POLICY BRIEF

Ideas on Democracy in the Western Balkans

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FORUM 2000

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INTRODUCTION

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At the beginning of 2023, with the support of the International Visegrad Fund, a coalition formed by the Forum 2000 Foundation (Czech Republic), MEMO98 (Slovakia), Political Capital (Hungary), Res Publica Foundation (Poland) and YIHR (Serbia) decided to focus on the Western Balkans. Inspired by Francis Fukuyama's statement at the 26th Forum 2000 Conference in Prague that the Western Balkans "is an area that could blow up in a nasty way in the future", these organizations decided to put together a working group of stakeholders from the region and the European Union to analyze the situation in the region and set an agenda of ideas, concerns, and recommendations in order for democracy in the Western Balkans to thrive.

As a result of that process, and with the contributions of the working group, the 27th Forum 2000 Conference included three panels specifically focused on the Western Balkans, and over 20 participants from the region contributed to the discussions. This policy brief is the final result of the project.

The ideas presented here focus on some of the key aspects identified during our year of work, and those included here represent the most urgent or impactful. From EU integration to disinformation and the role of youth in democratization processes and conflict resolution, this roadmap aims to contribute to the public discussion on strengthening democracy in the Western Balkans.

Authors who are from the Western Balkans contributed with their views from the inside, while V4 authors provided their insights from the geographically and historically close outside.

We hope the reader will find some insightful views and ideas on the future of the region in this work.

WITH THE EU IN GEOPOLITICAL LIMBO, CHANGE MUST COME FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

Petr Čermák
Association for International Affairs, Czechia

On the rhetorical level, the stalled process of the Western Balkans' European integration has received much needed new impetus due to Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, it is politically naive to expect that dramatic geopolitical developments alone will bring the unstable region into the EU. Much work still needs to be done on both sides of the process to revive the enlargement and its lost credibility. While the EU must not leave the Western Balkans behind, the key reforms need to come from the region to get it back on the path of democratization and EU integration.

Contested EU in need of internal reform

The EU is currently facing multiple pressing challenges that test its political resilience and internal unity. Democratic decline in some of its member states, recurrent migration crises, energy transition, and above all, its response to conflicts in Ukraine and the Palestinian territories loom over the debate on enlargement. Furthermore, to make any enlargement politically achievable and incorporate new members, the EU must first go through its own institutional internal reform, which will be neither easy nor fast in the current state of uncertainty.

Even when facing multiple internal and external challenges, the EU must not give up on the Western Balkans and should work on policies that will keep the prospect of enlargement alive. However, no fast-track solutions can realistically be expected from the current EU. Symbolic gestures of continuous support, such as the recently announced Growth Plan, are the maximum the EU can now provide the region.

Real change must arise from the Western Balkans

Recently published European Commission annual reports have once again confirmed how little progress the Western Balkan states have achieved in the reform process over the two decades of their European integration. While there might be obvious differences in the political commitment of governments across the region, none of them have fully resolved the key internal and regional problems preventing them from joining the EU.

While the EU is sometimes blindly expected to democratize the region, fundamental change cannot be imposed externally without the will of elected political representatives. The solutions to major regional issues must come from within the region and its leaders and societies. The permanent constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, as well as internal tensions in Montenegro, can only be resolved through compromises reached between the legitimate democratic representatives of local societies. Instant solutions invented outside of the region and installed externally have proved to be unviable and ineffective in the long run.

A regional pro-European alliance can bring the needed change

Even after years of stalled progress, most Western Balkan citizens still want a European future. Pro-European actors from across the region should build on this public support, and, with vocal encouragement from the EU, convert it into a regional pro-reform movement. A broad alliance consisting of elected pro-European politicians representing both government and opposition, independent media, experts, and a strong civil society could become a promoter of change and a credible partner for the EU. The European future of the region is a historical task that must transcend the particular interests of individuals, nations, and states, as it can provide stability and prosperity to the Western Balkans as a whole.

WESTERN BALKANS AND EU ENLARGEMENT: INTEGRATION FATIGUE?

Haris Ćutahija
Foreign Policy Initiative, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The European Commission adopted the 2023 Enlargement Package on November 8, 2023, presenting a detailed assessment of the state of play and progress made by the Western Balkans, Turkey, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on their individual pathways to the European Union. Even though the Eastern European countries were the main focus, it was evident that the European Union recognized the importance of the Western Balkans' integration process in light of geopolitical changes and the risks posed by other actors in the region.

Status quo in the Western Balkans

The European Commission's reports reveal that no significant progress has been made in the Western Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina, the region's "winner" of this year's Enlargement Package, has received a conditional recommendation to begin negotiations for EU membership. This is despite the fact that the country has yet to fulfill the key priorities that have been stated as a clear condition for beginning negotiations. Backslides have been reported in the majority of the region's other countries.

It is clear that the European prospective of the region is starting to be questioned within the Western Balkan countries, and, despite the gestures made by the EU, the integration process is at a standstill.

Citizens: The key to integration

To relaunch the Western Balkans' integration process, the EU's focus should move from politicians to citizens. A strategy should be developed to positively impact the everyday lives of citizens through reform implementation. The new Western Balkans Growth Plan, which was launched with the Enlargement Package, was a move in the right direction. Citizens are going to apply pressure on their political representatives to implement reforms if they understand the benefits of full membership, and European integration will once again take precedence over everyday politics.

THE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF ENLARGEMENT

Magdalena Jakubowska
Visegrad Insight, Res Publica Foundation, Poland

Debating the Western Balkans' accession to EU structures will be a pressing issue for the coming months and years. As the EU is expecting changes in its governing bodies following the upcoming EU Parliament elections in June, there is little time to make the relevant, also institutional pathways, create open-door policies, and build public support for enlargement. Promising declarations from November 2023 directed by the European Commission to the Western Balkans have crucial importance for the future of the EU, Central and Eastern Europe, and all neighboring countries. It is without doubt that the costs of a potential non-enlargement - security-, economy-, and society-wise - are too high for Member States, specifically those in Central Europe, to procrastinate any further.

The costs for the EU

Disillusioned by unfulfilled promises, the neighborhood countries are likely to become even more vulnerable to external influences. The accession to the "West" is falling down on the list of political priorities in the Western Balkan states — less than 50 per cent in Serbia would opt for EU accession and a strong majority in Serbia named Russia (73 per cent) and China (71 per cent) among the most important economic partners. With Russia's targeted support for polarization, alongside Chinese investments, local autocrats will be holding onto their posts even harder in the drained, disenchanted, and ageing populations that would like to change the fate of second category countries for future generations.

With broken accession promises, liberal pro-European parties in the neighborhood would lose their credibility, with civil society already in retreat, together with media and state institutions. Thus, on a larger time scale, a non-enlargement leads to large challenges to security and democracy, a power vacuum, and stronger economic dependencies. All this paints a rather testing picture of the future EU.

The costs for Central Europe

Without further expansion and acceptance of new members, the EU would face a security gap on its southeastern flank, which would be especially challenging for its CEE nations. The potential for instability and missed economic opportunities would be substantial.

The threats may not only be direct, but may also bring about unwanted political changes in the region with radicalizing or populist political growth, inevitably affecting the region's democracy and leading to a further erosion of common EU values.

With the State of the Union speech in September 2023 and declarations in November, Ursula von der Leyen awoke dynamic public discussions in the EU and specifically in the CEE region. Opponents of enlargement are in place flagging the dark visions of opening treaties and seeing Schengen and free market accession as threats to their own economies. This is visible in Central Europe too, as it has been the main narrative for Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, has fueled Poland's election campaign on the conservative front, and has allowed Slovakia to choose Robert Fico over pro-EU progressives.

Possible recommendations

Nonetheless, the costs of not moving forward with enlargement would bring much higher costs than a well-planned yet accelerated process, which should include a comprehensive monitoring system and post-accession conditionality. The Western Balkans - empowered by the EU — should establish monitoring and advice centers that produce impact assessments. This may be a relevant task for Poland's upcoming EU presidency, one that would bring beneficial and tangible outcomes. For that, a strong public debate supportive of the process is necessary in both Central Europe and the Western Balkans.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE ROLE OF THE WEST

Balša Božović
Regional Academy for Democratic Development, Serbia

Serbian nationalism, historically aligned with Russia, instigated four wars in the 1990s against Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and NATO. Although Slobodan Milošević was ousted in 2000, the nationalist elite responsible for the wars has never been removed from power. Post-2000, a coalition between the nationalist elite, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Russia gave rise to the "Serb World," aligning with the security and foreign policy of the "Russian World" in the Western Balkans.

Nationalists in Serbia acknowledge neighboring countries' territorial integrity but deny their sovereignty, advocating that only nations possess sovereignty, making borders relative. President Aleksandar Vučić considers himself the leader of all Serbs, adopting a doctrine of limited sovereignty. This nationalism asserts the right to intervene where Serbs reside under the pretext of protecting Serbian rights, mirroring the Russian narrative in the Ukraine conflict, and fostering a centralized, corrupt regime with anti-European sentiments. This regime cannot create strong and independent institutions; only para-states influenced by Russia.

Western efforts to redirect Serbia's allegiance from Russia to the West are misguided. The "Serbian World" aims to prevent neighboring countries, particularly those with Serb populations, from joining the EU, advocating for Serbs to be unified in one place and not divided between the EU and Serbia. Belgrade prevented a pro-EU government from being formed in Montenegro and supported pro-Russian factions entering the government, seeks to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina through Russian and Serbian proxies in Republika Srpska, and provokes ethnic conflict in Kosovo.

Potential solutions

Democratization and decentralization of Serbia: Centralization and autocracy are powerful tools of aggressive Serbian nationalism.Until Serbia undergoes democratization, freedom and democracy for its citizens, and peace for neighboring states, will remain elusive.

Baltic model of EU integration process: This model involves strong partnerships between Western Balkan countries and stable EU democracies that have no specific political agendas in the region. During the 1990s, when the three Baltic states embarked on their path towards EU membership, three Nordic EU member states partnered with them. They trained their public officials, and helped harmonize laws, build institutions, and introduce necessary decision-making and implementation procedures. They also facilitated their communication with EU institutions. To this day, it is considered the most successful integration into the EU since 2004. Partners for Western Balkan aspirant states cannot be the largest EU members, nor the states too close to the region. The reason is the latent danger that the neighboring states have their political agendas in the region, leading to a distrust among the citizens of the Western Balkan countries in their bona fide intentions. In summary, the six EU member states, partners to the Western Balkan countries on their path to the EU, should all be stable democracies without specific political agendas in the region and have a strong EU orientation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina as a civil state: Propose a democratic constitution for Bosnia and Herzegovina, initiating electoral law reforms based on universal voting rights rather than ethnicity.

Kosovo's NATO integration: Facilitate Kosovo's NATO membership and establish the Association of Serb Municipalities without executive powers.

Montenegro's EU membership: Liberate Montenegro from Russian and Serbian influence through its accelerated accession to the EU.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: WHAT CAN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES (UN)LEARN FROM V4 COUNTRIES ON THE EU ACCESSION PROCEDURE?

Lóránt Győri
Political Capital, Hungary

The journey towards EU membership for the Western Balkan countries is still fraught with numerous tasks and challenges. There are some valuable lessons to be learned from the experiences of the Visegrad Group (V4) countries on how to meet the requirements of the accession process and avoid the pitfall of democratic backsliding.

Considering the recent democratic backsliding in Central European countries, their experience demonstrates that initial public enthusiasm for EU accession, such as in the Western Balkans, does not automatically lead to the long-term development and stability associated with EU membership in the absence of the necessary democratic institutional foundations.

Learning from V4 experiences

The first few years following the 2004 EU accession of eight Eastern European countries did indeed showcase how harmonization of political, legal, and economic systems can contribute to the modernization of societies, including reintegration into the global economy. In terms of political transformation, that meant the application of the Copenhagen Criteria which contributed to more robust democratic institutional systems through enacting anti-corruption measures and ensuring the independence of the three branches of government. The four freedoms of the European Union economically enabled these countries to successfully integrate into the highly developed manufacturing chains of Europe and the world. As a result, GDP growth in the V4 has consistently exceeded the EU average since 2013 on an annual basis, while Central and Eastern Europe emerged as one of the new "megaregions" of Europe, constituting the 5th largest economy in Europe and the 12th in the world with a trade volume (with Germany) reaching a record of EUR 562 billion in 2022.

Preventing democratic backsliding

However, the 2008-2009 financial crisis undermined the still fragile economic and political developments in these young democracies, giving way to post-modern populism with autocratic tendencies. In Poland, after 2015, the consequent governments led by PiS started to substitute the rule of law with a nationalist, religion-based "illiberal" governance that severely limited the right to abortion, started the persecution of the LGBTQ community, and tried, unlawfully, to upend the independence of the judiciary, according to the ruling of the European Court of Justice. In Hungary, the second government of PM Viktor Orbán went even further after 2010 by establishing a full-blown autocratic or "hybrid" regime stretching from the "nationalized" economic sectors ruled by oligarchs to a conglomerate of more than 500 media outlets. Similar political changes were envisioned by the former Czech PM Andrej Babiš and the old-new Slovak PM Robert Fico, already curbing the freedom of the press after his recent political comeback. Despite promises of stability from populist leaders, the consequences have been increased societal polarization, isolation in the EU, and corruption intertwined with reduced competitiveness.

The European Commission's 2023 Enlargement Reports and International IDEA's 2023 Global State of Democracy Report detail similar problems faced by the Western Balkan countries awaiting membership. These include, among others, problems with judicial independence in Serbia, combating corruption in Albania, polarization in Montenegro, and electoral reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thus, the future of some Western Balkan countries lies in learning from the past mistakes of the V4 countries.

On a country-by-country basis, the Czech and Slovak examples show how a free and strong civil society in coordination with independent media can act as a counterbalance to autocratic tendencies, so any legislation against human rights organizations should be viewed with suspicion. In Poland, a viable political alternative proved essential, while Hungary is a testament to how the change of free and fair electoral systems can wreak havoc on political alternatives if a simple majority can be turned into a constitutional one, time after time.

These lessons and democratic mechanisms, if applied properly, can protect both the proper functioning of the market economy and the democratic will of the people against autocrats. Otherwise, the Western Balkan countries risk being gradually marginalized politically and/or economically by the core countries of the European Union, as has happened to Poland and Hungary, losing the much-anticipated opportunity for long-term development and modernization.

HIGH VOTER TURNOUT IN THE RECENT POLISH AND SLOVAK ELECTIONS OFFERS SOME HOPE AGAINST DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Rasťo Kužel
MEMO98, Slovakia

Democratic backsliding in V4

The Slovak experience with democratization is illustrative for the broader V4 and the Western Balkans. Since gaining its independence in 1993 - and EU and NATO membership in 2004 - Slovakia's stability, prosperity, and influence have grown. Over the past decade, however, Slovakia has experienced recurring bouts of populism, high-level corruption scandals, declining trust in democracy, and growing illiberalism and extremism.

Russia has exploited these developments and followed its own geopolitical interests, mainly packed into symbolic terms of Pan-Slavism and brotherhood, reaching out to many countries in the V4 and Western Balkans. The main goal of such interference is to fuel polarization and disseminate disinformation, which casts doubts about democracy and blurs the lines between reality and fiction.

The current perception of democracy as a superior political system in Slovakia is below 50% and is tied to both personal economic conditions and the erratic performance of previous governments, characterized by chaos and political instability, which further undermined public trust in democratic institutions. As a result, many dissatisfied citizens were much more open to disinformation and populism, leading to radical swings in political preferences.

This largely contributed to the outcome of the recent Slovak elections, which saw such illiberal and populist forces coming to power after openly articulating pro-Russian, anti-democratic, and anti-Western narratives. The incumbent ruling coalition in Slovakia used social media to spread disinformation, which helped them to win the elections.

What can the Western Balkans learn from the recent Polish and Slovak elections?

Let's have a look at what we learned from the recent Slovak and Polish elections. While the outcome of each election was different, with Slovakia joining Hungary to form a bloc of countries with illiberal tendencies and democratic backsliding and Poland generally rejecting the continuation of such policies, some common features offered some hope. People in both countries went to vote in large numbers in the recent elections. Participation of first- and second-time voters was 69% and 70% in Slovakia and Poland, respectively. Moreover, the mobilization of women in the Polish elections proved crucial for a higher turnout. In Slovakia, a robust civil society has been a bulwark against democratic backsliding. This is good news, as the main aim of disinformation is to create passive and cynical societies.

The experience with mobilization efforts in Slovakia and Poland may be inspirational for the Western Balkans, as it is important for civil society to join forces, tackle common threats and challenges, and share experiences — especially since the actors on the other side have been doing the same for quite some time already. Young people, in general, see their future aligned with the EU. This is why there is a clear need to build an identity among the current young generation, appealing to Europeanism and building healthy patriotism and self-confidence.

REVIEW OF ANTI-DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Amar Karađuz
Zašto ne, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The magnitude of the impact of disinformation on democratic stability in the Western Balkans alone is difficult to assess. However, narratives based on disinformation, originating in war propaganda from the 1990s, persist in the public discourse, making the process of reconciliation difficult to impossible. These narratives are instrumentalized during election campaigns by ethno-nationalistic parties, and still work as a go-to solution for electoral success.

Furthermore, the Western Balkans is particular for its strong affiliation to "cult of personality" narratives, which are somewhat based on disinformation and conspiracy theories. These narratives put in the spotlight the need for strong, charismatic, and powerful leader(s) perceived as capable of solving the many political disputes that the countries from the region are known for. By this, however, the personality of a leader is the focus rather than power of institutions and procedures, effectively promoting an illiberal form of governance as a "more stable" substitute for democracy - which is perceived as too slow at generating solutions.

The third set of anti-democratic narratives is a broad group of anti-Western narratives, which again have their roots in the events of wars fought on the territory of former Yugoslavia. In these narratives, which are mostly based on mythology, Western countries are portrayed as enemies of the entire peoples, with democracy — as a Western product — being further despised in that sense.

The perpetuity of these narratives can be taken as a solid indicator of the power that disinformation can have on election outcomes, hindering the process of democratization and with that, potentially undoing what has already been done through the democratic transition thus far.

State capture of the media

The region's media is under huge political and market pressures that have a limiting effect on its freedom. On the political end of this issue, media outlets loyal to political elites are rewarded with access to public funds in exchange for their loyalty and limited freedom, while those that are critical of the political establishment are threatened with prosecution and financial insolvency. In the former, the media serves as a mouthpiece for distributing narratives that favor political elites and have a hindering effect on democratic stability. In the latter, there is potential for the few independent media outlets to become silenced. Overly saturated media markets, on the other hand, push outlets to grasp for the audience by resorting to low-quality, tabloid-like content, instead of providing the thoroughly researched journalism that would keep political elites in check and serve the public interest.

Roadmap for fighting disinformation

Long-term solutions to tackle disruptive narratives would require strengthening democratic principles, empowering independent institutions, and focusing on rules and procedures. Democracy takes hold in an environment where institutions are independent, trusted, and accountable. In order to accomplish this, it is quintessential to divert people's attention away from current political elites. Another solution, connected to the previous, will require ending all forms of media capture, starting with political pressure on the media.

Finally, market incentives need to change, making the spread of disinformation no longer profitable. Big tech advertising companies need to commit to fighting the spread of disinformation and harmful content in the digital realm of the Western Balkans to the same extent that they are committing themselves to doing so in the EU. Quality journalism needs to be promoted by algorithms much more vigorously to have greater visibility on social media.

WESTERN BALKANS
YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY

Kostian Jano
youth leader, Albania

Time has shown us that healthy democracies need responsive citizens who are actively involved in their communities and who work daily to strengthen democracy at all levels. This is especially true when we talk about young people, since they are considered the most vital part of society, consistently at the forefront of groundbreaking movements and campaigns across the globe.

The young generation is a key ally for democracy

The role of youth is even more important in fragile regions like the Western Balkans, where democratic traditions have been almost non-existent in the past. We should not forget that 100 years ago this region was considered the powder keg of Europe because of successive ethnic conflicts which continued until the end of the 20th century. Today, the panorama in the Western Balkans is completely different. Peace has been established and the dream of European integration is bringing positive change across the borders. Key democratic reforms have been pushed forward and have started to improve the level of democracy in the region.

Still, even today, democracy across the region is undermined by high-level corruption, foreign malign influences, the weakening of civil society, diminished checks on power, and pressure on free media. In this context, the strongest allies of democracy are precisely the youth of the Western Balkans. The younger generations, unlike their older counterparts, have grown up in peace and aspire to live in free and prosperous societies like their peers in the Western world.

Today the potential of the youth is threatened by domestic neglect and emigration

Engaging young people and creating opportunities to participate directly in decision-making processes would undoubtedly make our democracies stronger and healthier, but unfortunately it is not happening. Today, the role of young people is largely unrecognized, and that has had a negative impact on young people's perception of democracy, pushing them to leave their countries and migrate.

The Western Balkan countries are rapidly losing their populations, and those who are leaving are mostly young, vibrant, and educated people. This is one of the greatest threats to democracy and that's why it is crucial to put more trust in young people and to support them in being the generation of change for the entire region.

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Vesna Pusić
former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Croatia

It is not for nothing that in the Western Balkans, democracy is almost always mentioned in the same breath as the European Union. These countries in the southeastern corner of Europe are mostly new states, with no democratic tradition to speak of, lacking a finished institutional state structure, and with very little practical experience in running a functioning democracy. This is why accession to the EU here is not only a process of joining a wealthy club of (mostly) democracies. It is also, and most importantly, an exercise in democratic state building. For these countries, outside the EU and its acquis communautaire, there is no other democratic blueprint, experience, or tradition. Looking from that perspective, there are three main challenges on the road to democracy for the Western Balkans:

1. Leaders against societies

Many of the political leaders of the Western Balkan states are turning society against itself or, more precisely, turning against their own societies. That means fueling political divisions and instigating culture wars. But it also means manipulating their relations with the EU, i.e., democratic state building. In Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there used to be strong public support for EU membership. Through media control and intense propaganda in Serbia, that support has been reduced to 38%. In the other two countries, it still holds at above 50%, but part of the political leadership is hard at work in trying to erode it.

2. Disruptors

For different global and regional geopolitical reasons, a number of democracy disruptors are at work in the region:

- Foreign, hostile — the main disruptor in this category is Putin's Russia, who sees an unstable and non-EU Western Balkans as a means to destabilize the European Union.
- Regional — primarily Serbia under its current government and with its strong ties to Russia.
- Foreign, friendly — different Western mediators who are trying to help Western Balkan states on their way to the EU but are basing their approach on political realities that no longer exist.

3. Tailor-made approach

In order to achieve success, it is important to understand that the Western Balkan countries are six very different states and societies, with different levels of institutional infrastructure, support for EU membership, political culture, self-understanding, leadership, and political trajectories. They cannot be approached as "one big lump", but require an individualized, tailor-made approach for each one.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Find ways of directly addressing societies through inclusion in different EU programs, where people can feel the benefits in their everyday lives.
- Pay great attention to the local media scene, invest in independent democratic media, keep track of media ownership.
- Accelerate EU accession for countries where both political leadership and public opinion are supportive of it and are producing results (Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo).
- Surround Serbia with success. Although Serbia can no longer lead the process in the region, it still needs to eventually become an EU member. Appeasement has not worked and has even worked in the opposite direction. Competitiveness with its neighbors could motivate its leadership to get off the fence and decisively turn to the EU.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Balša Božović was a member of Parliament in the Republic of Serbia for three terms. He holds a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Belgrade, and is an alumni scholar of the George C. Marshall Center and of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). He is currently chair of the executive committee of the Regional Academy for Democratic Development.

Petr Čermák is a Research Fellow at the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based independent think tank. His research focuses on politics and security in the Western Balkans. He holds a Ph.D. in international relations from Masaryk University in Brno and had the opportunity to study and conduct his research at universities in Sarajevo, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Graz, and Tirana. Recently, he has been working on research projects focused on the energy transition and foreign influences in the Western Balkans, and Czech foreign policy towards the region.

Haris Ćutahija is the Director of the Foreign Policy Initiative BH. He graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Sarajevo where he also gained an MA degree in political science — European integration. He also holds a professional qualification degree in political management from the New Bulgarian University. With extensive experience in managing and working on various projects ranging from European integration, foreign policy and international relations, to activism and culture, he is a columnist on several internet portals, as well as a political analyst and commentator.

Lóránt Győri is a sociologist and political analyst, with a postgraduate degree in social sciences from Eötvös Loránd University. His research interests include geopolitics, new media, network analysis, discourse analysis, and science-, youth- and urban sociology. His analysis is focused on current Russian influence in Europe, and he is the co-author of several studies on this topic.

Magda Jakubowska has been the Executive Vice President of Visegrad Insight, Res Publica Foundation since 2017, where she manages key ventures, including strategic development, and security-, regional-, EU- and transatlantic-related programs. She is involved in democratic security and strategic foresight projects at Visegrad Insight. She has a strong interest in women's empowerment in security which led to the internationally recognized NATO campaign "#WomenAreNATO," which she created a few years ago. Previously, she worked at the U.S. Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and at the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

Kostian Jano is a young leader from Albania, passionate about the EU integration of the Western Balkans and the empowerment of young people as actors of change. He is an active member of organizations such as the European Democracy Youth Network and JEF Europe, and has been a youth delegate in various high-level summits and forums, including Forum 2000.

Amar Karađuz is a researcher and author on the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje. From Bosnia and Herzegovina, his academic background is in democracy and human rights in Southeast Europe (MA) and international relations (BA). During the four years of his professional career in tackling disinformation in the Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, and Montenegrin languages, he has co-authored several research publications on the topic of information disorder.

Rasťo Kužel is a media & election expert with over 25 years of international experience. Since 1998, he has been running MEMO98, a media-monitoring organization with extensive experience in delivering analyses and technical assistance to international institutions. He co-authored a White Paper on Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity to guide IFES in this area and the UNESCO/UNDP guide Elections in Digital Times. He is a member of the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR).

Vesna Pusić was the Croatian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs between 2011 and 2016 and elected member of the Croatian Parliament for six terms. She also served as Chair of the National Committee for Monitoring the EU Accession Negotiation between 2007 and 2011. She was a founding member and President of the Assembly at the Foreign Policy Forum, Croatia, and an official candidate of the Republic of Croatia for the position of UN Secretary-General. A member of the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR) and on the board of the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna, she is also a Professor of Sociology and Political Theory at the University of Zagreb. She has authored five books and numerous scientific and professional articles.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS OF THIS PROJECT

The **Forum 2000 Foundation** pursues the legacy of Václav Havel by supporting the values of democracy and respect for human rights, assisting the development of civil society, and encouraging religious, cultural and ethnic tolerance. It provides a platform for global leaders, as well as thinkers and courageous individuals from every field of endeavor, to openly debate and share these critical issues.

MEMO98 is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that specializes in media monitoring and analysis, particularly related to election campaigns, political communication, and media coverage in various countries. The organization aims to promote media transparency and fairness in democratic processes.

Political Capital is an independent policy research, analysis and consulting institute founded in 2001 in Budapest. We are committed to the guiding principles of liberal democracy, parliamentary democracy, market economy, human rights and Euro-Atlanticism. With the creation of analytical content, quantitative and qualitative policy research, and organizing substantial debates, we want to promote critical political thinking and increase understanding for politics, raise awareness about political issues that have an impact on citizen's everyday life, even if indirectly, and contribute to and develop a critical public discourse and policymaking that is based on knowledge and evidence.

Visegrad Insight is the leading Central European analytical platform of debate and analysis that generates future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners. It partners up with leading think-tanks, media outlets and public administration to deliver intelligence in democratic security. Visegrad Insight was established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation — an independent think tank in Warsaw devoted to advancing public debate on democratic security questions among the CEE region publics and provide expertise to policymakers in the EU.

The **Youth Initiative for Human Rights** was founded in 2003 with the aim of advancing peacebuilding and initiating youth cooperation within the region through conflict resolution and overcoming inter-ethnic tensions, as well as monitoring human rights violations and advocating for accountability, proper treatment of war victims and the rule of law. YIHR is a regional network with representation in Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. In 2019, YIHR was awarded the Vaclav Havel Prize on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe which honors outstanding civil society action in defense of human rights.

The views expressed in the paper are the responsibility of its authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forum 2000 Foundation or its staff.

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