



RECIPE BOOK

**KEY
INGREDIENTS
FOR CHANGE**

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THANK YOU!

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INTRODUCTION

For more than 18 years, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) regional network has been reminding regional actors that the future belongs to young people, and that youth voices matter when we discuss it.

Through numerous events, training, summits, workshops, schools, debates, and activism, YIHR has been equipping young people with fact-based knowledge while empowering active citizenship among the youth.

Considering the rise of autocratic political leaders, populism, and far-right ideologies that have strengthened harmful nationalistic perspectives across the region, empowering and supporting youth voices of change must be considered a priority. By acknowledging the ongoing threats posed to peace in the former Yugoslavia, YIHR recognises the call from and for the youth from the region to engage in discussion on some of the most important topics for the future of Europe and the region.

Thus, we are honoured to present to you our latest publication “Recipe Book - Key Ingredients for Change” which was produced as a result of joint work between youth across the region at the Podgorica Youth Summit during the Idea Lab workshops. The Idea Lab workshops featured the participation of around 80 young people from the former Yugoslav states of North Macedo-

nia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, as well as Albania.

The purpose of this publication is to serve as a successful blueprint for the youth in using their voices, energy, and capacities to increase civic participation in their communities, and it covers six topics:

- 1 Transitional justice and reconciliation;
- 2 Human rights and rule of law;
- 3 Democracy and democratic values;
- 4 Resilience of civil society and civic education;
- 5 Accountability and transparency;
- 6 Access to information and media literacy.



TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Transitional justice deals with the societies that had experienced war, armed conflict, repressive regimes and other massive human right violations. These are the societies that are currently undergoing the process of dealing with the past. The ultimate goal of the Transitional Justice is to overcome the legacy of the conflict and prevent its recurrence.¹

Generally, when addressing issues of transitional justice, the YIHR invites participants from all sectors of society to participate, while remaining vigilant towards the tendency of some groups to promote hatred and glorify war criminals. The YIHR has been consistently critical of state and local authorities' tendencies to glorify war criminals and has advocated for victims' rights.

The contributions of participants in the Podgorica Youth Summit echoed this, with many saying that change should originate from state institutions, but also that the NGO sector should take the lead on certain issues, such as providing support, psychological and otherwise, for victims, which was also identified as a key ingredient in reconciliation. Participants said that it was

¹ “Commemorative Practices in the Region and Attitudes Towards the 1990s War Crimes”, YIHR 2021.

important to encourage victims to move beyond state-imposed narratives of ethnocentric victimhood, as it prevents them from fully recovering. In terms of challenges, reflecting the complicated status of reconciliation and dealing with the past in the Western Balkans, participants discussed how state institutions must not defend both the victims of conflicts and war criminals the same time.

During the discussion, participants were repeatedly mentioning the following challenges posed to the process of transitional justice in their countries: glorification of convicted war criminals by the political parties and representatives of the state, ethnocentric narratives about the war victims and manipulating the numbers, lack of knowledge about the facts, hostile public discussions about the past as well as the lack of the youth-oriented regional strategies directed towards better understanding of the concept of reconciliation and responsibility for war crimes.

Based on the answers from the discussion, both the public and civil sectors have key roles to play in the reconciliation process, with state authorities perhaps providing more logistical and financial support while the civil society sector would provide services such as psychological support and workshops on integration. It is also crucial that state actors publicly disavow their support of war criminals and ensure that their governments are su-

pporting victims, rather than criminals, both in words and in actions.

At the workshop held as a part of Youth Summit in Podgorica, young people gave their opinions on what is important for them to change.

Regarding the responsibility of institutions, change must primarily come from the institutions.

Participants discussed how media freedom is all but extinct in the region, with states exerting much influence over what is displayed in the news. They said that manipulative narratives were in general an issue, and that people should be wary about where information comes from and who they should trust. One specific example that was given was on the subject of people that were killed or went missing during the 1990s wars. Young people said that the media was manipulating the numbers of children killed during the conflicts, which they said created further mistrust among ordinary people. The majority of participants said that while the media is important, some things and people (such as war criminals) have no place in them, but should rather be discussed in the court of law, rather than the court of public opinion, especially considering state control over media in the region. Overall, it is pivotal that media freedom be strengthened and consistently protected, while misinformation should be publicly disavowed, corrected, and overall eliminated.

With regards to media literacy, young people need the media to report fairly and truthfully about what happened in the past. Given that free media is almost non-existent in the region, it is of utmost importance to finally have media freedom.

Most young people learn about reconciliation in the region from their parents, which can be very subjective. On the other hand, they also learn from books, which are also not the best source, as there is no accurate information about reconciliation in school textbooks today due to state propaganda and the fact that there is no good model for reconciliation in the Balkans.

The topic of transitional justice is not represented in school textbooks and in the educational system in the Balkans. Young people lack a better educational system where they would be able to explore and learn more about this topic.

Many participants said that they had attempted to get involved in the reconciliation process, mostly via exchanges, but felt as if something was holding them back. They said that while the conflict is over, they still felt as though they were living in a war, demonstrating the effects that post-war trauma still has on the population, even those who did not live through or remember the conflicts themselves.

Regarding the role of the youth, as long as young people cooperate, get to know each other and learn about each other, changes for the better are possible.

The younger generation must accept the facts about the conflicts, whether positive or negative about their own states or people, in order to come to terms with the conflicts themselves. They said this was a required step in the reconciliation process that would allow people to generally take a step forward.

Transitional justice constitutes a component of YIHR's ongoing efforts to resolve post-war disputes which place human rights protection and all related governmental capacities on hold. It is necessary for regional cohesion and cooperation, as well as the advancement of a society from the impacts of a destructive conflict. In March of this year, the YIHR issued a demand to the Government of Kosovo to unequivocally condemn ethnically motivated attacks directed towards Serbs in Kosovo, while ensuring internally displaced people and refugees a safe return to their homes. This is merely one of the steps taken by the YIHR to further transitional justice and its application throughout the region.

Key ingredients to move this agenda forward should include efforts to diminish any instances of denials of human rights atrocities and other forms of discrimination. Such efforts will require expanded awareness of both recent

historical and current human rights violations that have impacted regional political dynamics, which have the capacity to restore positive post-war relations between government authorities and citizens. Education reform can be demanded to advance efforts towards completing the regional post-war transitional justice process in the Western Balkans.



During the first half of 2019 and the second half of 2020, YIHR Serbia organised six two-day workshops in places where war crimes took place on the territory of Serbia from 1991 to 2001.

The participants of the workshops were young people aged 18 to 30, of different nationalities from more than 20 cities in Serbia, who had the opportunity to learn more about the war that is denied in public through conversations with witnesses, experts in the field of transitional justice. The workshops also included memorial walks and visits to places of crime that to this day do not have an official monument or memorial plaque, such

as the Šljivovica, Stajičevo, and Begejci camps, the site of the mass grave in Batajnica, as well as the places where civilians were killed during the NATO bombing of Serbia in Niš.

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND RULE OF LAW

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ², human rights are characterised as rules set to protect all people from any form of political, legal and social abuse or oppression. They are fundamental rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, religion, or any other status.

The challenges of upholding human rights therefore vary, depending on the country and region. Some examples of human rights violations include inhumane treatment, persecution of religious or ethnic minorities, restriction of freedom of expression and assembly, and the violation of the right to privacy and access to information.

According to the OHCHR, all human rights are considered indivisible and interdependent, given that one set of rights cannot be fully enjoyed without the other. Therefore, equality and non-discrimination are the essence of human rights.

The concept of rule of law supports the idea that all citizens are equal before the law, thus showing that human rights and rule of law go hand in hand. When rule of law is emphasised by a state, the society is well ordered and its citizens know their legal worth and value.

The participants of the workshop within the Podgorica Youth Summit mapped several challenges that they face as activists and young civil society professionals in relation to the broad concept of human rights and rule of law:

Discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity is a reality for many throughout the region. The problem of homophobia, racism, as well as misogyny is prevalent throughout the whole Western Balkans. Police do not react appropriately to violation of women's rights, LGBTIQ+ rights or Roma rights. Roma people are often disregarded by the governments as equal participants of the community; discrimination is also prevalent in schools, by peers as well as social workers. Cases of sexual harassment and assaults on women are not handled with care by the police. The LGBTIQ+ community is often disregarded completely as being a legitimate part of the population; the police do not react when hate speech or attacks occur.

Abuse of power by the police and the judiciary is yet another related issue which must not be overlooked. The legal assumption that everybody is innocent until proven guilty does not apply in the court of public opinion. In all levels of the legal system, from the clerk to the minister, the culture of bribery and corruption runs rampant. High government officials are rarely held accountable for either their participation in, or their deliberate blindness towards, corruption.

Freedom of expression and assembly are some of the fundamental rights that stand at the basis of democratic societies. Freedom of expression enables people to share and explore opinions and ideas, as well as to express them through protests and marches. As the right to peaceful assembly enables citizens to communicate their opinions freely in public space, this puts it in close relation to freedom of expression. In the past couple of years, protestors all over the Western Balkans have been subjected to violence, threats, intimidation, and even arrests. According to Amnesty International, these were all shown to be methods governments use to suppress critical voices, which have all the right to agree or disagree with those in power. Although governments are obliged to prohibit hate speech, many misuse their power to suppress different opinions by criminalising freedom of expression through laws. In recent years, activists, NGOs, and individuals who have been helping refugees and migrants have faced backlash from the authorities, which

can be perceived as an indicator of a country's treatment of human rights in general.

During Podgorica Youth Summit, a set of recommendations were written based on the discussions with the youth. In relation to the topic of human rights and rule of law, young people accordingly agreed that:

Governments and institutions have to create a safe space for young people to report and to react to violations of human rights that they experience or witness. Accordingly, young people have to be supported and protected in their efforts to speak up against injustices.

Governments, institutions, and international organisations have to work together in reducing hate speech both online and in the offline spaces, especially hate speech that targets and stigmatises various vulnerable groups of young people.

Governments, institutions, international organisations and civil society organisations have to protect young refugees and people seeking asylum especially in the context of the current war in Ukraine.

Governments have to be more committed to the enhancement of the rule of law while adopting the laws that will guarantee the same rights for LGBTIQ+ community and other people in vulnerable situations.

In 2016, the YIHR published its report “Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty in Serbian Prison System” in line with the broader aim of “Building free of torture and impunity societies in the Western Balkans” project. This initiative is one of the many examples highlighting actions to be taken to address systemic discrimination throughout prisons in Serbia. This serves as one step forward in the call for justice and respect for rule of law in the country, and throughout the region.

According to the newest report of Freedom House regarding nations in transit³, all Western Balkan countries are still considered hybrid regimes. As long as the support for human rights defenders and CSOs is lacking, tackling this issue will remain a challenge. These actors are key allies in addressing the challenges posed by illiberal democracies, and should thus be protected at all times.

Key ingredients for all current and prospective youth ready to engage on this front should include the following: respect and appreciation for diversity,

3 Freedom House. “Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression”. 14. Accessed 2 July, 2022. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf



proclaiming this acknowledgement in all contexts - from daily conversations to demonstrations and other forms of democratic participation. Defence against discrimination will also require that activists remain aware of the most recurrent challenges faced by discriminated communities, including their political representatives.

DEMOCRACY & DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Countless reports on the state of democracy in the world are still defining the regimes in the Western Balkans as hybrid regimes⁴. These regimes combine elements of democracy and authoritarian rule, though they are, in effect, distinct from both. They may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but governing institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy: checks and balances, rule of law, and robust protections for the rights and liberties of all. Thus, illiberal democratic standards have begun to reappear as a regional standard throughout the Western Balkans.

Participants in the Youth Summit did not fail to acknowledge the variety of issues impacted by the democratic structures and procedures at stake in the

4 Ibid.

Western Balkan countries.

Young people have stressed ageism in the Balkans as one of the main issues they are struggling with when they are trying to make decision makers listen. Although stakeholders are calling on the youth to be proactive, the voiced opinions and political interests of young demographics are often neglected and discredited by establishment politicians. Major concerns among the youth are directly associated with the ensuing concern for a lack of prospective opportunities for the personal and professional development of the youth. Direct (democratic) participation is viewed as restricted in scope, with governments' lack of efforts to include the youth in forms of direct democracy in the nation's democratic institutions.

At the Youth Summit, participants were quick to recognise the foundation connection between national and local civic educational efforts and systematic inclusion of themselves and their peers in democratic processes and structures alike. Accordingly, students attribute the relative lack of democratic tendencies in Serbia, for instance, to the need for education on democratic values such as participation, tolerance, openness, justice, and the need to interact with these values from an early age.

Firm and unequivocal commitment to democratic values in the Balkans is lacking from the moment the states have declared their independence and

closed the paths of democratisation. Countries are also struggling with their own views towards EU enlargement⁵, which leaves youth demographics reluctant to the process of EU integration of their country. Where prospects of European integration remain dire for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo due to ensuring political dynamics which complicate and may go so far as blocking EU membership, government leadership may be seen as lacking on this front. Furthermore, although Croatia is officially part of the European Union, according to young people it still shares many negative patterns and democracy issues with other countries from the Western Balkans region.

Illiberal democratic practices have become the status quo throughout countries in the former Yugoslavia where elections are held, though only to effectively allow ruling parties to maintain their place in governing institutions and elsewhere. This semblance of democracy has itself been overshadowed by frequent accounts of voter fraud and patronage networks throughout the Western Balkans⁶. Recent elections this year in Bosnia and Herzegovina have

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- 5 “2021 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses and sets out reform priorities for the Western Balkans and Turkey”. European Commission. 19 October, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5275
- 6 Bak. Mathias. “Overview of corruption and anticorruption in the Western Balkans and Turkey”. U4 Anti-Corruption Helpdesk. Accessed 2 July, 2022. <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/products/Country-profiles-Western-Balkans-and-Turkey.pdf>

given rise to a continued lack of trust among the voting population⁷. A recent landslide victory on behalf of Serbia's ruling party; attempts on behalf of the nation's leader to garner votes in the neighbouring state of Kosovo and instances of voter fraud⁸ have been reported as instances of consequential limits of liberal democratic processes which have the capacity to persist.

In Montenegro, electoral results await democratic assessment as the minority government continues to be held responsible for the lack of domestic political unity. Moreover, youth demographics remain altogether excluded as they witness the lack of interest in discussions of democracy amongst leading politicians. With a history of authoritarian tendencies in Croatia, more direct democratic initiatives are in demand among civil society groups and the electorate⁹. Party preferences and agendas increasingly shed light on the presence of anti-democratic interest groups, including anti-abortion activists. Its treatment of migrants along the state's borders has, for some youth, signified the country's lack of recognition of European democratic values which it claims to sustain.

7 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. "Public Perceptions of Elections in BiH: Reforms Needed". <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/514606>

8 "Council of Europe bodies observe national and local elections in Serbia". Council of Europe. 5 April, 2022. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-bodies-observe-national-and-local-elections-in-serbia>

9 Bertelsmann Stiftung. "Croatia Country Report 2022". BTI Transformation Index. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/HRV>

Inherently, democracy cannot persist without equal recognition for all citizens, including its youth. This should include comprehensive measures to assess and act upon the exclusion of youth from their nation's democratic systems, and increased action to represent future generations through democratic governance.

Youth demographics have recognised the importance of the EU's recognition of democratic values embraced in the Western Balkans. Nonetheless, this will remain a challenge as long as these states fail to commit to embracing democratic values and implementing them to the extent that the youth throughout the region are included in such processes themselves. Where the youth have witnessed a lack of hope for political transformation in the region, they offered recent events including the invasion of Ukraine as a viable political moment for the Western Balkan unity to show itself in defence of democracy in Europe.

Recently, the activism originating from various YIHR initiatives relates to the immediate demand for effective responses to the government attempts to curtail democratic freedoms for all members of civil society and the Serbian electorate. The successful representation of these efforts was most evident when the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) obliged the Government of Serbia to answer questions regarding endangering the security of activi-

sts of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights after the unsuccessful removal of the mural of Ratko Mladić on November 9 in Njegoševa street in Belgrade and the ban of public assembly by the Ministry of Interior.

This initiative and the mobilisation of various YIHR activists have informed us that the following key ingredients are necessary for an efficient demand for democratic reform, both local and regional: firstly, democratic standards must be demanded alongside the inclusion of different demographic groups; secondly, where repeated instances of disrupted democratic processes signify negative advances, electoral activism through existing democratic processes and civil society membership can only be sustained in numbers and consistency. Moreover, democracy cannot persist on a regional scale without active demand for democracy on the national scale.



THE RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC EDUCATION

Civil Resilience describes civil society's ability to resist challenges and threats and to transform a current state. It is a key indicator for describing the civic culture of a country. Furthermore, it describes the ability of concrete institutions to share and incorporate democratic principles, attitudes, and processes.

Currently, the lack of dialogue between CSOs and governments fosters the continuation of insufficiently developed relations and cooperation between governments and CSOs for reforms and general decision making processes. There is still a lack of involvement of CSOs, deriving from the lack of acknowledgment of the CSO sector as an important state actor.

A shrinking civic space presents issues in and limitation of space for civil society to speak out and to act in promoting democratic values and the importance of civic participation of citizens but also to influence political and social structures. This results in the creation of an unsupportive environment from governmental bodies.

In order to contribute to social innovation and democratic transformation, the democratic resilience of individuals can be strengthened through durable civil society organisations. The starting point for this improvement is the empowerment of individual citizens in terms of public expression, and for proactive, targeted engagement in Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

A vibrant civil society is a key ingredient for democracy. Both NGOs and more informal movements help ensure that governments are taking decisions that may affect everyone in society. Such civil society groups allow a citizenry to unify and project their voices together, and eventually speak regularly with their elected representatives and ensure democratic represen-



tation and provide the appropriate support and care to all of their constituents.

In its broadest definition, “civic education” refers to all the processes that affect people’s beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities. Civic education does not need to be intentional or deliberate; institutions and communities transmit values and norms without intending to. It might not always be beneficial: sometimes people are civically educated in ways

that disempower them or impart harmful values and goals. It is certainly not limited to schooling and the education of children and youth - families, governments, religions, and mass media are just some of the institutions involved in civic education, which is understood as a lifelong process.

The participants of the workshop within the Podgorica Youth Summit ma-

pped several challenges that they face as activists and young professionals within civil society in relation to the resilience of civil society:

Civic education is not integrated in the education systems in the countries of the Western Balkans and it is not explicitly mentioned in their youth policy frameworks. Young people lack information on what civic engagement is and on participation opportunities.

The youth legal and policy framework is an under-regulated area in the countries of the Western Balkans. No efficient mechanisms for integration of youth perspectives into public policy can be identified, and current legal and policy frameworks do not encourage youth participation and activism.

There is a lack of conducive environments in the region for volunteering. Volunteering is not sufficiently promoted among the youth, resulting in a lack of information about volunteering opportunities in and outside the home countries. The lack of a volunteering environment is also affected by poor institutional, legal and policy frameworks in the region.

The democratic backsliding and closing of civic space are worrying for the civil society. Not only are the rights of citizens and organisations being weakened (or violated altogether), but vulnerabilities within the sector are emerging as a result of the shrinking space. The pandemic exacerbated the

financial instability of civil society organisations, shining a light on outdated business models. Internal sector-wide discord is making it difficult for civil society to organise collectively against the trends or discuss points of sectoral weaknesses. Additionally, civil society's legitimacy is being undermined by the spread of false information and its cybersecurity systems are being compromised.

As one of the examples of how to improve civic education with a special focus on learning about human rights and reporting on their violation, YIHR Serbia carried out a programme during 2021 called 'How to Research and Report on the State of Human Rights?'

The workshops offered the participants an opportunity to learn more about the purpose and strength of a single human rights report, the preparations and research methods that are used depending on the manner of data collection, as well as how the report is formed and presented to the public. The lecturers were renowned experts with many years of experience in civil society, and they shared their knowledge and experience with the participants, in order to prepare them for all the situations they may encounter if they decide to engage in research and reporting.

As a result of working on this program, participants were empowered to report eight individual human rights violations in local communities in Serbia.

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These researches were later presented through the internet platform *defende.rs*. *Defende.rs* is a platform created by YIHR Serbia that collects and facilitates access to available reports on human rights in Serbia, but also facilitates the procedure of addressing independent institutions for the protection of human rights to interested citizens.

ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY

In Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, government accountability and transparency remain issues concerning and affecting local populations.

As of 2020, watchdog Freedom House rated Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia as “hybrid regimes”, citing their weak institutions and gradual degradation in democratic indicators¹⁰. Croatia was classified as a semi-consolidated democracy, while Slovenia was considered a consolidated democracy. Both Serbia and Montenegro were specifically cited for lacking media freedom and political

10 Freedom House. “Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression”. 14. Accessed 2 July, 2022. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf; European Western Balkans. “Freedom House: Western Balkan countries remain hybrid regimes, decline for Serbia and BiH”. 20 April, 2022. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/04/20/freedom-house-western-balkan-countries-remain-hybrid-regimes-decline-for-serbia-and-bih/>

accountability, whilst also having increased corruption.

During the Youth Summit, participants stressed the importance of including the youth perspectives throughout policymaking processes. Enhanced policies directly acknowledging the prospective role of youth and the need for their empowerment as future political actors and human rights advocates within their respective countries. The youth today shared their interest in holding persons in power accountable for their words and actions due to the resulting implications on the future of the youth.

The youth, furthermore, demand that regional and domestic leadership mobilises its efforts to implement measures against the brain drain that will motivate larger numbers of youth to mobilise for change. Many young people also expressed interest in increased support from local leadership in order to be equipped with the knowledge and skills which would allow them to contribute to professional investigative journalism as it should be further demanded throughout the region today.

While defamation and other acts invoking the civil right to the freedom of speech still remain criminal offenses in Croatia, lack of freedoms throughout media across the country also remain overconstrained. Mention of war crimes committed during the independence war (between the years 1991 and

1995)¹¹ remains outlawed and journalists are frequently at risk of intimidation by both governmental and non-governmental actors alike¹². Thus, despite the implementation of laws guaranteeing privately owned media companies, expression in the media has not yet met EU standards for transparency. Thus, challenges are sure to exist in the face of youth activism.

Similar tendencies persist through Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia,¹³ where freedom of the press is constrained either by national regulations or the practice of state-financing media outlets.

According to Transparency International, which works against global corruption, the issue of state capture, which refers to how influential individuals and groups utilise corruption to guide and modify a nation's politics, laws, and economy to enrich themselves and their own private enterprises, all while avoiding punishment and prosecution, is a major problem in the Western Balkans. Transparency International puts the blame for this issue

11 Reporters Without Borders. "Croatia". RSF. <https://rsf.org/en/country/croatia>

12 European Federation of Journalists. "Croatia: Union reports over 900 lawsuits against journalists and media". 4 April, 2022. <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2022/04/04/croatia-union-reports-over-900-lawsuits-against-journalists-and-media/>; Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. "Media Freedom in Croatia". <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-freedom3>

13 Freedom House. "Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression". 14. Accessed 2 July, 2022. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf

on these actors' "undue influence" on the judiciary, and lawmaking itself¹⁴.

In terms of lawmaking, the influence of powerful individuals has led to laws being passed that serve private interests, often at the expense of the society at large, focusing on specific business matters while seeming to have a more general purpose. Laws passed might give the aforementioned powerful individuals privileged contracts and industry monopolies, as well as giving public employment to poorly-qualified individuals who then enable further corruption. These laws often prevent courts from pursuing and penalising particular examples of corruption.

As discussed above, individuals engaging in corrupt activities are often protected with immunity from prosecution.

As of 2021, while Albania has seen slight improvements in addressing corruption, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo are stagnating, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are backsliding. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) which gives countries points on a scale from 1-100, where 100 is a "corruption-free" public sector and 0 indicates an "absolutely corrupted" public sector, the Western Balkans countries have an average score of 39.8, much lower than the European Union average score of 66.

¹⁴ Transparency International. "Captured States in the Western Balkans and Turkey". 11 Dec., 2020. <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/captured-states-western-balkans-turkey>

Insufficient redress within domestic criminal justice systems does not make room for systematic change that would eliminate the loopholes and laws allowing for corruption to flourish. This is often most detrimental when criminal justice is also not pursued as a means of re-establishing regional respect for the principle of rule of law and transparency with regards to human rights violations.

Where Criminal Tribunals in the Hague serve as a means of judicial redress, recent accounts of procedural “blocking”¹⁵, notably on behalf of the Croatian authorities, have only rendered post-war transitional justice initiatives more difficult to achieve.

Identifiably, international standards and efforts to regulate the return of corruption and illicit finance activities throughout this region of Europe have existed for over a decade¹⁶. Nonetheless, such activities have gone so far as to leave the rest of Europe with fresh calls for attentiveness on behalf of the governments in the region. This has most recently been the case in Serbia. Demonstrably, a recent report released by the Council of Europe this month

15 United Nations. “‘Justice Will Ultimately Prevail Where There Is the Political Will to Seek It’, President of Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals Tells Security Council”. 14 June, 2022.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14930.doc.htm>

16 “Regional Anti-Corruption and Illicit Finance Roadmap in Serbia”. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. <https://www.unodc.org/southeasterneurope/en/all-stories-may-regional-anti-corruption-and-illicit-finance-roadmap-in-serbia.html>



concerning corruption among the state's central government - including executive officials and law enforcement¹⁷ - highlights the continued urgency and structural dilemma which should be addressed in order to empower the nation and its mobilised youth.

The YIHR has succeeded in its efforts to meet some of the demands of the youth which are most

pertinent to discussions of accountability and transparency. In October of 2021, twenty-five young activists and journalists from Serbia attended the seminar 'Practices of Remembering the Srebrenica Genocide' at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre in Potočari, organised by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, and forumZFD.

This opportunity allowed for students to receive hands-on training on how accountability and transparency can be enforced through a variety of me-

17 "Serbia: Council of Europe anti-corruption body publishes report on measures to take concerning top executive functions and the police". 5 July, 2022.
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/-/serbia-publication-of-5th-round-evaluation-repo-1>

ans and mobilisation tactics. In 2017, moreover, the YIHR published a report titled “War Criminals in Political Life”. This report is a systematic presentation of how the government continuously defends and supports convicted war criminals. It brought together YIHR’s aim to demand transparency throughout democratic processes and create it through research on its own.

Whereas journalism may or may not serve as a tactic for all youth populations throughout the region, some key ingredients for success in addressing this systematic threat to human rights can include, firstly, holding civil servants accountable for any illegal acts which have the capacity to defy the principles of the rule of law and human rights within governmental institutions and throughout society, and, secondly, learning how to properly report and communicate denials of any official charges against executive officials or law enforcement officers regarding corruption or illicit activities.



ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND MEDIA LITERACY

In regard to media literacy and access to information, civil societies in former Yugoslavia have witnessed similar challenges that have evolved since the violent collapse of the former socialist federation.

Enrooted in the legacy of the 1990s wars, political ideas have become the main principle of journalism that continues to shape post-conflict narratives and public opinions in societies across the region.

In the years that followed, warmongering press and tabloids flooded the media space. Meanwhile, the deficiency of established institutional media framework and ethical codes allowed tycoons and members of political parties to take over. Failing to represent public interests, political leaders and moguls that arose from the ashes of former Yugoslavia marked the era of tightly controlled media landscapes that are nowadays characterised by a growing information gap between the ruling elites and ordinary citizens.

This information gap – defined by missing or incomplete information – sustains an environment that leaves the door open for manipulation and disinformation, hampers educated decision-making, and fosters extreme

differences in levels of political knowledge within and between ex-Yugoslav societies.

As mainstream media across the region still revolves around identity politics, political agendas and cultural hegemony, fact-based reporting is an exception rather than the norm. Investigative reporters, news outlets, NGOs, CSOs and members of civic society that are critical of the ruling class are often harassed, threatened, intimidated and scapegoated.

According to Reporters Without Borders' 2022 World Press Freedom Index (WPI), press freedom remains a major problem in the Balkans, with journalists facing highly polarised political environments and threats from criminal organisations.

Furthermore, in their research, authors Melita Poler and Marko Milosavljević noted “a lack of editorial independence” in public service broadcasting, which is “reflected in politically biased, pro-government news content.” Poler and Milosavljević also highlighted that “the commercialisation of programmes”, in the wider context of labour markets, has rendered (access to) information – a basic human right – simply a commodity.

When it comes to the subject of media literacy, major research conducted by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEEN-

PM) found that “countries of the region lack comprehensive policies and institutional framework for developing MIL [media and information literacy] in a systematic way and at scale.” Rather, as the SEENPM claims, “MIL is being left on the margins as a toy for civil society, public sector enthusiasts and international organizations.”

Distinguished by one-sided reporting, high levels of political polarisation, and the lack of free press, present media landscapes in the Balkans have also affected general public distrust towards governments and institutions. In turn, as noted by professor Florian Bieber, “low trust [in public institutions] and high polarisation provide fertile ground for conspiracies to flourish”. This trend (the rise of conspiracy theories and hoaxes) has exacerbated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, further underlining the issue of low levels of media literacy in the region.

At the Podgorica Youth Summit, young people from Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina together discussed and identified the main trends pertaining to access to information and media literacy in the region. Media polarisation, unethical and biased reporting were emphasised as key obstacles for creating generations of informed and media literate youth. Mainstream media in the region have been described as those who promote dehumanisation and discrimination of racial,

ethnic, religious and other minorities while at the same time they lack sensitivity in reporting for gender-based identities and the LGBTIQ+ community.

Insensitive media coverage has been mapped as hostile, often having negative effects on emotional and physical wellness and mental health of the youth. The lack of access to the internet in rural areas has been emphasised as a problem. However, access to the internet was only described as a tool for accessing the information, but the access itself is proved not to be a guarantee for media literacy and availability of accurate information. Due to the enormously fast spread of disinformation and misinformation in a very fast world, lack of impartial information and the ability among the youth to recognise them is a risk. Participants also stress the importance of countering sensationalism, unethical reporting on violence and victims, negative media portrayal of youth and absence of youth-oriented content.

While addressing the need for a human rights-based approach to journalism – one of the ‘key’ ingredients for creating sustainable change in the region – a 2012 publication by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, entitled “Journalists can do it,” contains the analysis of media reporting in Serbia about the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the topics relevant for the relations between the two societies. This publication, initially a project, first began back in 2004 as a response to poor, un-objective, racist and pent-up reporting style

in the media, which has been shaping relations between Kosovo and Serbia since the collapse of the former state. Eight years later, the publication came to life, as not enough has been done to bring about positive change in the media approach to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute.

Beyond the Belgrade-Pristina peace talks, however, more than three decades after the war unraveled in former Yugoslavia, media landscapes across the region still resemble a warzone. In a dire state, journalism and the media across the region would greatly benefit from similar initiatives that seek to bring about truth, justice and reconciliation between contemporary Balkan societies.

This publication is dedicated to all young people around the region who believe their countries can do it better and they are just about to raise their voices. Be the change and start now!

—Youth Initiative for Human Rights

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