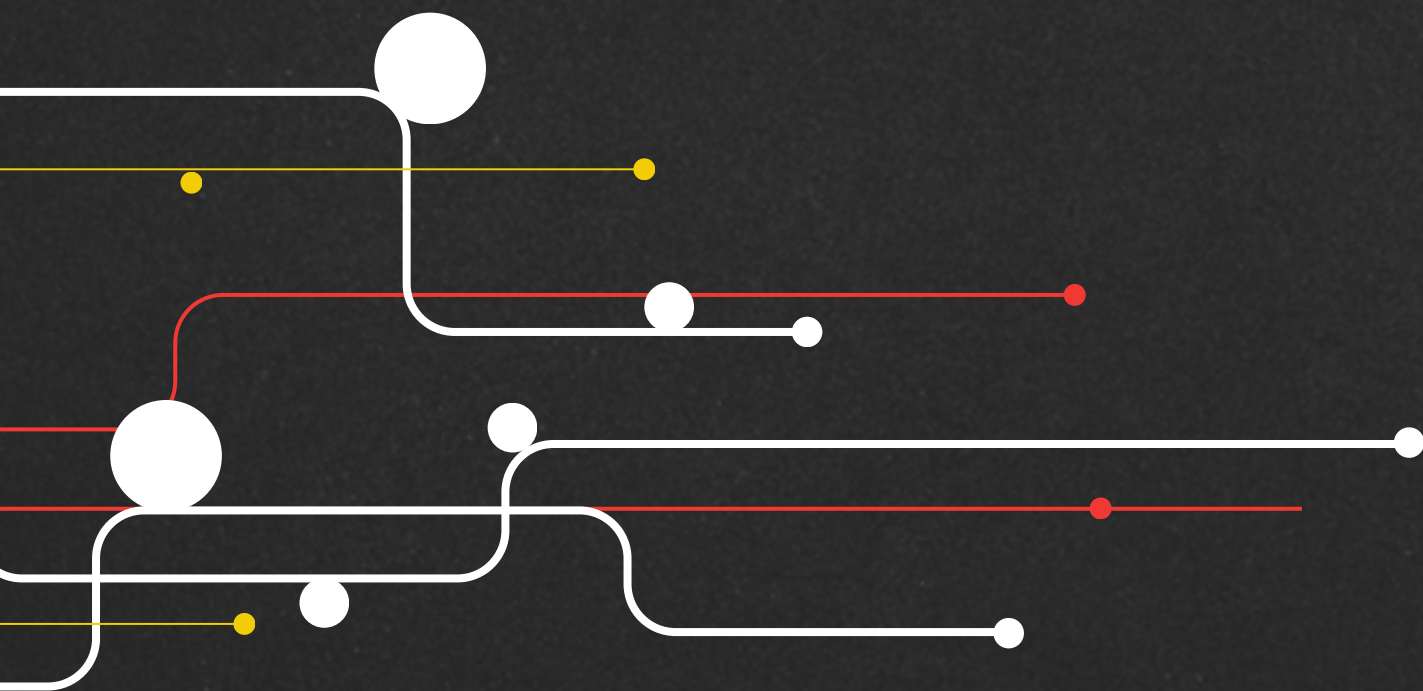


LOUD RESISTANCE

current issues of the youth from WB6 and Croatia



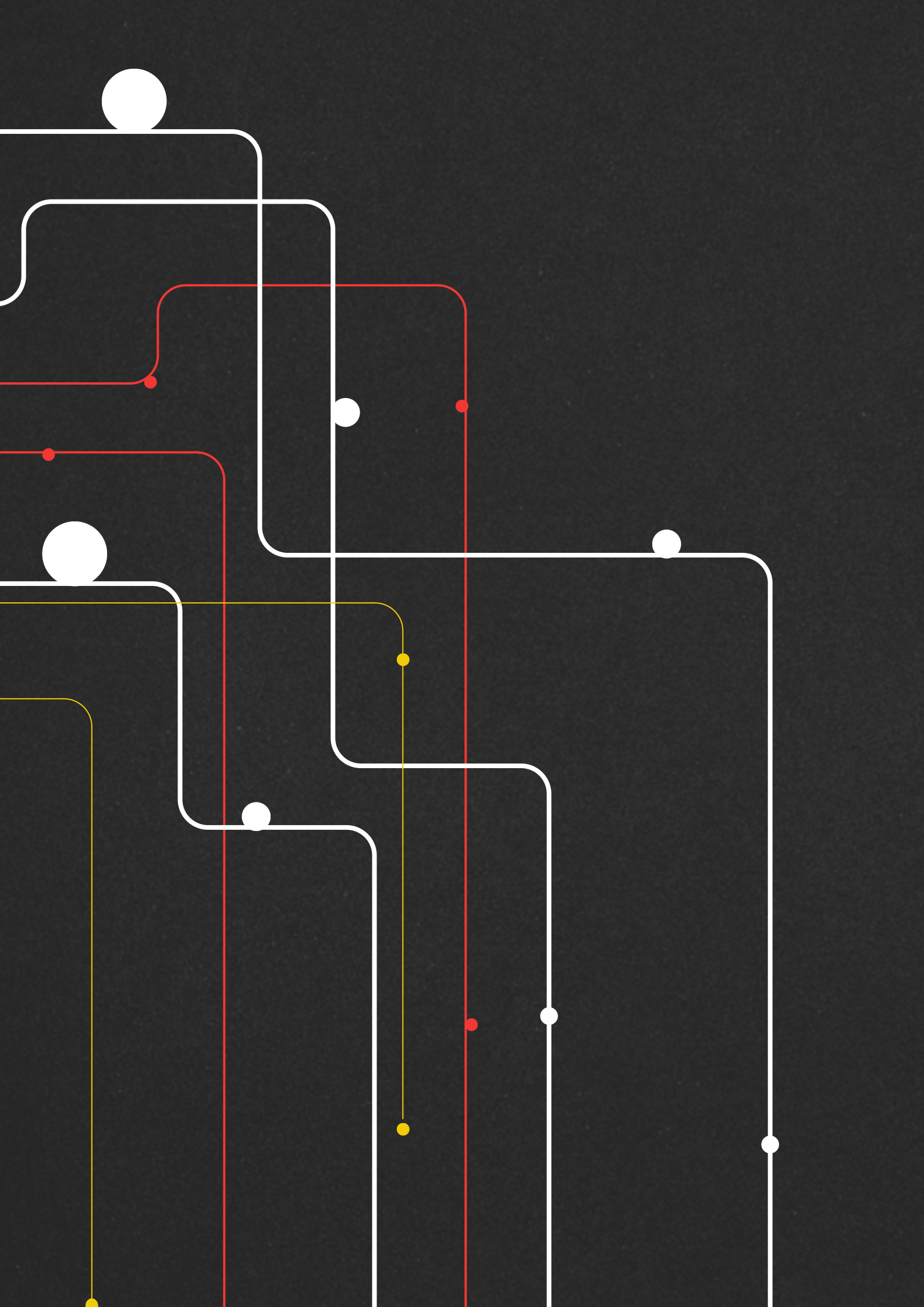
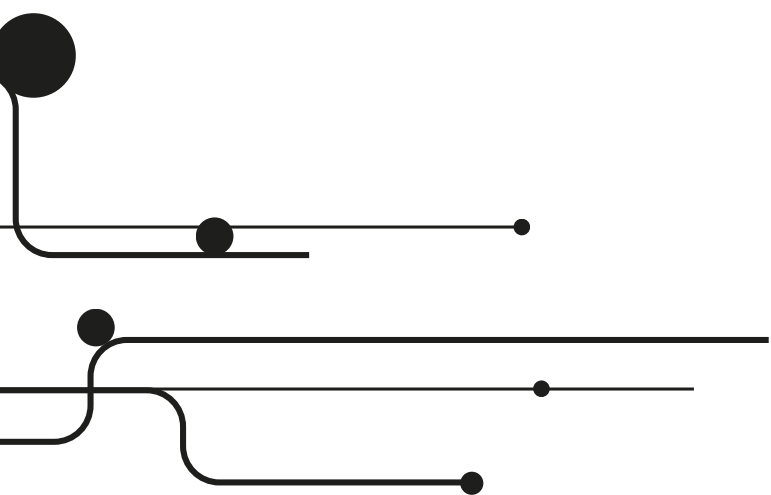


TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	<u>1</u>
REBUILDING THROUGH MEMORY	<u>3</u>
Strengthening Media Accountability and Promoting Ethical Journalism	<u>4</u>
Strengthening Judicial Independence and Advancing Transitional Justice	<u>4</u>
Enhancing Governance and Promoting Reconciliation	<u>5</u>
Empowering Civil Society for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation	<u>5</u>
Empowering Youth as Key Actors in Reconciliation	<u>6</u>
VOICES OF THE MARGINS – STRENGTHENING MINORITY RIGHTS	<u>6</u>
Political Representation and Institutional Inclusion	<u>7</u>
Language Rights and Cultural Inclusion	<u>8</u>
Socio-Economic and Migrant Inclusion	<u>9</u>
Trust-Building and Reconciliation/Hate Speech and Media Bias	<u>9</u>
DEMOCRACY	<u>11</u>
Separation of Power, Political Pluralism, and the Opposition	<u>11</u>
Accountable Institutions and a Democratic Political Culture	<u>13</u>
Media Freedom and Independence	<u>14</u>
Civil Society and Civic Participation	<u>14</u>
ECHOES OF TRUTH – COMBATING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA	<u>16</u>
Propaganda and Disinformation among Countries in the Region	<u>17</u>
AI Regulation, AI-driven Disinformation, and Deep Fakes	<u>18</u>
Disinformation in Elections and Against Marginalized Groups	<u>19</u>
FEMINISM, WOMEN’S RIGHTS, AND ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT	<u>20</u>
CONCLUSION	<u>22</u>



This publication is the result of workshops held as part of the Tirana Youth Summit, in which young people from the countries from the region - Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia - with the mentorship of experts from various fields. During the workshops, young people discussed various problems facing the region - transitional justice and reconciliation, democracy, minority rights, disinformation and propaganda, women's rights - thinking about possible solutions and recommendations. The mentors were: Mario Mažić, consultant and founder of YIHR Croatia; Margareta Blažević, program officer at YIHR Croatia; Naim Leo Beširi, executive director at Institute for European Affairs; Marija Ratković, publicist and activist; Bjanka Stanković, journalist at Vidi Vaka.

The Youth Summit is a semi-annual regional gathering that unites young people from the region, alongside peace activists from Europe and global experts. In 2024, Summit was held in Tirana, Albania from December 17th to 20th, under the theme “Loud Resistance”, aimed to empower youth to lead efforts that preserve hard-fought democratic gains and reconciliation processes, while laying the foundation for youth-driven positive change in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Region consisting of former Yugoslavia and Albania is a very dynamic and diverse, with Slovenia and Croatia, as former Yugoslav republics, being members of the EU, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo as parts of former Yugoslavia as well as Western Balkan countries, and Albania as one of the Western Balkan six. Often called the soft belly of Europe, this part of the Balkans has an interesting and important place on the European continent, as an area that is not fully integrated with the West, and on which states such as Russia, China, and Turkey have a significant influence. Today, the countries of the region face numerous challenges in various areas, such as the economy, corruption, lack of reforms and stronger EU integration, but also reconciliation, the position of marginalized groups and minorities, and the state of democracy and the rule of law. Although each of the countries has its own characteristics, challenges, and dilemmas, they all share practically the same future and are inextricably linked, and many issues concern all of them.

Since gaining independence, North Macedonia has constantly faced various demands from its neighbors, which makes EU integration difficult. North Macedonia's current dispute with Bulgaria, concerning constitutional amendments to recognize a Bulgarian minority, has delayed its EU accession process. Even though the previous administration had agreed to such changes, the new government elected in 2024 is not willing to do so. The Constitutional Court abolished the "Ethnic Balancer", a mechanism introduced in 2015 to enforce ethnic quotas in the public sector employment that greatly improved the inclusion of the Albanian minority. Its removal has raised concerns about potentially undermining progress in fragile inter-ethnic relations. Corruption remains the country's top challenge, with 2023 reforms to the Criminal Code weakening penalties and time limits for abuse of office and criminal enterprise, threatening many ongoing prosecutions.

Corruption and bribery remain major problems also in Albania. In 2019, Albania established a Specialized Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), which has prosecuted high-level officials. EU reforms and specifically the improved judiciary performance in Albania began restoring public trust in the justice system. Due to the dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, the EU announced the decoupling of Albania from North Macedonia on the EU accession path. Following the decision on the decoupling of their processes, the EU opened negotiations on Cluster 1 with Albania separately in October 2024. Serbia has the most specific position. It is the only country in the region that insists on military neutrality, its attitude towards the EU is ambivalent, and it is the only one that seeks to maintain close ties with Russia.

The unresolved relationship between Serbia and Kosovo further complicates the situation, not only for those two countries but for the whole region. Protests have become more frequent in Serbia in recent years. As a result of two mass shootings in early May 2023, tens of thousands of people protested for more than 5 months, demanding that the government and pro-government media stop promoting violence. The collapse of a canopy at the Novi Sad train station in November 2024, which killed 16 people, led to a new wave of mass protests led by students, demanding accountability. For several years, Serbia has made little or no progress in EU integration, while it still struggles with corruption and the absence of the rule of law.

The unresolved dispute with Serbia hinders Kosovo's further integration into the international community. A shootout between thirty armed attackers and the Kosovo police in the village of Banjska in September 2023 has further exacerbated tensions between the two countries. Even though in March 2024 the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy recommended Kosovo's membership to the Council of Europe, since then, there has been no progress on membership. As of January 1, 2024, Kosovo passport holders are permitted to travel to the EU without a visa, marking a significant milestone in Kosovo's EU integration process. Later that year, the European Parliament adopted the amendment to the Regulation as regards holders of Serbian passports issued by the Serbian Coordination Directorate who reside in Kosovo, exempting them from visa requirements.

Tensions in the region often reflect on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, negatively affecting relations between the three constituent peoples and other minorities. Opposing views on the organization of the state hinder reforms and progress, questioning the future of the country. In 2024, the EU agreed to begin membership negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, contingent on further reforms. However, frequent threats of secession by the leadership of the Republic of Srpska, and clashes with the High Representative, make everyday occurrences, making it difficult for the state to function smoothly.

Slovenia differs significantly from the rest of the region, embracing its Central European identity rather than its Balkan one. It is the first country of the former Yugoslavia to become a member of the EU, back in 2004, along with nine other European countries. Political developments in recent years have been dictated by the actions of a government led by the newly established Freedom Movement (GS) and the new Prime Minister in 2022, Robert Golob, a man without political experience. Devastating floods in 2023 and some unfortunate decisions connected with corruption represented a challenge for Golob's government. The floods changed the priority of the government, leading to the postponement of most reforms and cuts to the state budget.

Yet another former Yugoslav republic that became an EU member state – and the last country overall to become a member – is Croatia, in 2013. In recent years, concerns about the presence of far-right groups and political parties who are promoting the Ustasha movement from the Second World War and figures espousing discriminatory values in public life have increased. In 2024, Croatia got its new government led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Homeland Movement (DP), an extreme right-wing party, became part of the government, while after several mandates, the Independent Serbian Democratic Party (SDSS) is not part of it, which means that there are no representatives of Serb minority in the Croatian government.

Montenegro is often viewed as the next EU member state, and it is generally considered the most successful Western Balkan country in terms of EU integration and reforms. In recent years, Montenegro has implemented several key institutional and legal reforms, particularly in the areas of justice and the fight against corruption, on its path to EU membership. One of the biggest changes came in 2023 when Montenegro's long-time leader, Milo Đukanović, lost the presidential elections.

As can be seen, there are numerous open issues in the region. Some are very specific, while others are common to all countries. Therefore, this publication will map and address some important issues facing this region with recommendations addressed to various stakeholders.

REBUILDING THROUGH MEMORY

In the aftermath of the violent wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, various transitional justice mechanisms have been (mis)used in countries of the Western Balkans. In 2025, some countries will mark 30 years while some will mark more than 20 years since the end of the violent armed conflicts that raged across the former Yugoslav countries from 1991 until 2001. Following the cessation of war activities, all the countries, some to a larger some to a smaller extent, were faced with complex transitional challenges - establishing a fair, and democratic political system, (re)building socio-political institutions and establishing a functional and unbiased post-conflict transitional justice (TJ) system which would facilitate processes of dealing with the countries' recent, violent past. However, all countries continue to face serious challenges in implementing transitional justice mechanisms that would effectively facilitate democratization and progress in the field of justice and reconciliation. Due to the failures in developing and implementing effective mechanisms that would ensure responsible and unbiased dealing with violent conflicts, all countries are facing more and more security risks and anti-democratic trends. The Balkan powder keg is further destabilized by increasing foreign anti-democratic influence in the region and threats of a potential spillover of the conflict in Ukraine.

In recent years, Croatia has seen a rise in ethno-nationalism and xenophobia, evident in discriminatory policies and attacks against minorities (especially Serbs), attacks on activists, and continuous tensions with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro over unresolved war legacies. The glorification of war criminals, lack of regional judicial cooperation in prosecuting war crime cases, and political in war crime prosecutions continued to undermine transitional justice efforts and exacerbate socio-political tensions in the region. Additionally, ongoing political disputes between Croatia and Montenegro over historical narratives of the 1990s and WWII contribute to regional frictions.

Serbia faces increasing authoritarianism, disinformation campaigns, and denial of its role in the 1990s conflicts. The government's opposition to the UN Resolution on Srebrenica fueled further tensions with Bosnia and Herzegovina, while its crackdown on student protests has also recently included targeting Croatian citizens. Additionally, Serbia's strained relations with Kosovo remain a flashpoint, especially culminating with and after the attack in Banjska in 2023, as continued provocations from both sides and disputes over sovereignty fuel further instability between the countries. Tensions between Serbia and Albania persist over historical grievances and Kosovo-related issues, while disagreements between Albania and North Macedonia over minority rights and EU accession create further divisions. The socio-political situation in Montenegro has also deteriorated due to external political influence from Serbia, identity disputes, and historical narratives, exacerbating regional tensions.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains deeply divided, with the Republic of Srpska threatening secession, glorifying war criminals, and denying genocide. These tensions, exacerbated by interference from Serbia and Croatia in domestic politics, fuel nationalism, extremism, and political instability. The unresolved war legacies continue to drive interethnic conflicts, obstruct democratic progress, and heighten the risk of renewed violence. External meddling further weakens Bosnia's stability, making it more susceptible to future conflict.

The continuous exacerbation of socio-political tensions, threats of impending violent conflict, arms races and increased weaponization (especially in the light of increased political tensions), threats of secession, (political) radicalization, and the rise of (political) extremism, to name a few, continuously fuel socio-political tensions as well as endanger citizens' security but also national and overall security in the region. All these issues are very often encouraged through narratives and manipulative disinformation campaigns related to the 1990s wars.

To start countering these trends and rebuilding our societies through responsible remembrance, this section will recommend policies and initiatives to be implemented in all countries in the region.

Strengthening Media Accountability and Promoting Ethical Journalism

To address the challenges in the Western Balkans' media landscape, it is imperative to enforce ethical journalism by holding outlets accountable for sensationalist and inflammatory reporting that deepens ethnic divisions. This includes implementing stringent regulations and mandatory ethics training for media professionals. Establishing robust fact-checking initiatives, such as expanding platforms like Faktograf.hr regionally, is crucial to counteract the spread of misinformation and unverified claims. Taking into consideration the almost omnipresent denial and relativization of war crimes, revisionist practices, and sensationalist ethnocentric narratives in the media, regional fact-checking initiatives should be established and promoted. Media outlets should be penalized for disseminating false information, with measures including the withdrawal of state subsidies and proportional fines.

Additionally, there should be concerted efforts to highlight positive stories of interethnic cooperation and reconciliation, balancing the prevalent focus on conflict-driven narratives. Regulators might consider mandating a minimum allocation of airtime or space for such reporting. Finally, fostering cross-border media partnerships, funded by independent or non-governmental sources, can promote dialogue and reduce the influence of nationalist agendas, transforming public broadcasters into platforms for unity rather than division.

Strengthening Judicial Independence and Advancing Transitional Justice

To enhance the judiciary in the Western Balkans, establishing regional judicial academies that bring together practitioners from all countries can help address inefficiencies, political interference, and the lack of capacity in handling transitional justice cases. The academies should focus on training judges in international humanitarian and human rights law and victim-centered approaches. Governments must cease delaying or obstructing war crimes prosecutions for political gain, with independent bodies overseeing the judiciary to guarantee transparent case handling.

In the educational sector, urgent reforms are needed to revise national curricula that often present biased historical accounts, thereby reinforcing ethnic divisions. Efforts like the Shared Narratives project and, for example, the Joint History Project, which aims to create joint history textbooks, should be revived, and textbooks independently reviewed by regional and international experts to ensure neutrality. Additionally, governments should provide legal protections and training for educators to confidently discuss topics such as reconciliation and interethnic cooperation. In foreign affairs, ministries must move beyond symbolic gestures and invest more in practical cross-border initiatives, such as infrastructure projects and trade agreements, to demonstrate the tangible benefits of regional cooperation and effectively rebuild trust.

Enhancing Governance and Promoting Reconciliation

To strengthen governance in the Western Balkans, governments must ensure justice by fully cooperating with the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) and prioritizing the prosecution of war crimes. Governments should amend and/or pass laws to recognize civilian victims of armed conflicts without discrimination. Also state officials should organize and attend inclusive memorialization initiatives. They should also start offering sincere and direct public apologies followed by concrete actions, such as reparations and victim support programs, to demonstrate a genuine commitment to reconciliation. Politicians should advocate for reconciliation by offering symbolic reparations and publicly acknowledging wartime atrocities, ensuring that apologies are followed by concrete actions to demonstrate commitment. They must also engage with civil society organizations, youth groups, and victims associations to develop comprehensive reconciliation initiatives, actively listening to victims and marginalized communities to address their needs in policymaking. Additionally, political representatives should advocate for regional cooperation through inclusive economic and cultural projects, while refraining from promoting biased narratives, glorification of war criminals, interfering in war crime prosecution for political reasons, and denying or relativizing war crimes.

Empowering Civil Society for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans often face marginalization and limited resources, necessitating the establishment of accessible grant programs by governments to support CSOs engaged in transitional justice, ensuring these funds remain free from political interference. CSOs should more often organize joint regional youth exchanges and educational activities focused on transitional justice and reconciliation, incorporating firsthand accounts from conflict survivors to provide authentic perspectives. Additionally, CSOs should continue to lead and organize information and advocacy campaigns that present alternative, evidence-based narratives of the 1990s conflicts, countering prevailing state-driven nationalist discourses. Such campaigns should receive more media coverage, with media refraining from biased reporting and attacks on activists. Research on public perceptions of reconciliation should inform targeted initiatives, such as interethnic sports tournaments and collaborative art projects, to bridge identified divides.

Furthermore, CSOs should advocate for the creation of safe spaces for interethnic dialogue, with governments held accountable for supporting these initiatives rather than placing the entire burden on CSOs.

Empowering Youth as Key Actors in Reconciliation

Youth must be actively included in reconciliation efforts as equal partners, not just as symbolic participants, particularly in truth-telling initiatives, advocacy campaigns, and educational activities, as well as expert panels and conferences on peace-building and dealing with the past. Through youth's creative and innovative potential as well as their demonstrated determination to create a better future, youth can be facilitators of meaningful change by tackling issues from the past and thereby creating safer and cooperative communities for today and tomorrow.

Young professionals, especially those working in civil society, diplomacy, academia, state institutions, and the media, have the potential to start transforming the system from within, contributing to the development of more just societies that will start dealing with their violent pasts more responsibly. Youth should be encouraged and invited to join the decision-making and policy-developing tables to participate in proposing as well as advocating for realistic and innovative solutions informed by their unique first-hand experience with socio-political and security challenges caused by an inadequate process of dealing with countries' violent past. Moreover, to start countering the power of nationalist propaganda, the youth should seek to join programs teaching critical media literacy and youth exchanges encouraging transnational contact and cooperation.

Youth-led reconciliation initiatives such as crossborder exchanges, regional art programs, and youth-organized and led conferences on topics related to dealing with the past need greater visibility through regional and international media, with governments or state institutions creating platforms to amplify their impact. Finally, sustainable, independent funding should support youth-led projects beyond short-term donor-driven grants.

Transitional justice and reconciliation in this region require coordinated engagement from all stakeholders, including national governments, civil society organizations, the media, educational institutions, international bodies, and youth as key agents of change. By committing to inclusive policies, confronting facts, and rejecting revisionism, the region can dismantle the legacies of conflict and overcome deep-rooted divisions that continue to obstruct democratic progress and social cohesion. It is imperative to create resilient societies where accountability and facts prevail over impunity and propaganda.

VOICES OF THE MARGINS – STRENGTHENING MINORITY RIGHTS

Youth from minority communities, including ethnic, national, and sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, foreign workers, migrants, and asylum seekers, face systemic discrimination and social exclusion across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. Educational disparities are a significant barrier, particularly for Roma youth, who are often subjected to segregated schooling and lack essential resources.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic segregation in education remains institutionalized, while in other countries, the absence of inclusive curricula marginalizes minority languages and cultures. Similarly, people with disabilities and migrants face inadequate support within the education systems, further limiting their access to opportunities for advancement.

Economic exclusion disproportionately affects these vulnerable groups, with high unemployment rates and systemic barriers compounding their marginalization. Roma communities and ethnic minorities struggle with limited professional opportunities and inadequate housing. Women and people with disabilities face compounded discrimination, particularly in accessing healthcare and securing stable employment. Migrants and asylum seekers are often excluded from labor markets, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and precarious living conditions. Political underrepresentation of these groups further entrenches their inability to influence policies addressing their specific challenges.

Social and cultural marginalization exacerbates the vulnerabilities of minority groups. Hate speech, racist and chauvinist rhetoric, and inter-ethnic tensions are pervasive, fueling exclusion and discrimination against ethnic minorities, LGBTIQ+ individuals, migrants, and persons with disabilities. Interethnic mistrust obstructs efforts to promote social cohesion, while media narratives often dehumanize migrants and minorities, reinforcing public prejudices. Women and young people from these communities frequently face gender-based violence and systemic neglect. Despite these challenges, targeted advocacy efforts and initiatives led by civil society organizations are working to dismantle barriers, promote inclusion, and secure the rights of these vulnerable groups.

Political Representation and Institutional Inclusion

To strengthen the political representation of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, Roma, women, and LGBTIQ+ individuals, governments and stakeholders must prioritize the empowerment of leaders from these communities. Capacity-building programs, mentorship initiatives, and dedicated platforms should be established to enhance their participation in decision-making processes. Supporting political parties and organizations representing these groups through financial and technical assistance is essential for amplifying their voices and ensuring their contributions are recognized within political systems.

Fostering integration and dialogue across these diverse communities is equally critical. Governments, media, and civil society must work collaboratively to create forums for open dialogue among marginalized groups, policymakers, and other stakeholders. These forums should focus on inclusive policy development and address the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities, Roma, women, and LGBTIQ+ individuals, stateless people and refugees. Media outlets have a responsibility to promote positive and diverse representations of these communities by launching public awareness campaigns and practicing responsible journalism that combats stereotypes and fosters greater societal understanding.

The successful implementation of these recommendations requires concerted efforts from multiple actors.

Governments should develop and enforce inclusive legal frameworks that protect and promote the rights of these groups. International organizations can provide technical expertise, funding, and oversight to ensure impactful outcomes. Civil society organizations must continue their advocacy work and grassroots initiatives, fostering collaboration between communities and institutions. Local municipalities, as the closest level of governance, must focus on creating accessible environments and implementing inclusive programs that address the specific needs of these marginalized groups within their communities.

Language Rights and Cultural Inclusion

To address language barriers among diverse cultural communities, it is essential to promote multilingual education as a strategic priority. Educational systems should integrate programs that encourage students to learn multiple languages and foster an appreciation for cultural diversity. Such initiatives not only enhance communication and collaboration across cultural lines but also prepare future generations to navigate an increasingly interconnected world. Governments, civil society organizations, and educational institutions should collaborate to design inclusive curricula that support linguistic diversity and intercultural understanding.

Globalization has intensified the risk of linguistic and cultural loss, particularly for smaller and endangered languages. To counteract this trend, digital platforms should be developed to preserve and promote these languages. These platforms, such as apps and online resources, can facilitate learning and daily use of endangered languages, ensuring their survival for future generations. Efforts should also include documentation projects and partnerships with cultural organizations to safeguard linguistic heritage and promote its integration into modern contexts.

The combined efforts of governments, international organizations, technology developers, and civil society are critical to achieving these goals. Governments should prioritize protection for languages of minority communities and funding for multilingual education and digital preservation initiatives, while international organizations can provide expertise and foster cross-border collaboration. Technology developers play a key role in creating accessible platforms for language learning, while civil society can advocate for inclusive policies and promote community-driven approaches to cultural and linguistic preservation. These actions will ensure that language rights are protected and cultural inclusion is strengthened across societies.

Socio-Economic and Migrant Inclusion

Migration in the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Slovenia presents both challenges and opportunities, influencing the region through the movement of youth and the influx of migrants. Countries like Croatia have demonstrated how comprehensive integration policies can drive economic and social growth by effectively integrating some groups of migrants into the labor market and broader society. However, other countries struggle with inadequate sanctions for police torture and pushbacks against migrants, infrastructure in education, healthcare, and social inclusion, which hampers the ability to leverage migration as a tool for sustainable development. Addressing these disparities is essential for unlocking the region's full potential.

To foster youth engagement and inclusivity, migration-related topics should be integrated into education systems, encouraging students to explore and understand the dynamics of migration. Interactive platforms and cultural exchange programs can promote dialogue and collaboration between local and migrant communities, creating a foundation for long-term social cohesion. Highlighting migrant success stories in education and employment through media and public campaigns can further combat stereotypes and foster a more inclusive narrative.

Governments, international organizations, and civil society should work together to develop and implement policies that ensure access to essential services for migrants and support their economic inclusion. Initiatives such as funding internships for recent graduates and empowering young people through targeted training programs can help bridge gaps in the labor market. By promoting inclusive policies and positive media narratives, migration can be transformed into an opportunity for regional growth, strengthening the socio-economic fabric of the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Slovenia.

Trust-Building and Reconciliation/Hate Speech and Media Bias

Civil society organizations have played a critical role in fostering trust-building and reconciliation in the region, addressing the lingering divisions from the conflicts of the 1990s. Organizations have prioritized truth-telling by documenting war crimes, gathering evidence, and supporting victims. Memory initiatives, including oral history projects, have been instrumental in promoting inclusive narratives that confront uncomfortable truths about the past. These efforts not only preserve the stories of victims from all sides but also challenge selective historical accounts, fostering a culture of accountability. CSOs have also championed justice by providing legal support for marginalized victims, advocating for impartial prosecution of war crimes, and urging collaboration with international tribunals like the UN International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Media bias and hate speech present formidable challenges to reconciliation efforts in the region, exacerbating existing divisions. National minorities are often targeted by inflammatory narratives, while Roma communities face negative stereotyping and are disproportionately associated with crime in media reports. These portrayals reinforce prejudice, alienate minorities, and perpetuate cycles of mistrust. Additionally, the framing of minority groups as "others" creates barriers to integration and undermines reconciliation efforts. The rise of online hate speech has added a new layer of

complexity, amplifying divisive rhetoric and normalizing discriminatory attitudes. Addressing these challenges requires systemic interventions by authorities that promote ethical media practices and counteract harmful stereotypes.

Civil society initiatives have been effective in promoting dialogue and understanding between communities. Programs such as interethnic workshops and cultural exchanges target youth in war-affected areas, encouraging collaboration and reducing stereotypes. Grassroots cultural and artistic projects, including joint theater productions and music festivals, offer non-confrontational spaces for engagement and shared heritage celebrations. These efforts not only address interethnic tensions but also provide opportunities for communities to build trust through meaningful interactions.

To ensure sustainable progress, a multi-faceted approach is essential. Media outlets must adopt ethical reporting practices, including balanced coverage and amplifying minority voices. Governments should support public awareness campaigns that challenge nationalist rhetoric and promote inclusive narratives. Civil society should continue to facilitate dialogue and lead educational initiatives that emphasize critical thinking over propaganda. Youth engagement through art, cultural exchanges, and workshops remains pivotal for breaking down stereotypes and fostering trust. Moreover, creating inclusive memorials and organizing symbolic acts of reconciliation can bridge divides and set the stage for long-term peacebuilding. These collective efforts can transform reconciliation from an aspiration into a reality, fostering an inclusive and equitable future in the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Slovenia.

The responsibility for implementing these recommendations lies with all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, media, educational institutions, international organizations, and local communities. By working together with dedication and commitment, they can create inclusive societies that embrace diversity and foster equal opportunities for all. It is important to collectively address systemic barriers, combat prejudice, and promote dialogue and understanding to ensure that no one is left behind. The future of the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Slovenia depends on shared efforts to build a more equitable and harmonious region.

DEMOCRACY

Democracy in this region, especially in the Western Balkans, is a work in progress – established in form, but fragile in substance. While democratic structures, such as parliaments, courts, and elections, exist, they often lack genuine functionality. Executive dominance, centered on strong leaders, weakens the separation of powers and diminishes legislative and judicial oversight, resulting in policy-making that lacks inclusivity and legitimacy. Political pluralism, essential for meaningful public debate and policy formulation, is also under threat. Opposition parties struggle to assert themselves, and parliaments fail to check executive power. Without robust parliamentary mechanisms and institutional accountability, democracy becomes a formality rather than a dynamic process.

This fragility is compounded by a weak civic culture, where the legacy of authoritarianism and conflict has left many citizens disengaged and without representation. Institutions often reflect this environment, serving the interests of those in power rather than the public. Fostering a democratic political culture, through civic education and public participation, is essential for democracy to take root. Civil liberties and political rights, though constitutionally protected, are frequently restricted. Media independence is under attack through ownership control, financial manipulation, and harassment, while civil society faces legal and political barriers. These violations undermine democratic life by stifling debate, accountability, and dissent. The relationship between media freedom and democracy is critical in the region. A free and independent media drives informed public discourse and holds power to account. When media freedom is curtailed, public trust erodes, and authoritarian tendencies grow. Ensuring media independence is not just protecting journalists; it is protecting democracy itself.

This section explores these challenges across four interconnected areas: the separation of powers, the development of democratic institutions and political culture, and the protection of civil liberties and media freedom, with recommendations aimed at addressing these issues, directed primarily at national decision-makers, but with calls for support from youth, civil society, media, and international actors.

Separation of Power, Political Pluralism, and the Opposition

The democratic transition in the region has established the formal structures of governance, with parliaments, judiciary and elections in place. However, power remains concentrated in the executive branch, often dominated by strong political leaders, undermining the separation of powers and weakening political pluralism. Parliaments often act as rubber stamps, with limited ability to challenge executive authority, and opposition parties are sidelined, preventing meaningful oversight and accountability. Electoral systems, with high thresholds and gerrymandering, further favor dominant parties, limiting competition and disadvantaging smaller or emerging political movements. This, combined with media control and political pressure on the judiciary, restricts democratic participation and erodes public trust in institutions.

This issue is not only structural but cultural, as the legacy of authoritarianism has left both institutions and political behavior shaped by informal power networks, weakening the democratic culture. The lack of effective constitutional control reflects and perpetuates this weakness.

Various things could be done to strengthen parliamentary democracy. The introduction of incremental electoral thresholds will allow broader political participation and reflect the region's diverse political landscape. A 3% threshold for single parties and proportionally adapted thresholds for coalitions can lower entry barriers for smaller and minority parties while maintaining functional governance. Implementation of the preferential voting system could empower voters to choose individual candidates, reducing the concentration of power within party elites and promoting accountability between citizens and their representatives. Preventing gerrymandering could be possible by establishing pluralistic and independent electoral commissions composed of representatives from all major parties, civil society, and academia. These bodies should oversee the delineation of electoral units transparently, ensuring fair representation and reducing the manipulation of electoral boundaries for partisan advantage.

Institutionalizing opposition influence by granting opposition party leaders chairperson roles in key oversight and parliamentary investigative committees can ensure they play a central role in scrutinizing government activity and shaping policy dialogue. Strengthening parliamentary mechanisms for holding the executive accountable, including mandatory government reporting, interpellation procedures, and public hearings. These mechanisms should be protected from executive interference and institutionalized through parliamentary rules of procedure. By ensuring equitable access to parliamentary resources, including staffing, research services, and media access, opposition members can effectively engage in legislative work and communicate with the public. Encouraging cross-party initiatives and working groups can reduce polarization and promote collaborative policymaking on shared challenges, such as EU integration, rule of law reforms, and youth participation.

Accountable Institutions and a Democratic Political Culture

Institutions are crucial to democracy, but in the region, they often reinforce political elites rather than serve the public. Post-conflict institutions are weak, underdeveloped, and vulnerable to manipulation, compounded by a nascent political culture marked by low civic engagement and limited democratic understanding. This weakens governance and undermines citizens' ability to hold leaders accountable. Institutions, instead of checking power, often serve the powerful, leaving citizens with few means to demand transparency. A historical lack of civic participation and trust in institutions, due to authoritarian legacies, further exacerbates the issue. To strengthen democracy, reforms are needed to make institutions transparent, accountable, and inclusive. Citizens must be actively involved in political life to overcome the region's legacy and build a resilient democratic culture.

Governments should be required to publish clear and accessible budget reports and ensure that these processes are open to public scrutiny. This transparency is essential for fostering trust and ensuring that public resources are allocated according to citizens' needs and priorities. Publicly accessible documentation and stakeholder dialogues should be mandatory for all emergency procedures and procurement activities. While emergency measures may be necessary in certain circumstances, they should not be used to bypass regular legislative or public consultation processes. By ensuring that these procedures are fully documented and open to scrutiny, governments can demonstrate accountability and prevent misuse of power. While emergencies can require rapid decision-making, the use of emergency powers to push through legislation should be restricted to cases that are strictly justified, both legally and procedurally. This will help prevent the abuse of power and encourage more transparent, deliberate policymaking.

Reform judicial appointment processes to ensure that they are transparent, merit-based, and free from political influence. Judicial appointments should be made by independent bodies, with input from civil society and professional associations, rather than being dominated by the executive or legislative branches. This will ensure that the judiciary remains impartial and focused on upholding the law, rather than serving political interests.

Mandate government consultation with civil society organizations, minority groups, and other stakeholders during the policy development process. This will ensure that policies are inclusive, reflect the needs of all sectors of society, and promote social cohesion. Public consultation should not be a token process but a genuine opportunity for citizens to contribute to decision-making. Introducing participatory budgeting at the municipal level would enable citizens to directly influence local government spending decisions. Participatory budgeting has been successfully implemented in several democratic countries and can serve as a powerful tool to engage citizens, particularly marginalized groups, in the governance process and ensure that public resources are used in ways that meet their needs.

Media Freedom and Independence

The media is vital to democracy, providing citizens with the information needed to hold governments accountable. However, in many countries in the region, media independence is under threat from government influence, corporate control, and political pressure. Journalists face intimidation, strategic lawsuits, and threats, creating a climate of fear that stifles independent reporting. Despite legal protection for press freedom, these rights are often violated, and the judiciary fails to protect journalists. This undermines the media's watchdog role, leaving the public uninformed and vulnerable. To strengthen democracy, the region must build a more independent media system that can challenge government narratives and provide diverse, accurate information.

Introducing anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) laws to protect journalists from abusive legal actions intended to silence or intimidate them. These laws should provide journalists with legal protections and remedies when faced with frivolous lawsuits aimed at preventing public scrutiny or suppressing critical reporting. Empowering independent media regulators would ensure that media outlets are not subject to undue political or corporate influence. These bodies should have the mandate to monitor and enforce ethical standards in the media, investigate violations of press freedom, and impose penalties on those who threaten media independence. Strong regulators can protect both the media and journalists from external pressures, ensuring that the media serve the public interest rather than political or commercial agendas.

It's imperative to establish specialized protection for investigative journalists, who are often the targets of intimidation, threats, or physical violence. Legal safeguards, such as secure reporting channels, the protection of sources, and access to public information, should be strengthened to ensure that investigative journalism can continue without fear of retribution. Encourage public media literacy campaigns to help citizens recognize the importance of independent media and understand the threats posed by media manipulation, misinformation, and censorship. This can foster a public that is more attuned to the value of media freedom and the role it plays in sustaining a democratic society.

Civil Society and Civic Participation

An engaged and active civil society is fundamental to a healthy democracy. In the region, especially in the Western Balkans, however, civil society organizations (CSOs), activists, and outspoken citizens often face numerous challenges. These range from restrictions on freedom of assembly, harassment, and legal action against civil society actors, to narratives that frame them as traitors or enemies of the state. Funding deprivation and targeted campaigns against NGOs have further stifled civil society's ability to contribute to the democratic process. Despite these challenges, civil society remains one of the most powerful forces for promoting transparency, accountability, and public participation in the Western Balkans.

To enable a vibrant civil society and create opportunities for broader citizen engagement, it is critical to strengthen the legal and institutional frameworks that support these groups. A flourishing civil society, free from government repression, is essential for ensuring that citizens' voices are heard and that governments remain responsive to the needs of their people.

Governments must consult with civil society organizations (CSOs), minority groups, and other stakeholders during the policy development process. Public consultations should be formalized and institutionalized, ensuring that these voices are not just heard but have a meaningful impact on policy outcomes.

Introducing participatory budgeting processes at the local government level would allow citizens to directly engage in decision-making and ensure that public funds are allocated in line with community priorities. Incorporate civic education into the national curricula from an early age to cultivate a culture of active citizenship and democratic engagement. Partnerships between schools and NGOs can provide practical learning opportunities for students to understand how democratic processes work and how they can contribute to shaping public policy.

It is important to ensure that CSOs and civil society actors can operate freely without fear of government reprisal. This includes safeguarding access to international funding, eliminating restrictions on their work, and creating spaces for independent civil society dialogue and activism. By fostering an enabling environment for CSOs, governments can create a platform for more vibrant civic participation.

The future of the region depends on its ability to overcome persistent democratic challenges, including power concentration, weak institutions, and limited civic participation. While progress has been made since the post-conflict period, bold reforms are needed to strengthen oversight, promote inclusivity, and build a transparent and accountable political culture. A resilient democracy requires the protection of fundamental freedoms, active civil society engagement, and a free flow of information. Journalists, citizens, and organizations must be empowered to hold power to account, ensuring democracy serves the people, not elites. Achieving this vision demands a collective effort from governments, civil society, and international partners, united in their commitment to freedom, justice, and equality.

ECHOES OF TRUTH – COMBATING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

This region is home to a diverse mix of ethnic groups, political actors, and civil society organizations. Each of these groups can be both a target and a conduit for misinformation. The region's unique history, marked by ethnic tensions and political conflicts, has shaped how information is shared and trusted. Propaganda and disinformation have long been tools used to influence public opinion and deepen divisions, and these historical practices now mix with modern digital tactics.

In recent years, digital technology has transformed the way we communicate. Social media, online platforms, and advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have opened new opportunities for connection and creativity. For example, AI tools now create realistic deep fakes, generate human-like text, and allow users to create art from text. Facial and voice recognition have improved, impacting security and privacy. AI-powered translation tools and medical analysis are more accurate, enhancing global communication and healthcare. Algorithms personalize ads and recommendations, while AI chatbots replace many customer service roles. AI is also driving robots in industries and monitoring social media trends. These advancements have significantly affected technology, communication and many other fields.

However, these same developments have also introduced significant challenges. For example, AI now makes it easier than ever to create realistic fake images, videos, and audio recordings. While deep-fake technology can be fun and creative, it also carries risks. The world has seen videos of well-known leaders like Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Volodymyr Zelensky, whose voices and faces were misused multiple times, ranging from jokes to serious statements that could harm global politics. Such scenarios are not far from the Western Balkans. Similar examples occurred with the presidents and prime ministers of Serbia and North Macedonia. In the Western Balkans, where political allegiances and historical narratives are especially sensitive, AI-driven disinformation can quickly erode trust and stir up old conflicts.

The way we get our news has changed, too. In the past, most people relied on a few trusted news sources. Today, information comes from countless websites, social media channels, and private groups. This shift means that people often see only the news that confirms their existing beliefs, which creates echo chambers and deepens social divisions. In a region like the Balkans, where shared history and collective memory are important, this fragmentation makes it harder to find common ground and build mutual trust. Algorithms used by digital platforms further complicate the situation. These systems are designed to show content that will keep users engaged, but they can also be manipulated to favor certain messages over others. Political parties, governments, and businesses can exploit these algorithms to spread their narratives while silencing alternative voices. For this region, where public discourse has often been a battleground, this manipulation poses a serious threat to transparency and fairness.

The rapid spread of false or misleading information has made media literacy more important than ever. Many people in the region, as elsewhere, struggle to verify the sources of the information they receive. This vulnerability leaves them open to manipulation by those looking to exploit political and social divisions. Schools and community programs must work to improve critical thinking and teach digital literacy, so citizens are better equipped to navigate the complex digital landscape. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort. Governments in the region need to implement policies that promote accountability in digital media.

Tech companies and social media platforms must take responsibility for the content circulating on their networks. At the same time, media organizations and educators have a crucial role in building the public's ability to distinguish fact from fiction.

Propaganda and Disinformation among Countries in the Region

Public campaigns and social media campaigns should continue to raise awareness about the organized propaganda and disinformation existing between countries. The academic community, activists, journalists, and the CSO sector must be proactive and involved in ending the so-called culture of silence. CSO activists must coordinate efforts for education and the debunking of false narratives.

Implementing legal frameworks to combat disinformation involves establishing regulations that hold platforms and individuals accountable for spreading false information while ensuring freedom of speech is protected. Governments should establish a regional legal framework to counter propaganda and disinformation. This should include defining clear laws around the spread of disinformation, with penalties for individuals or groups found responsible for this. Technological solutions, such as AI-driven fact-checking, content moderation algorithms, and blockchain-based verification systems, can help detect, flag, and mitigate the spread of misleading or false narratives online.

Strengthening regional cooperation on disinformation means countries and organizations working together to spot and stop the spread of false information. This can include sharing fact-checking tools, exchanging information on emerging threats, and creating common policies to protect people from misleading news and harmful narratives. A recommendation would be to form a regional network of journalists' associations, journalists' unions, and other media organizations that can address issues, organize activities, and inform each other about the situations in their countries. Additionally, we propose the idea of creating AI applications that would block fake news and disinformation, something like an ad blocker.

Teaching people how to recognize false information helps them think critically about what they see online. This includes learning to check the source of an article, spot misleading headlines, and verify facts before sharing. For example, schools can introduce media literacy classes, and social media platforms can offer short courses on how to fact-check viral news.

The media could introduce some type of street surveys or TV series with phone-ins where examples of information and disinformation are presented in the form of a quiz, followed by further elaboration of the correct answer.

Encouraging countries to engage in dialogue and resolve propaganda issues instead of escalating them. Instead of escalating conflicts through misinformation and propaganda, countries can engage in open discussions to address concerns. Governments can set up meetings to discuss disinformation campaigns and agree on ways to prevent them. CSOs could help young people learn about disinformation through events like youth summits, debates, and online series. These activities encourage discussions about propaganda and misinformation in a way that's engaging and educational. For example, a youth summit on digital literacy could bring together students from different places to discuss how disinformation spreads and what they can do to stop it.

AI Regulation, AI-driven Disinformation, and Deep Fakes

Education and investment in time and money are necessary in this area. Social media campaigns should continue to focus on educating about artificial intelligence and deep fakes. Edutainment, or education through entertainment, is a key solution to this issue because it can highlight both the benefits and the misuse of AI in an engaging way. To stop AI-driven disinformation and deep fakes, there is a need for a combination of technology, laws, and education.

Journalists, activists, and people from the IT sector should work on creating online tools for recognizing deep fakes and AI applications and promote them. Workshops for AI are also necessary as soon as possible to ensure that people are informed promptly (how it is used, how it can be misused, and how it can help people with disabilities, as well as fact-checking). Fact-checking groups can organize public workshops or webinars where they teach people how to spot deep fakes. They could invite experts in AI, technology, and media literacy to demonstrate how deep fakes technology works and give tips on verifying online content. For example, a fact-checking organization might host a webinar for students to learn how deep fakes are made and what red flags to look for in videos and photos. Also, interactive tools or quizzes could help people practice identifying deep fakes. These could include examples of deep fakes alongside real media, and users would have to figure out which is which. Afterward, the tool would explain the techniques used to create deep fakes and show how to verify content in real life. The IT sector should work together with fact-checking groups/CSOs on AI-powered tools that could help people verify the authenticity of content online.

Governments should establish stronger regulations around AI use, particularly concerning personal data and media manipulation. This includes creating strict guidelines for the ethical use of AI in content creation, including measures to prevent its misuse in spreading disinformation and deep fakes. Each country should stay up to date with the trends and challenges related to AI that it faces. Accordingly, it should organize debates and gatherings with legal experts, lawyers, and the judiciary to work on laws that are suitable for the country. Additionally, when creating these laws, it is

important to consult the Personal Data Protection Agency, as well as IT professionals who understand AI and can contribute insights into potential abuses and help avoid possible loopholes in the laws.

Disinformation in Elections and Against Marginalized Groups


One of the key recommendations is to develop guidelines and specialized training for journalists and media professionals to improve their ability to fight disinformation and learn how to report on topics that involve marginalized groups. To do this, media organizations, journalism schools, and independent training institutes should create clear guidelines and offer specialized courses. These training programs would teach journalists not only how to identify and counter fake news but also how to cover topics that affect marginalized communities respectfully and accurately. The target group here is journalists, editors, and media professionals. They need to be equipped with tools and knowledge to deal with the growing challenge of disinformation while ensuring they report on issues involving marginalized groups fairly. Media organizations, journalism associations, and universities should lead the charge in implementation. They could partner with experts in ethics, digital media, and marginalized communities to create impactful training programs.

Another recommendation is to ensure continuous reporting by journalists when political parties do not disclose information about their finances. This would include legal regulations for political parties that use disinformation to manipulate voters, especially when it concerns marginalized groups. CSOs should also monitor governments and political parties for their finances and act if they notice irregularities. They should collaborate with the media when it comes to continuous reporting on political party finances and disinformation.

Informative campaigns via social media, television, and radio should educate the population about disinformation and stereotypes being spread about marginalized groups. CSOs and media outlets should collaborate to create and spread informative campaigns. They can partner with experts in social justice and communication to ensure the message is accurate and impactful. These campaigns should aim to expose the manipulations used by political parties to gain political points through discrimination against these communities. The target group for these campaigns includes the general (wide) audience, from young people to older generations.

Teaching media literacy in schools is one of the best ways to empower young people to think critically about the information they consume. Schools should provide lessons on how to spot false information, understand media biases, and stop the spread of misinformation. The Ministries of Education, along with school and educational authorities, should integrate media literacy into the curricula. The target group is students of all ages, from primary schools to high schools.

This section shows that long-standing ethnic and political tensions in the region are now mixed with modern tech issues like fake videos, deep fakes, and personalized news that only reinforce existing beliefs. This has led to increased misinformation and divided communities. To address these challenges, the report recommends using technology such as AI tools for detecting fake content, enforcing stronger legal measures, and promoting media literacy through education.



A united effort by governments, journalists, CSOs, and tech companies is seen as key to rebuilding trust and ensuring clear, honest communication.

FEMINISM, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, AND ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT

The global challenges posed by anti-gender movements have no barriers between East and West, nor the geopolitical divides often drawn between the Global North and South. These movements, which transcend regional borders, have introduced new forms of gender-based violence, including digital violence, targeted harassment, and the manipulation of traditional values to suppress gender equality.

In 2025, digital gender-based violence remains largely unrecognized in the legal frameworks of many countries in the region, despite being a pervasive issue affecting the daily lives of young people who experience technology-mediated harassment and discrimination. Similarly, financial dependency in a highly patriarchal context is a significant barrier preventing women from breaking the cycle of violence, as economic instability limits access to legal aid, housing, and mental health resources while increasing vulnerability to further abuse.

Reevaluating established and policy-regulated types of gender-based violence, financial dependency is a key challenge that sustains cycles of abuse, despite long-standing and coordinated state efforts to prevent severe manifestations such as femicide. Financial dependency functions both as a mechanism of control – a form of violence, directly inhibiting individuals from escaping abusive environments, and as a key factor of the "culture of violence" context, a society that culturally normalizes violent behavior and allows other types of violence to be either unrecognized or unprevented. Limited financial resources restrict access to legal assistance, stable housing, education, and mental health services, while simultaneously increasing exposure to substance abuse and poverty. These intersecting barriers create a near-impossible path to safety and autonomy. Addressing financial literacy is therefore essential in equipping both girls and women with the knowledge and resources to reclaim power, i.e., to achieve economic independence and resilience against all forms of gender-based violence.

Throughout the region, women have faced harassment, rape, physical abuse, and even murder – often at the hands of their partners, despite having reported the violence multiple times to the authorities. The region's deeply conservative culture, rooted in centuries of male dominance, has contributed to the problem, which worsened following the wars of the 1990s and the ongoing political, economic, and social instability that followed. While most countries in the region have introduced laws and policies to address violence against women, their enforcement remains inconsistent.

Equally important is the issue of digital violence, which young people identify instinctively. Unfortunately, in many countries in the region, digital violence remains legally unacknowledged and unregulated. It is viewed both as a standalone form of violence and as a critical contributor to a broader "culture of violence" that normalizes abusive behaviors, allows anti-gender movements to operate on a global scale, and prevents recognition and intervention in other forms of violence. As the first fully digital generation, young people in 2025 navigate technology-mediated violence daily and

are acutely aware of its implications. However, previous generations – including educators, policymakers, and decision-makers – often fail to grasp the gravity of digital violence, focusing solely on the perceived harmful effects of technology while neglecting the complex abuses occurring online. Given that young people are at the forefront of these challenges, their active involvement in raising awareness, defining critical issues, shaping policies, and developing regulatory frameworks is indispensable. Ensuring the safe and free use of digital technologies is not just a necessity but an urgent matter for the future, which is already unfolding.

Enhancing regional regulation practice and enforcing the existing legal framework regarding digital rights violations by insisting on improved content moderation on digital platforms is of great importance. Strengthening content moderation on digital platforms will help counter online harassment and gender-based hate speech. Without these measures, harmful content continues to proliferate, undermining efforts to create a safer online space.

Another significant step can be improving education programs together with the compulsory civic education curriculum by focusing on digital violence, gender equality, and safety of different generations, bearing in mind the cultural context of the region. Educational efforts must be tailored to the cultural context of the region while equipping youth with the tools to recognize and combat digital gender-based violence.

Supporting youth-led initiatives that are dealing with gender-based violence (GBV) and radicalization of youth, while providing digital literacy and advocacy for a safer environment, in particular for marginalized groups, can make a huge impact. Providing funding and resources for these initiatives enables young leaders to drive grassroots change and foster solidarity and an integrative approach within their communities. Increasing networking opportunities for regional and EU knowledge exchange on combating anti-gender propaganda and hate speech, and establishing collaborative platforms for dialogue among youth organizations, policymakers, and international partners will enhance the region's capacity to address these challenges effectively.

Promoting positive and inclusive examples of gender equality while creating support networks for young men and encouraging young men to actively participate in dismantling harmful gender stereotypes/norms, while fostering support networks, will contribute to a cultural shift. Publicizing role models who advocate gender equality can help reshape societal attitudes and promote inclusivity.

CONCLUSION

The region, comprising former Yugoslav republics and Albania, is diverse and complex, marked by unresolved conflicts, instability, and challenges related to EU integration, democracy, and the rule of law. While Slovenia and Croatia are EU members, the rest of the region continues to grapple with internal and external obstacles to accession. Even though some of the countries in the region have specific issues and challenges, the region as a whole faces shared problems, like corruption, lack of rule of law, and unresolved disputes and divisions from the 1990s.

This publication discussed several topics of great importance to the region: transitional justice and reconciliation, minorities and their rights, democracy, combating disinformation and propaganda, and gender-based violence and women's rights. For each of these issues, the problem was mapped out, and different solutions were offered. In most cases, problems can be prevented and solved only with joint efforts, work, and cooperation of various stakeholders: government, media, CSOs, and experts in various fields. Additionally, the role of youth here is crucial for overcoming these challenges.

Thirty years after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, countries in the region continue to struggle with transitional justice and reconciliation. Ethno-nationalism, historical revisionism, weak rule of law, political interference in war crimes prosecutions, and foreign influence threaten regional stability and obstruct meaningful progress. The lack of accountability and failure to address war legacies have fueled extremism, division, and insecurity. To counter these trends, multifaceted strategy is needed, and includes strengthening media integrity, reforming judiciary and education, promoting good governance, empowering civil society and youth, which is seen as a key actor in reconciliation.

Youth from marginalized communities – ethnic, national, sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, migrants, and asylum seekers – face systemic discrimination across the region. These groups are affected by educational segregation, economic exclusion, political underrepresentation, cultural marginalization, and widespread hate speech. Despite some progress, entrenched inequalities persist due to insufficient institutional support, exclusionary policies, and nationalist narratives. Only with adequate political representation and institutional inclusion, implementation of comprehensive integration policies, promotion of multilingual education, combating stereotypes and media bias and hate speech, and promoting shared memorials and symbolic reconciliation acts, those challenges could be overcome.

Democracy in the region is institutionally established but remains fragile in practice. Power is often concentrated in the executive branch, undermining the separation of powers, marginalizing opposition, and weakening political pluralism. Electoral systems, gerrymandering, and informal power networks further restrict democratic competition and accountability.

A weak democratic culture, shaped by authoritarian legacies, low civic engagement, and fragile institutions, exacerbates this problem. Civil liberties and media freedom are frequently under threat due to political pressure, ownership manipulation, and harassment of journalists, undermining transparency and trust. For democracy in the

region to thrive, reducing executive overreaching, protecting rights, supporting independent media, and engaging citizens meaningfully, are necessary steps.

There is a serious and growing problem of disinformation and propaganda in the region, where ethnic tensions and political divisions create fertile ground for manipulation. With the rise of digital technologies – especially AI – creating realistic deep fakes and personalized content, false narratives can now spread faster and more persuasively than ever. Algorithms on digital platforms reinforce existing beliefs and divide societies and many people struggle to identify fake news or verify sources, increasing their vulnerability. Adequate legal framework, proper education and promotion of media literacy, with a support of technology and with a meaningful regional cooperation, are indispensable ways to combat disinformation and propaganda.

The rise of global anti-gender movements – crossing East-West and North-South divides – has intensified GBV, including digital harassment, manipulation of traditional values, and systemic suppression of women's rights. In the region, financial dependency, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, and legal gaps, particularly around digital violence, contribute to persistent cycles of abuse against women. Only with legal reforms that would recognize and regulate digital violence as a form of GBV, promotion of financial literacy among women and girls, and promotion of positive male role models and involvement of young men in efforts to challenge harmful gender norms, just to name a few, are some of the most urgent steps to overcome these serious issues.

Appropriate solutions and ideas were offered for all the topics covered, but due to their interconnectedness and intertwining, it is necessary to address them together. There is no democracy without transitional justice, or respect for minority rights. Disinformation and propaganda are seriously damaging democracy and its institutions. Minority rights, systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and GBV are part of the same issue, and require joint decisive action and solutions. All these issues cannot be solved separately, one by one, but must be addressed jointly, with mapping of priority problems and adequate steps and the best ways to make maximum use of existing capacities and resources.

