values and advocating for human rights. According to the EU's 2020 report on BiH, “the overall legal and regulatory framework for civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina is broadly in line with the EU acquis” (Europa.ba). However, their effectiveness is often undermined by deep-seated ethnic divisions, a legacy of the war, and the international community's influence, which has sometimes imposed external models that do not fully resonate with the local context (BTI Project 2024).

A significant challenge facing civil society in BiH is the entrenchment of ethnic polarization, which has persisted long after the end of the conflict. Political elites in BiH remain deeply divided along ethnic lines and often use this polarization to further their own interests. This environment makes it difficult for CSOs to build a shared civic identity across different ethnic groups. Moreover, many CSOs are themselves divided along ethnic lines, limiting their ability to represent the interests of all citizens and contributing to the fragmentation of civil society.

The international community's involvement in BiH, while crucial in the immediate post-war period, has in some cases led to a dependency on external funding and models, which do not always align with local needs and realities (Armstrong et al. 2010). The intensive involvement of the international community in BiH has had both positive and negative consequences for civil society (Barnes et al. 2004).

Despite these challenges, the hybrid nature of BiH's political order also presents opportunities for civil society to find new pathways for engagement. By transcending conventional Western concepts of civil society, which often emphasize non-governmental organizations as the primary actors, there is potential to incorporate a broader range of civil society actors, including trade unions, faith-based groups, and community organizations (Armstrong et al. 2010).

This broader approach could leverage the hybridity of the political order by fostering collaboration between state and non-state actors, potentially creating more resilient and locally grounded forms of civil society. Such an approach would require not only a shift in how civil society is conceptualized but also a rethinking of strategies to strengthen civic engagement and democratic participation in a way that is more attuned to the local context.

For civil society to become a more effective force for democratization and peacebuilding, there needs to be a concerted effort to develop more sustainable and locally driven initiatives. This includes fostering a greater sense of ownership among citizens and reducing the reliance on foreign donors, which often comes with

strings attached. In this way, civil society in BiH could move beyond its current limitations and play a more substantial role in addressing the complex challenges of hybridity in the country's political order.

Albania

Although the first civil society laws were adopted already at the beginning of the 1990s, civil society in Albania has only become more active after 2000. In the Albanian case, the legal and policy frameworks enabling cooperation between public institutions and civil society are largely in place. But some of the main challenges remain, including lack of feedback and follow-up mechanisms, poor implementation of legal framework, and superficial collaboration with CSOs with very limited substantial impact. In a wider sense, the structures and processes of collaboration with the CSOs are badly integrated, not sustainable, loosely defined and lack internalization. Institutions have limited capacities to prioritize public information, consultation, and overall cooperation with CSOs (Bino, Qirjazi and Dafa 2021).

According to the CSO Needs Assessment Report 2016, conducted by the EU-funded Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organizations (TACSO), CSOs mainly provide basic social services, such as health, education, access to legal aid and psychological support in areas where the state has not allocated adequate funds and capacities to support some groups of the population. The limited institutional memory (in terms of capacity-building contributions by the civil society initiatives) and deficient procedures for knowledge management constitute another key challenge to the cooperation between public institutions and civil society (Bino, Qirjazi and Dafa 2021).

Prolonged restrictions on public gatherings mostly during the COVID19 pandemic period limited transparency, and the lack of opportunities to consult with the government (such as the formal procedures of law consultations) have hindered CSO advocacy initiatives, while the public image of the sector slightly deteriorated as a result of ongoing public media attacks on the credibility of specific CSOs and activists. (CSOSI 2021).

Although civil society engagement is of critical importance, most organizations suffer from insufficient advocacy knowledge, capacities and resources to make significant impact – except for a few well established CSOs. Hence, while CSOs at the local level have stronger ties with the communities, they have considerable limitations in terms of adequate structures, resources, and competences to interact

in a sustainable and meaningful manner with decision makers at the local and national level (Bino, Qirjazi and Dafa 2021).

According to the EU Commission, as stated in its last report on the country's progress, the role of civil society in the EU accession negotiation process needs to be strengthened to ensure the meaningful participation and consultation of CSOs in policy-making processes. The existing structures aimed to ensure communication between civil society and the government need to be strengthened and become fully operational (EU Progress-Report for Albania 2023).

To wrap up this part of our overview, it must have become obvious that with respect to the major dimensions of governance – electoral system, political parties, judicial system/rule of law, media freedom, and civil society – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania exhibit the characteristics of hybrid regimes. Although in origins, intensity and persistence the extant forms of hybridity display variations across the three countries and across the different dimensions, a common articulating feature of all of them is the combination of formal compliance with the structural criteria for EU membership and stagnating, or even declining, democratic performance. Notwithstanding the dissimilar driving forces behind this process, in all three case countries we beset with state capture, which appears to be most patent in Serbia owing to Aleksandar Vučić's blatant authoritarian, quasi-dictatorial procedures, but also in ethnically divided Bosnia and Herzegovina and, with some partial qualifications, present-day Albania. One might tentatively hypothesize that the noted gradient is due to the fact that in the first two cases, Serbia and BiH, we are talking of contexts marked by ethno-nationalist cleavages, an onerous process of postwar state-building, and uncertainty over territory and sovereignty, which makes these two societies relatively more unstable and conflict-prone. But in all three states we are presented with the phenomenon of new, democratic institutions being captured by old-regime and newly created informal networks through various kinds of practices, which are formally acknowledged as illegal – patronage, clientelism and cronyism, corruption, manipulation, and control through intimidation or financial dependence.

We can still discern certain specific features as regards the *form of neopatrimonialism and state capture* characteristic of each of these societies. The general insecurity, which war and pauperization of the middle class brought about in Serbia, was a major conduit for regression into less formalized, but more effective patron-client relations. The neopatrimonialism that the regime under Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party has been promoting since 2012 appears sweeping: it has been

characterized by rampant crony privatization, growing securitization of politics, national defense and policing functions geared toward protection of the regime, and usurpation of the right to name caretakers of the remaining state-owned enterprises – in other words, a system of rule where loyalty and/or racketeering provide protection and opens opportunities. Occasional cracks in this system do not come from some reform-minded alternative, but from within, due to clashing influences of different patrons, which however are being neutralized by the current President of the Republic whose power stems from successful navigation through these murky waters. Neopatrimonialism in Serbia, thus, exhibits most of the characteristics of the predatory variety, outwardly mitigated by reformist simulation as per the EU acquis.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, neopatrimonialism is directly linked with the specific constitutional setup. As part of the Dayton Peace Agreement, the Constitution established ethno-territorial power-sharing among three main ethnic groups, neglecting the rights of other minority groups and citizens. Over the last three decades, the three main ethnic-nationalist political parties have monopolized in every aspect the representation of their ethnic groups, assuming the role of prominent patrons. They managed to do that by adopting a public discourse based on a war narrative, perpetually threatening “their people” with the aspirations of the other ethnic groups. This atmosphere of constant fear and re-traumatization has ensured their stable political and economic power. The complex post-conflict context and socio-economic transition further contributed to developing “ethnic patron – ethnic client” relationships. So, the most important articulating feature of the mechanism that undergirds neopatrimonialism and state capture in BiH appears to be the rigid ethnicization of the political process.

Characteristic of Albania’s form of neopatrimonialism is the intimate connection between the political elite and the organized crime, ensuring access to state financial and economic resources of individuals or groups linked directly or indirectly to criminal structures. This kind of criminal-based neopatrimonialism has manifested in the multiple reports about organized-crime interference in both local and national elections through vote buying, which is a major vehicle to state capture. Evidence of the same phenomenon is the large number of arrests, judicial proceedings and court decisions against numerous former and acting mayors, senior officials and ministers (including a deputy prime minister), who are being accused of or charged with corruption and multiple links to criminal organizations (SPAK National Report, 2023).

Considering its two-pronged meaning, it is also important to define the *kind of resilience* we observe in each case. In Serbia, there have been several outbursts of popular resistance and dissent toward manifestations of state capture, however, one barely sees any indications of structural, institutional resilience in this direction. Instead, state institutions and the political establishment are exhibiting marked resilience toward pressures aimed at their reforming. Vested interests of the party elites and of domestic and foreign businesses result in a mimicry of reforms, mostly aimed at scoring positive evaluation in periodic reports on progress of EU integration negotiations. At the same time, much effort and ingenuity is put into sucking the content out of the reforms, which renders pointless at least those of them that threaten entrenched interests. In this respect, the murder of the Serbian Prime Minister in 2003 serves as a dramatic warning about the price of crossing that “red line.”

The strength of the post-Dayton political and institutional structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been evident in recent years, as they have remained unaffected by large, well-organized protests focusing on socio-economic issues or prolonged protests for truth and justice addressing corruption within the police and judiciary (Hasanović et al., 2024). Over thirty years of continuous rule by ethnic-nationalist elites have created an army of civil servants employed by those political parties in state and other official institutions, agencies, public companies at various levels, even electoral commissions, who demonstrate remarkable institutional resilience to change. Efforts to align the law on civil servants with EU standards have been repeatedly delayed. A bulky obstructive, slow and unresponsive, thus resilient civil service is the true embodiment of the deep state observable in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the face of the resilience of the above described neo-patrimonial system, some serious recent attempts at building Albania’s *democratic* resilience deserve attention. Electoral reforms have been intended to increase the transparency of and public trust in the electoral system. Huge efforts have been undertaken by international actors such as the EU, USA, UK to strengthen the judiciary system by reducing corruption and enhancing its effectiveness. The same goes for the support for civil society engagement and free media to ensure exposure of corruption, public information and greater accountability. But most of all, the prospect of EU integration, although it continues to be hampered by the numerous obstacles inherent in a hybrid regime, remain the strongest incentive cultivating democratic resilience in Albania.

III. VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL TRUST

Trust, both horizontal between various segments of the population and vertical between population groups and political elites/the system, is indicative of the popular support for democracy as a system of rule, consequently of the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by negative internal and external influences in obstructing the EU's democracy promotion efforts in our three countries. Unpacking what trust actually means in these societies is a matter of further empirical research. Here we limit ourselves to registering the levels of vertical and horizontal trust, drawing mainly on data from sociological surveys.

Serbia

A 2021-2023 survey indicates an overall rather low *vertical trust* in Serbia which, however, is not equally distributed between all state institutions. The army (traditionally) is by far the most trusted institution in the country (64.4% trust it), whereas trust in the police is 29.4%, and in courts and prosecutors 34.8%. Only 25.9% say they trust the national parliament, 31.2% trust the government, and 39.2% the president. Significantly, massive 72% believe that members of parliament care more about the interests of their parties than of citizens, and only 33% believe that the parliament can exercise control over the executive (BTI 2024b).

Despite that, Serbian citizens tend to have significantly stronger, though overall low, trust in their own national institutions than in international institutions. Thus, when 1660 respondents from a structured sample were asked to evaluate trust in their own parliament and that in the EU parliament on a 11-level scale, the Serbian parliament ended up with a 3.8 average value of trust, whereas the trust in the EU parliament was barely over the average value of 3, which is considered to be a very low level by European standards. The same survey has found that differences in sex, gender and age correlate with the level of vertical trust, but not to the extent that was expected by researchers (Drndarević 2020).

Another research carried out by the non-governmental organization Center for Research, Transparency and Responsibility (CRTA), which includes repeated surveys involving more than 1000 participants over six consecutive years (2013-2018), seems to reveal a new phenomenon that should be taken into account when discussing vertical trust in Serbia. On the one hand, the research has shown continuous growth of trust towards democratic institutions and democratization and substantial rise in resentment towards the authoritarian mechanisms of

governance and control. At the same time, however, each year respondents showed less and less interest in personal participation in civil initiatives or involvement in politically oriented group activities as well as declining trust that the citizens can contribute towards democratization through collective efforts. According to the results of this research, a paradoxical phenomenon reveals itself in contemporary Serbia – while trust in the value of democratization is increasing, trust in collective action and cooperation between different groups in the society is decreasing.

This has been confirmed by the data gathered in the course of surveys aimed at assessing horizontal trust. In the World Values Survey Serbia features among the lowest ranking countries in Europe as far as interpersonal trust is concerned, with only 16.3% percent of the respondents agreeing with the statement “Most people can be trusted” (WVS 2022). As far as the other element of horizontal trust, that between different groups in society, is concerned, results of a research conducted by the Serbian Institute for Criminology and Sociology in 2020 indicate that trust between social or ethnic groups is significantly lower than interpersonal trust among members of the same social group.

A large case study conducted by Serbian psychologist Veljko Jovanović back in 2016 seems to suggest that horizontal trust, i.e. interpersonal trust and trust between groups, is strongly linked to subjective well-being, whereas vertical trust (between the government and the citizens) is not a significant factor in determining subjective well-being (Jovanović 2016). Yet, based on the results of the above-mentioned surveys, it can be concluded that both horizontal and vertical trust are on the decline in Serbia. Finally, as shown by the results of the CRTA survey between 2013 and 2018, Serbia is a country where the public approval for further democratization is on the rise, while personal enthusiasm for participation in the same process is steadily declining (CRTA 2022).

BiH

Vertical trust is notably low also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country deeply affected by its complex governance structure and ethno-nationalist politics. Only 25% of Bosnian citizens expressed approval of the national government. Internationally commissioned polls conducted in 2019 and 2020 revealed similar sentiments among citizens regarding the judiciary, with 75% expressing a lack of trust in this institution and, only 10% of respondents were satisfied with the judiciary’s performance (BTI 2024a). This low level of trust is symptomatic of deeper issues within the country's governance and institutional structures.

The governance system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by a complex division of competences between various levels of government, which has contributed to slow reforms and limited governance progress. This fragmentation makes it difficult for citizens to understand which level of government is responsible for specific areas of governance, particularly at the local level, which is typically their first point of contact (Marko 2021). The lack of clarity and transparency within this system has further eroded trust, as citizens often feel disempowered and disconnected from the decision-making processes that affect their daily lives.

The influence of ethno-nationalist parties has exacerbated the situation. These parties have exploited the institutional setup, which is based on ethnic territorial divisions, to capture state institutions for personal and political gain. This has led to widespread corruption, human rights violations, and a reinforcement of ethnic divisions within society. Nationalist rhetoric has surged, with calls for secession and demands for ethno-territorial autonomy, further weakening vertical trust. While pride in ethnic identity remains high among all groups, attachment to the Bosnian state varies significantly, being highest among Bosniaks (91%) and lowest among Serbs (46%) (BTI 2024a).

To raise vertical trust, the international community has emphasized the importance of creating economic opportunities for young people, enhancing trust in state institutions, and promoting reconciliation through a process that acknowledges past grievances while moving away from divisive rhetoric. By supporting an inclusive future and reinforcing the constitutional order, Bosnia and Herzegovina can hope to lay the foundations of a more democratic, peaceful, and stable society, thereby restoring the essential vertical trust between the government and its citizens.

Horizontal trust, or the trust between individuals of different ethnic, religious, or social groups, in Bosnia and Herzegovina fare no better. According to the 2019 European Values Study, an overwhelming 90.6% of Bosnian respondents expressed caution in dealing with others, with trust in individuals from different ethnicities or religions barely reaching 6% (European Values Study 2019). This pervasive distrust is deeply rooted in the country's history and political framework, particularly in the aftermath of the 1990s war, which left communities deeply segregated and entrenched in ethnic nationalism (Hromadžić 2015). The legacy of the war continues to impact interpersonal relations, particularly in regions that experienced the most intense conflict, further reducing trust beyond familial or in-group boundaries (Whitt and Wilson 2007).

Several factors contribute to this low level of horizontal trust. The ethnic power-sharing system, designed to maintain peace, has inadvertently reinforced divisions by empowering ethnic elites and perpetuating patronage networks (Belloni 2020). These elites, particularly within Republika Srpska, often engage in nationalistic rhetoric, fuelling fears of secession and deepening ethnic divides (Toal and Maksić 2011). International efforts to promote social trust have largely failed to bridge these divides, resulting in a society that remains segregated and distrustful (Pickering, 2007). The strong intragroup loyalty observed among members of the same ethnic group only exacerbates the mistrust towards others, further undermining the potential for cross-community cohesion (Whitt 2010).

In Bosnia the lack of horizontal trust, therefore, poses a significant challenge to national cohesion. Without trust between different ethnic and religious groups, efforts to build a cohesive society remain tenuous at best. The ongoing segregation and the persistence of ethnic nationalism suggest that without significant efforts to build trust across these divides, Bosnia's social fabric will continue to be fragile and vulnerable to external and internal pressures (Mujkić and Hulseley 2010).

In conclusion, the low levels of horizontal trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina are a product of a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. The war's impact, ethnic nationalism, and a deeply flawed power-sharing system have all contributed to a society that is deeply divided and mistrustful. Addressing these issues and fostering horizontal trust is crucial for the country's future stability and development. However, this will require not just institutional reforms but also a significant shift in the social and political culture that currently prioritizes ethnic identity over national unity (Touquet and Vermeersch 2008).

Albania

In terms of the Albanian citizens' vertical trust towards the government and the state institutions, latest data has revealed an impressive level of mistrust, underpinned by perception of an extremely high level of corruption in these institutions. In a recent study undertaken by the Barometer of Euronews Albania in 2022, trust in the government was only 18.5%. Meanwhile, international actors, the embassies of the EU countries and the USA received a remarkably high level of trust. In this regard, the poll showed that the level of trust of the Albanian public ranks first the US Embassy in Tirana as the institution with the highest reliability with 33.2%, followed by the EU delegation with 30.7% and the OSCE with 23%.

From among the state institutions the most reliable is the Central Election Commission, who scores 18.6%. At the same time, the police, which has the task of maintaining order and security, has only 16.1% of the citizens' trust. When it comes to the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK), although it has been trumpeted a lot by internationals as the instrument that will fight successfully organized crime and corruption in Albania and as a model of success, the level of trust that Albanians have in this institution is only 14.2%. The institutions with the lowest level of trust are the Parliament (7.4%), the courts (7.4%), and the political parties (6%).

Meanwhile, the latest data (as of May 2024) reveal a considerable increase of trust in the judicial and prosecution structures. In fact, the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK) has scored a remarkably better performance, from 14.2% in November 2022 to 26.16% in November 2023, to 33.6% in February 2024, and 32% in May 2024. This substantial increase in public trust can be mostly attributed to the high-profile arrests and convictions the prosecutors have achieved during the last two years.

These data on vertical trust reveal lack of democratic accountability of the institutions and the government, yet we see that there are some positive changes coupled with an increase in horizontal trust, understood as inter-personal, society level trust in non-state institutions. So, for example, trust in religious institutions has been constantly higher than that in most institutions and governmental actors, scoring 26,3% in 2022 (Euronews Albania, Trust in Institutions, 2022). At the same time, however, civil society and media are not among the most trusted institutions, when it comes to horizontal trust, scoring respectively 17.1% and 18.9%.

To conclude, in all three countries the level of vertical trust is conspicuously and abidingly low across the full spectrum of state institutions. Rebuilding vertical trust in these societies, and thus the legitimacy of the state, hinges upon strengthening the accountability and transparency of government institutions, promoting inclusive governance and, in the case of BiH, fostering reconciliation. Against the backdrop of such low levels of vertical trust, the similarly low levels of horizontal trust appear striking. The importance of horizontal trust cannot be overstated, as it is a critical component of social cohesion and resilience. Horizontal trust fosters a sense of unity and cooperation among citizens, which is essential for the stability and progress of any society (Putnam 2000). Although we might say that declining horizontal trust is a general phenomenon in the postindustrial world, the combination of low vertical and low horizontal trust compounded with hybrid forms

of rule and captured institutions ends up in low democratic resilience and opens the door wide to the uninhibited work of internal and external destructive forces.

IV. THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON UKRAINE ON DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE AND TRUST

The war on Ukraine has radically changed the geopolitical map of Europe and beyond and forcefully brought to the forefront the question about European security. How do our three countries navigate this complex new situation and did the war affect in some way democratic resilience and the levels of trust in these societies?

Serbia

In Serbia the crisis exhibits several distinctive aspects. The country used to have good relations with Ukraine, which (just like Russia) does not recognize Kosovo. Furthermore, Putin's 2014 annexation of Crimea was conducted, among other pretexts, by invoking the Kosovo precedent, which already suggested some sort of tit-for-tat along these lines in the future (McGlynn 2022). Yet severing ties with Russia would have dealt a severe blow to Vučić regime, which draws significant support from pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments in Serbia. Therefore, the regime has acted very cautiously. It did condemn Russian invasion of Ukraine, but belatedly and with no zeal. It also usually voted against Russia in the United Nations. This was, however, toned down by Vučić's ambivalent statements, filled with caveats and hedging. Moreover, Serbia did not join sanctions against Russia, nor was it arm-twisted to do so. Russia also did not demand Serbia's explicit support, so the country was basically allowed to operate as a loophole in a polarized global situation. Russian citizens saw an opportunity for themselves in this loophole, moving into Serbia in tens of thousands with their businesses as the war dragged on (Beckmann-Dierkes and Rankić 2022). This is indeed the most visible consequence of the war, however, there is no coherent policy towards the Russian immigrants. In general, they can stay as long as they want, but on a "visa run," meaning leaving for Bosnia or Bulgaria for several hours in order to re-enter the country. That used to be every 90 days, and was recently reduced to 30 days. In the absence of any coherent policy on the issue, the full effects of this migration remain to be seen.

So far, there are no indications that Serbia is moving towards less ambiguous position. Concerns that Putin might try to divert attention from his actions in Ukraine by igniting the proverbial Balkan powder keg in either Bosnia or Kosovo by leveraging his influence in Serbia have proved, for the time being at least, to be

wrong (Stavridis 2024). Therefore, Serbia keeps maintaining its equidistant position. In March 2024, its minister of foreign affairs Ivica Dačić could pay a semi-official visit to Moscow on occasion, whereas at the same time Aleksandar Vučić signed a joint statement with Volodymyr Zelensky in Tirana, supporting the Ukrainian position (Miković 2024). Furthermore, Serbia seems to be engaged in arms deals with both sides, so far with minimal consequences (Balkan insight 2024). Its importance in this geopolitical gambit is incommensurate with its economic and political power, but is boosted by the recent visits of Xi Jinping in April, Olaf Scholtz in July and Emmanuel Macron in August 2024.

These developments are reminiscent of Tito's strategy of playing East against the West while relying on the support of the Global South. However, there are serious external and internal limitations to Vučić's reenactment of nonalignment. Internally, Vučić cannot capitalize on these policies as much of his constituency calls for more resolute positioning against the West. However, going in that direction would be highly disruptive for him. On the other hand, abandoning the commitments he took to Russia and China could prove equally dangerous. There are as yet no obvious signs of cracks within his inner circle, which is still a possibility as the external situation remains highly volatile. Serbia is constantly risking sudden isolation from either East or West, or even both at the same time. Against the backdrop of the open territorial questions in the region, most patently in Kosovo, which was on the verge of an explosion of violence in Spring 2023 (Prelec 2023) and again at the time of writing of this paper (early September 2024) coupled with the tensions in Bosnia as manifested during the debate on the genocide resolution in the United Nations (UN 2024) – in this context Serbian foreign policy resembles, in the words of a high governmental official who preferred to remain anonymous, “precarious dancing on a dime.”

It is difficult to gauge the effect of war in Ukraine on the levels of trust and resilience in Serbian society. Vertical trust keeps low, but it might be that the crisis has increased it to some extent, since Vučić was actively fearmongering, stockpiling vital resources and conveying a sense of imminent danger, while successfully presenting himself as the only one capable to navigate the country through those troubled waters. Groups such as Grupa Okotbar (October Group) who demand tougher measures toward Russia remain marginalized and labelled as NATO lobbyists, while one can observe a tug-of-war in posters and graffiti between groups such as RUBS (Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Serbs against War) and unidentified groups keen on painting the letter “Z,” wearing it on T-shirts etc. as

well as groups who advocate open siding with Russia, such as the Russian Party etc. Such acts are currently neither encouraged nor discouraged by the regime, which remains committed to European integrations but is flirting with Russia – a country that has powerful supporters in the top echelons of power and key state institutions, especially the security apparatus. Importantly, during the December 2023 elections, which solidified Vučić's parliamentary majority, his foreign policy was not substantially challenged by the opposition.

BiH

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex political landscape, the war in Ukraine has not significantly impacted the core elements shaping political hybridity in the country. The entrenched power structures, deeply rooted in ethnic divisions and the post-Dayton framework, remain largely unaffected by external conflicts. However, what has become more pronounced is the public's perception of allegiance towards Russia or Ukraine, which varies depending on ethnic or entity affiliations. This division is evident in the symbolic use of the letter "Z" on various objects and road signs throughout Republika Srpska, particularly in Eastern Herzegovina, indicating popular support for Russia's actions within this entity.

Conversely, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a clear stance against Russian aggression in Ukraine. These differing perceptions underscore the deep-seated ethnic and entity-based divides within Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have been exacerbated rather than reshaped by the war in Ukraine. Despite the visible symbols and public opinions, there has been no substantial research indicating the extent to which the Russian aggression has influenced various dimensions of Bosnia and Herzegovina's democratic resilience or vulnerability.

Thus, while the war in Ukraine has highlighted existing divisions and allegiances within Bosnia and Herzegovina, it has not fundamentally altered the hybrid political order. The country continues to grapple with the challenges of state capture, entrenched ethnic divisions, and a complex political system that was designed to manage these tensions but in fact often exacerbates them. The focus remains on internal issues of governance and ethnic power dynamics, with external conflicts serving more as a mirror to existing domestic realities than as a transformative force.

Albania

The political establishment and public opinion in Albania, in contrast, appear united in their condemnation of Russia's aggression and in their pro-Western orientation. As a rotating member of the UN Security Council, Albania voted on a draft resolution, co-authored with the US, which condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The draft resolution was not adopted due to Russia's veto, while China abstained. Yet this episode indicates that, building on its strong partnership with US and its NATO membership, Albania aims to play a disproportionate role at the international arena and take responsibilities outmatching its defence and security capacities.

At the same time, the ruling party has shown keen on using the Russian geopolitical threat in the Western Balkans as an instrument of pressure to accelerate EU membership negotiations – efforts that met with limited success. Meanwhile, however, it has become clear that Albanians are becoming increasingly frustrated about the EU's failure to give a green light to the accession of Albania and North Macedonia into the Union, fuelled also by the Bulgarian veto to North Macedonia. The growing concern is that the government might further slip away from democratic standards, towards a more unaccountable governance, leaving a fertile place for stabilocracy instead of democracy in the Western Balkans.

On the whole, the wider geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans is changing rapidly towards a new balance between Russia-oriented political elites, such as the Serbian both inside Serbia and in BiH, and the Euro-Atlantic oriented political elites in the NATO member states of the Western Balkans, who are yet not ready to adhere fully to democratic standards.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the post-Cold War Western Balkans countries, marked by a common past of successive authoritarian, dictatorial and totalitarian regimes that used the trappings of representative/democratic governance, hybridity has been the rule rather than the exception.

As a key feature of hybridity, state capture is present in all three countries of the Western Balkans. The phenomenon of state capture found fertile ground in the structures of Serbian society, its profound inequalities, informal mechanisms of reproducing power, and authoritarian culture. What distinguishes Serbia from other

transitional countries is its late coming on the road to political and economic reforms, which was delayed for a good decade by the Milošević's regime. Bombed by NATO in 1999 and coerced into abandoning its southern province, Kosovo, Serbia was brought into the fold of European integrations, but hardly ever experienced the zeal that drove its neighbors.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's political landscape, on the other hand, is defined by a complex structure tiered along ethnic lines, which was contrived by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. This agreement established a decentralized and consociational framework aimed at ensuring representation and power-sharing among the country's three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Although this system was designed to maintain peace and promote reconciliation, it has inadvertently promoted hybridity in governance. Characterized by the interaction of democratic institutions and informal power structures and practices typically based on ethnicity, this hybrid political order has perpetuated state capture, ethnic divisions, and a complex governance system that frequently impedes progress.

Albanian democracy has been seriously hampered by not only widespread corruption but also the incapacity of its judiciary and executive branches to stand up to it. Corruption has undermined the foundations of Albanian democracy, with multiple effects on its national security, and has had serious repercussions leading to state capture by organized crime. It is inherent in the rampant clientelism practiced by each parties when in power, influencing all important economic decisions and deepening the divide between the political and economic (oligarchic) elite, on the one hand, and the larger Albanian society, on the other.

In all three cases limited competition and low levels of vertical accountability signal the enduring presence of state capture. The latter has been recognized as a key impediment to deep reforms, especially with respect to the rule of law, and genuine, not simulated, liberal democracy in the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2018: 3).² Public response to it is deep social mistrust, at both vertical and horizontal level, in these societies, which seriously erodes the legitimacy of the state and thins out social cohesion. Recurrent refusals on the part of both political opponents and

² "Today, the [Western Balkan] countries show clear elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests. All this feeds a sentiment of impunity and inequality", reads the cited European Commission's "Credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans."

sizable segments of the constituency to recognize electoral results at local or national level are one of the many symptoms of this widespread social mistrust.

In seeking to explain the common phenomenon of hybridity of the political regimes in all three countries, proponents of path dependency are likely to prioritize the effects of the authoritarian legacy and the long tradition of informality and patrimonialism in the region. Others, more sensitive to the specific contexts in these societies, would argue that the current predicaments facing the post-communist and, in large parts, postwar Western Balkans are without precedent. For our part, we consider inherited institutional culture and social inertia, on the one hand, and the distinctive paths of socio-economic and political “transitions” propelled by the aspirations to, but also the inflicted standards of, EU membership, on the other hand, to be important for our understanding of the “hybrid” performance of these countries.

EU reports and prognostications seem to suggest a more active engagement in monitoring state capture across the region. However, there have been opinions, from as early as the 1990s, to the effect that EU enlargement policy is producing “pathological effects” in third countries, such as “Potemkin-village organizational structures” (Jacoby 1999: 3), whereby elites adapt their behavior in short-term as a facade to hide deep-rooted informal practices of decision making. More recently some critics went further by contending that EU conditionality itself has unintentionally contributed to consolidating, rather than disabling, patterns of state capture in the Western Balkan region, in that “early pressures for simultaneous economic and political transformation clearly facilitated the emergence of clientelist structures that are at the origin of the ‘state capture trap’ we observe today” (Richter and Wunsch 2020: 51). A forthcoming paper of the Re-engage team will test these arguments and probe the broader public perceptions of the EU enlargement and conditionality strategies.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).