

Policy brief



D6.6: Rethinking EU Democracy Promotion in the Western Balkans



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:	Policy brief
Deliverable number:	D6.6
Deliverable title:	Rethinking EU Democracy Promotion in the Western Balkans
Due date of deliverable:	30 June 2026
Actual submission date:	23 June 2026
Editors:	Diana Mishkova
Authors:	Berina Beširović, Luka Filipović, Enri Hide, Veldin Kadić, Diana Mishkova, Vladimir Petrović, Lamija Silajdžić, Anjeza Xhaferaj
Reviewers:	Pernille Rieker, Morten Bøås
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:	R
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	14
Keywords:	EU democracy promotion, hybridity, trust, informal power, authoritarianism



POLICY BRIEF

Rethinking EU Democracy Promotion in the Western Balkans

Findings from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia¹

Berina Beširović
Luka Filipović
Enri Hide
Veldin Kadić
Diana Mishkova
Vladimir Petrović
Lamija Silajdžić
Anjeza Xhaferaj

30 June 2026

¹ This brief synthesises research conducted as part of the Re-Engage project (Horizon Europe, Grant Agreement No. 101132314) and draws on case studies carried out in the three countries. Full survey data, focus group findings, and source references are available in the underlying working papers: <https://re-engaging.eu/hybridity-and-hybrid-regimes-in-the-western-balkans-in-a-time-of-war-and-increased-geopolitical-tensions/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/external-engagement-in-the-western-balkans/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/trust-social-cohesion-and-eu-democracy-promotion-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/trust-social-cohesion-and-eu-democracy-promotion-in-times-of-acute-political-crisis-the-case-of-serbia/>; <https://re-engaging.eu/selective-europeanisation-and-conditional-trust-eu-democracy-promotion-in-hybrid-albania/>



SUMMARY

- Across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, hybridity is structurally embedded rather than transitional: formal democratic institutions coexist with entrenched informal power, clientelistic brokerage, selective enforcement, and uneven public trust, limiting deeper democratic consolidation.
- Trust in domestic institutions remains low across all three countries, while non-EU actors — Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf states — continue to exploit governance gaps, elite dependencies, and socio-economic vulnerability to compete with the EU for influence.
- The EU remains the most credible and trusted long-term partner in each country, but its democracy-promotion efforts often have limited visibility and uneven everyday impact, especially when reforms are filtered through politicised domestic institutions.
- In Serbia, a hybrid regime under Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party is consolidating authoritarian control in the face of the largest protest movement in Serbian history; 47% of Serbian Gen Z respondents believe EU democracy promotion has had no effect, and a further 40% say it has actively strengthened non-democratic tendencies.
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnonational political power sustained through patronage networks, a politicised judiciary, and weak rule of law reduces incentives for meaningful reform; in Albania, selective trust concentrated in a few insulated actors such as SPAK shows that trust is performance-contingent rather than culturally absent.
- Key recommendations: reorient EU engagement from procedural conditionality toward societal legibility and citizen-facing outcomes; strengthen justice, media freedom, and local civic participation; in Serbia, publicly acknowledge the anti-authoritarian movement and establish a permanent human rights monitoring presence in Belgrade.



Introduction

The Western Balkans remain the most consequential testing ground for the EU's capacity to promote democracy beyond its borders. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia are formal partners on the enlargement path, yet each displays the defining feature of hybrid governance: formal democratic institutions coexist with informal networks of patronage, rent-seeking, and personal rule. In this configuration, reforms are formally adopted without being fully internalised in everyday institutional practice, citizens broadly trust the European horizon while remaining sceptical that domestic institutions consistently embody European standards, and non-EU actors — Russia, China, Turkey, Gulf states — continue to exploit the openings that hybridity creates.

This brief draws on the three national case studies produced within the Re-Engage project to make a common argument. The EU's challenge in the region is not primarily one of resources: it already funds substantial democracy promotion activity in all three countries. The challenge is one of direction, visibility, and credibility. Where citizens cannot see EU-backed reform translate into concrete improvements in how institutions actually function — faster and more adequate justice, freer media, less corruption, protection of civic space — symbolic support for Europe does not deepen into democratic trust. And where the EU's engagement is read as tacit endorsement of incumbent elites, as has happened most sharply in Serbia, loss of faith among precisely those citizens defending democratic values becomes the EU's most serious strategic liability in the region.

The brief sets out, first, the structural features common to all three cases; second, the country-specific dynamics that require tailored responses; and third, a set of concrete, cross-cutting and country-specific recommendations.

Part I. Common structural findings

Hybridity as the shared structural condition

The empirical findings of all three case studies confirm that hybridity is structurally embedded rather than transitional. Hybrid regimes are not temporary stages of democratic transition, but enduring forms of governance in which formal democratic institutions coexist with informal networks of patronage, rent-seeking, and personal rule. A defining trait of such regimes is the weakness of both vertical trust in institutions and horizontal trust among citizens, which undermines accountability and makes societies more vulnerable to authoritarian influence.

In each country the particular configuration differs. In Albania, strong Euro-Atlantic alignment and substantial formal approximation to European standards coexist with persistent informal power, clientelistic brokerage, selective

enforcement, and uneven institutional credibility. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the institutional configuration established by the Dayton Peace Agreement produces frequent political blockages, veto practices, and limited coordination between state and entity authorities — enabling obstruction as a political strategy and reinforcing systemic paralysis, while political competition continues to be structured primarily along ethnonational rather than programmatic lines. In Serbia, the hybrid regime under the Serbian Progressive Party has proven remarkably durable and unstable at the same time: despite near-continuous strikes, university blockades, and mass protests, the government has retained its grip on power by combining near-total media control with selective repression — and by exploiting the absence of a credible, unified political alternative.

Across the three cases, the main problem is not the absence of democratic aspiration or weak attachment to Europe. It is the limited conversion of reform into visible, credible, citizen-facing outcomes.

Erosion of institutional trust and democratic legitimacy

Survey findings from all three cases indicate persistently low trust in domestic political institutions. Citizens place strong trust in family and close networks, while politicians, bureaucrats, and governance institutions are viewed with much greater scepticism. At the same time, a small number of insulated actors — international organisations in all three countries, and specific domestic bodies such as Albania's SPAK — enjoy much higher confidence because they are perceived as more competent and less exposed to partisan interference.

This segmented trust structure has important democratic consequences. Rather than producing general withdrawal from politics, low institutional trust often drives citizens toward informal problem-solving strategies based on kinship, brokerage, and personal ties. This sustains social stability, but it also reinforces the hybrid order by weakening civic trust and limiting incentives for deeper institutional accountability. Weaknesses in judicial independence contribute to limited accountability for corruption and undermine perceptions of equality before the law — an especially acute problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the coexistence of formal compliance with democratic standards and informal political influence illustrates the structural nature of hybridity.

Competing external influences

The interplay between non-EU actors and EU engagement continues to shape each country's political trajectory, reform capacity, and democratic resilience. Non-EU actors such as Turkey, China, Russia, and Gulf states operate through capital, contracts, sectoral cooperation, narratives, and targeted influence. They do not currently function as full strategic alternatives to the EU in any of the three

countries, but they can still exploit weaknesses created by hybridity, low trust, and socio-economic insecurity. Their influence is often filtered through local elites and patronal structures, allowing external engagement to reinforce domestic power asymmetries rather than promote open accountability. In this way, external influence and internal hybridity become mutually reinforcing.

The depth of entanglement varies. In Serbia, Russian companies dominate the energy sector, Chinese firms hold exclusive mining rights in Eastern Serbia and have recently installed surveillance infrastructure in Belgrade, and the Vulin–Petrushev intelligence agreements (2021–2024) granted Serbia a formal promise of FSB assistance against so-called 'coloured revolutions'. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, external actors frequently operate through patron–client networks that empower local elites and engage through ethnically aligned constituencies, reinforcing identity-based politics and sustaining patterns of political polarization. Albania remains firmly Western-oriented, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and under economic stress Albanian respondents continue to prioritise EU membership and EU-centred support measures over Russian- or Chinese-linked alternatives.

The EU's visibility and credibility deficit

Despite competing influences, the EU remains the most credible external partner for the long-term democratic and institutional development of each country. Citizens broadly perceive 'Europe' as the anchor of rules, fairness, legality, and modernization. Yet strong symbolic support for the EU does not automatically translate into recognition of specific EU democracy-promotion interventions.

The result is that EU engagement often contributes to procedural anchoring and institutional capacity-building, but too often lacks sufficient social visibility and transformative reach. EU engagement has largely relied on conditionality-based approaches focused on legal and institutional reforms; in the context of entrenched hybrid governance and elite capture, these mechanisms have produced limited transformative outcomes. Reforms frequently remain superficial, allowing ruling elites to maintain control while demonstrating nominal progress. Citizens do not reject EU support — rather, they struggle to see it clearly in everyday life.

In Serbia, the problem is sharper still. EU criticism of democratic backsliding has been voiced on multiple occasions but widely perceived as 'too little, too late' — a performative response rather than a principled stance. The Re-Engage survey makes the scale of the problem concrete: among Serbs under 29, 47% believe EU democracy promotion has had no effect, and a further 40% say it has actively strengthened non-democratic tendencies. These are not residual attitudes from an older, more Eurosceptic generation: they reflect a collapse of trust among precisely the people currently leading the resistance to authoritarian governance.

Part II. Country-specific dynamics

Albania: selective Europeanisation and conditional trust

Albania functions both as a showcase of Europeanisation and as a stress test for the EU's democracy-promotion toolbox. Electoral competition exists, but party politics remains highly leader-driven and clientelistic, while wider governance is often filtered through personalised access, elite networks, and uneven rule enforcement.

The rise in confidence in SPAK is particularly significant: it shows that trust is not culturally absent, but rather performance-contingent and selective. Where institutions demonstrate visible and impartial enforcement, especially against powerful actors, citizens are more willing to extend trust upward. However, these gains remain too concentrated in a few 'islands of integrity' and have not yet transformed the legitimacy of the broader state apparatus. Awareness of EU-supported programmes such as EU4Justice is limited, though still much higher than awareness of media-freedom support; justice reform has institutional visibility because of vetting and new councils, but citizens continue to evaluate it through practical experience — speed, access, execution of rulings, and fairness.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: ethnonational capture and institutional paralysis

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a structurally embedded hybrid system, where ethnonational political power is maintained through patronage networks and low institutional trust. Political parties function as gatekeepers of ethnically defined constituencies, consolidating support through patronage networks and public sector control. Weak rule of law and a politicised judiciary undermine anti-corruption efforts and reinforce perceptions of inequality before the law; effective independence of institutions and enforcement capacity are limited.

The information and security environments compound these vulnerabilities. The decentralization of the security sector enables the emergence of security linkages outside state control, which political leaders often instrumentalize to exacerbate ethnic tensions, destabilize the political environment, and weaken effective security governance. The media landscape is highly polarized; public broadcasters are politically captured; and there is no transparency in media ownership. Defamation has been reintroduced as a criminal offence in parts of BiH (Republic of Srpska), with over 20 identified SLAPP lawsuits annually. EU-funded initiatives are often perceived by citizens as disproportionately benefiting political elites rather than the broader public.

Serbia: a resilient regime and a leaderless movement

Serbia is at a crossroads. After years of democratic backsliding under President Aleksandar Vučić, the country has witnessed the largest, longest, and most resilient protest movement in its history, triggered by the collapse of a newly renovated canopy at Novi Sad's railway station on 1 November 2024 — killing 16 people and exposing the consequences of opaque, corruption-laden infrastructure deals. Almost 70% of citizens want regime change, yet there is no agreement on how to achieve it, nor on whether representative democracy itself should be preserved in its current form or radically reformed.

The protest movement, organised through horizontally structured student plenums and citizen assemblies, has deliberately avoided engagement with opposition parties. While this reflects genuine disillusionment with established political actors, it has also made it harder to convert civic energy into political change, and the regime has actively cultivated divisions between self-organised citizen groups and opposition parties. Part of the EU's image problem in Serbia is perceptual: many Serbian citizens still associate the SPP's rise to power with a period in which EU representatives praised Vučić's reform agenda, creating a lasting impression of institutional backing. The perceived silence of EU institutions in the face of police brutality and regime-sponsored violence during the summer of 2025 prompted students to adopt the slogan 'We are defending EU values against the EU-supported regime.'

What this means for EU policy

The challenge in all three countries is to move EU engagement from procedural conditionality toward societal legibility, institutional integrity, and local ownership. The decisive question is not simply whether reform exists, but whether citizens can recognise it as a meaningful improvement in how institutions actually function. Enhancing EU effectiveness therefore requires stronger attention to social reach, institutional legibility, and everyday delivery — and, in the Serbian case, an urgent reckoning with the perception that the EU's engagement has underwritten rather than constrained the incumbent regime.

Failing to act will not only damage the EU's standing in the Western Balkans; it will cede ground to Russia, China, and other competing actors at a moment when the geopolitical stakes in the region could scarcely be higher.

Policy recommendations

Cross-cutting recommendations

1. **R1. Shift from procedural conditionality to citizen-facing performance.** EU democracy-promotion support should complement institutional restructuring with measurable service-delivery benchmarks and public performance reporting — faster procedures, reduced backlog, better enforcement of rulings, clearer decisions, and stronger access to justice. Responsible actors: European Commission (DG NEAR), EU Delegations, national ministries of justice.
2. **R2. Increase visibility and attribution of EU-supported reforms at local level.** EU democracy-promotion initiatives should be communicated through concrete local outcomes rather than project labels, elite discourse, or institutional reporting. Visibility strategies should prioritise poorer, younger, older, and less institutionally connected groups outside capital cities. Responsible actors: EU Delegations, national communications partners, civil society intermediaries.
3. **R3. Strengthen media freedom by addressing structural capture, not only legal standards.** Priorities should include journalist protection, legal aid, stronger self-regulation, anti-SLAPP safeguards, and transparent media governance — with particular attention to ownership opacity, intimidation, politicised pressure, and the economic vulnerability that drives self-censorship. Responsible actors: European Commission, Council of Europe, national regulatory authorities.
4. **R4. Support local civic participation and reduce dependence on informal brokerage.** Because low institutional trust pushes citizens toward informal coping strategies, reforms should include more local participatory mechanisms, stronger civic consultation, and better support for grassroots initiatives. Responsible actors: local governments, EU Delegations, national civil society funds.
5. **R5. Introduce mandatory transparency rules for foreign financing, political support, and strategic investments involving public institutions.** Patron–client relationships between external actors and domestic elites reinforce elite capture and weaken democratic accountability; transparency requirements should apply uniformly across all non-EU and EU external engagement. Responsible actors: national parliaments, anti-corruption agencies, European Commission.

Country-specific recommendations

Albania

6. **A1. Protect and expand islands of integrity across the wider state system.** Institutions such as SPAK should continue to receive strong technical, legal, and political backing, but the broader objective should be diffusion rather than isolation. Albania needs mechanisms that extend standards of impartiality, transparency, and enforcement into ordinary administration and regulatory institutions, so that trust is not confined to a few exceptional bodies. Responsible actors: Albanian government, Parliament, EU Delegation.
7. **A2. Link enlargement and EU integration more clearly to everyday democratic outcomes.** EU integration should be communicated not only as a geopolitical path, but as a practical route to fairer institutions, stronger rule of law, safer journalism, and more transparent governance — helping to reduce the gap between symbolic trust in Europe and weak recognition of concrete EU assistance. Responsible actors: EU Delegation to Albania, Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

8. **B1. Initiate a structured, EU-facilitated constitutional reform dialogue focused on aligning the Constitution with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).** Amend constitutional provisions to strengthen civic political rights (active and passive suffrage regardless of ethnic affiliation); introduce a gradual transition model combining power-sharing safeguards with expanded civic competencies at state level; and restructure veto mechanisms — instead of ethnic 'vital interests', introduce an objective 2/3 majority with the automatic abolition of the veto after few years without consensus. Responsible bodies: Parliamentary Assembly of BiH; Entity Parliaments; Constitutional Reform Commission (to be established).
9. **B2. Depoliticize the judiciary and law enforcement agencies and enforce the law more efficiently.** Reform appointment procedures within the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council (HJPC) with external monitoring; introduce an automatic enforcement protocol for Constitutional Court rulings and annual public performance scorecards for courts; and establish an independent national police service with depoliticized management, banning appointments based on ethnic quotas or party lines. Responsible bodies: HJPC; Parliamentary Assembly; Ministry of Justice; Council of Ministers.
10. **B3. Establish a national coordination council for foreign policy and reforms.** Since fragmented foreign policy and erosion of state authority in BiH stem in part from competing external alignments, an autonomous state body composed of representatives of various bodies would reduce secessionist

rhetoric and create a unified diplomatic position. Responsible bodies: Presidency of BiH; Council of Ministers of BiH.

Serbia

11. **S1. Publicly acknowledge the anti-authoritarian movement and endorse peaceful, electoral transition.** The European Commission should voicefully acknowledge the anti-authoritarian movement as a political force opposing corruption and democratic backsliding, and publicly endorse its efforts to pursue change through elections and peaceful transition. A formal statement by the EU Delegation to Serbia would signal that the EU's relationship with candidate countries is guided by values, not only by geopolitical convenience. Responsible actors: European Commission, EU Delegation to Serbia, European Parliament.
12. **S2. Issue a high-level formal statement on threats to university autonomy in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Novi Pazar, and Niš.** Universities have been the primary hubs of civic resistance and the EU's most consistent partners in democracy promotion; their suppression would give any future government near-total control over how young Serbs learn about democracy — and the EU. Responsible actors: European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the EU.
13. **S3. Redirect existing project funding in Serbia towards education about the EU.** Funds should focus on how the EU works, what its institutional constraints are, and how to distinguish between diplomatic engagement and political endorsement. Re-Engage participants consistently reported that the same funds, differently directed, could have substantially greater democratic impact. This requires no additional budget, only a reorientation of priorities. Responsible actors: DG NEAR, EU Delegation to Serbia, national and regional civil society partners.
14. **S4. Establish a permanent human rights monitoring office in Belgrade.** Its mandate should cover not only elections but media freedom violations, restrictions on assembly, and other political liberties. Such an office would expand observation capacity to include local municipalities — where the regime's grip is tightest — and provide visible evidence that the EU is engaged with Serbia's democratic situation on a continuous, not episodic, basis. Responsible actors: European External Action Service, OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe.

Conclusion

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia each stand at a critical point where strong pro-European orientation coexists with persistent hybrid governance, selective trust, and uneven democratic performance. The findings presented here show that the central challenge is not persuading citizens that Europe matters. It is

ensuring that Europeanisation becomes visible and credible in the institutional interfaces citizens use every day.

For the region to advance toward more meaningful democratic consolidation, reform must move beyond formal approximation and elite-level compliance. It must produce faster and fairer justice, stronger media protections, more transparent governance, and broader civic participation. The EU remains indispensable to this process, but its strategy must continue evolving from procedural conditionality toward societal legibility, institutional integrity, and local ownership.

The most alarming finding across the three cases — most sharply visible in Serbia — is that the generation most actively defending democratic values is, in places, losing faith in the EU as an ally. That loss of faith is not inevitable. Much of it is grounded in misunderstanding, unmet expectations, and the EU's failure to make its engagement visible and legible to ordinary citizens. The recommendations in this brief do not require new resources. They require a clearer sense of priority, and a willingness to engage directly with those who are, often at considerable personal risk, defending the values on which the EU was founded.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Berina Beširović is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. She teaches courses in political, constitutional, and comparative politics.

Luka Filipović is a Research Associate at the Institute for Contemporary History in Belgrade, Serbia. His work so far has focused predominantly on the relations between Marxist parties and movements in Europe during the Cold War and on the contemporary rise of populist movements in Europe.

Enri Hide is a Research Associate Professor at the European University of Tirana and Executive Director of the Regional Center for Democracy and Security in Albania. His research is mostly focused on geopolitical dynamics, non-Western influences, international security, and religiously motivated terrorism in the Western Balkans and Southeastern Europe.

Veldin Kadić is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Security and Peace Studies, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. His academic interests include geopolitics, international security, humanitarian intervention, transitional justice, and peacebuilding.

Diana Mishkova is the Director of the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia and Foreign Corresponding Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She has specialized in and published extensively on modern and contemporary history of Southeastern Europe.

Vladimir Petrović is a Research Professor and the Innovation Center Head at the Institute for Contemporary History Belgrade, also a Senior Researcher at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam. His main research focus is on mass political violence and policies of dealing with its legacy.

Lamija Silajdžić is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Studies/Journalism, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. Her academic work focuses on media and information literacy, digital media, media convergence, youth and technology use, and the social effects of digital communication.

Anjeza Xhaferaj is a lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the European University of Tirana. Her research focuses on political parties and electoral systems, memory and identity in post-authoritarian contexts, populism, and issues of international security in the Western Balkans.

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).