



CASE STUDY: WESTERN BALKANS

Global State of Democracy 2023 Report

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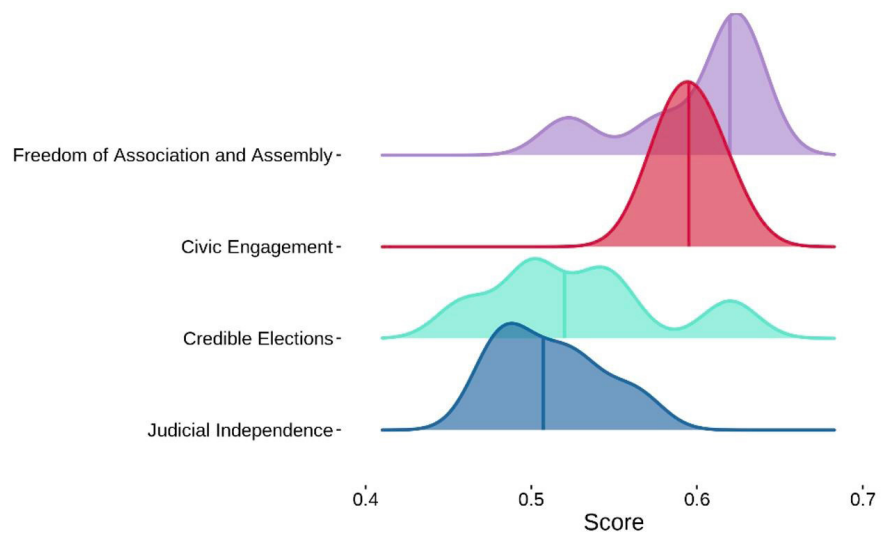
While far from homogeneous and at different stages of democratization and European Union accession processes, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia all continue to grapple with the shared challenge of middling performance and stifled growth in formal countervailing institutions, according to the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices data ([International IDEA 2023f](#)). Myriad factors, including unresolved issues from the 1990s wars, populism, ethnic tensions, secessionist threats ([Lukiv 2023](#); [Reuters 2023](#); [Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2021](#)), and corrupt politicians with ties to organized crime ([Worth 2023](#); [Borger 2022](#); [Semini 2022](#); [Testorides 2022](#)), have delayed meaningful reforms and prevented the strengthening of formal institutions such as independent judiciaries, credible elections, and regulatory agencies in these countries. Their citizens continue to live with the consequences, which threaten democratic norms and the quality of life, leading to depopulation and brain drain ([Regional Cooperation Council 2023](#)).

Despite the fragility of these institutions, informal countervailing institutions such as civil society and grassroots movements, as well as fourth-branch institutions such as the media, have demonstrated their pivotal roles in pushing for societal change and bolstering transparency and accountability. Although still encountering challenges, these institutions are especially effective in contexts marked by greater civic openness and media independence, where the cooperation of informal and oversight institutions frequently acts as a catalyst of change. Factors such as Civic Engagement and Freedom of Association and Assembly show the strength and vigilance of informal countervailing institutions most clearly (Figure 1). Recent trends are not yet apparent in the quantitative data, but anecdotal evidence from International IDEA's Democracy Tracker reveals important points in this regard ([International IDEA 2023e](#)).

Myriad factors have delayed meaningful reforms and prevented the strengthening of formal institutions such as independent judiciaries, credible elections, and regulatory agencies in these countries.

Informal countervailing institutions and the media have demonstrated their pivotal roles in pushing for societal change and bolstering transparency and accountability.

Figure 1. Variation in scores of Western Balkan countries on select measures related to informal and formal countervailing institutions (2022)



Source: Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 28 August 2023.

Recent popular mobilizations in the Western Balkans have particularly organized around issues affecting citizens' daily lives, such as violence, pollution or environmental degradation.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, ACTIVISM AND GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS—OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

Recent popular mobilizations in the Western Balkans have particularly organized around issues affecting citizens' daily lives, such as violence, pollution or environmental degradation.

In Kosovo, women's rights activists and citizens came together in one of the biggest protests in the country's history to bring attention to repeated domestic violence cases and the rape of a minor, leading to tougher criminal penalties for rape and domestic violence (Bami 2022) and the classification of virginity testing as a new criminal offence (Hoti and Berisha 2022; Kosova Post 2022). Similarly, in BiH, the livestreaming on Instagram of the murder of a woman by her former partner in August 2023 prompted thousands of people to take to the streets, resulting in the investigation of several police officers and a judge who failed to issue a restraining order against the perpetrator (Kurtic 2023; EURACTIV 2023; International IDEA 2023b).

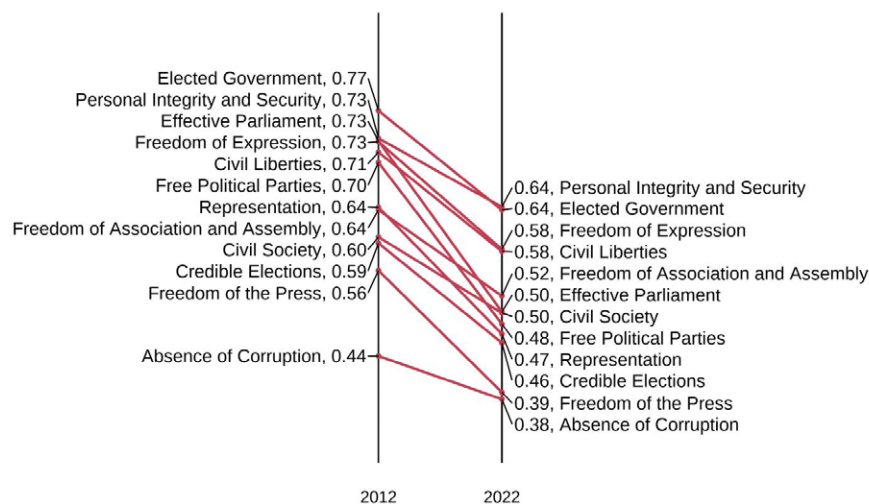
The region, particularly Albania and Serbia (Besliu 2023), has seen growing resistance to environmental destruction and pollution. Persistent national and international campaigns from experts and environmentalist groups to protect the Vjosa River in Albania from plans to construct dams led to a landmark decision to declare it a National Park in 2023 (IUCN 2023). In Serbia, weeks of

protests against a planned lithium mine forced the government to backtrack and cancel the project in 2022 (Sekularac 2022), while in North Macedonia, calls for action from environmental groups led the government to impose emergency measures in the capital, Skopje, and in three other cities due to high levels of air pollution (International IDEA 2022). Although they have had mixed success and are facing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and even arrests (Amnesty International 2021; Kajosevic 2021), environmental activists have been campaigning against the construction of hydropower plants in protected zones in both Kosovo and Montenegro (Marí 2021; Sherriff 2019).

Citizens and civil society have sought accountability even in Serbia, which experienced the biggest democratic deterioration in the Western Balkans in the past 5 and 10 years. Despite notable declines in Civil Liberties in Serbia in the past 10 years—particularly in Freedom of Association and Assembly, and Civil Society—(Figure 2), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and protests involving 135,000 people (according to their organizers) pressured the ruling coalition to withdraw proposed amendments to the Law on Expropriation and to change the Law on Referendums and People’s Initiative, which were imposed without genuine public discussion (Masina 2021; Vasovic 2021; The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2021; Stojanovic 2021; Sekularac 2021; RFE/RL 2021).

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Figure 2. Serbia experienced the biggest deterioration in democratic performance scores in the Western Balkans in the past 10 years, with significant declines in 12 measures



Source: Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 28 August 2023.

In BiH’s entity of Republika Srpska, the crackdown on freedom of expression, civil society and freedom of assembly has become evident following attacks on activists and journalists, failure to protect them, and the

adoption of concerning policies showing President Milorad Dodik's illiberal tendencies (Civil Rights Defenders 2019; Kovacevic 2018; International IDEA 2023d). This becomes even more alarming given Dodik's close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his anti-EU stance (Chiappa 2023). In September 2023, rights groups and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, raised concerns about a proposed law that would create a register of NGOs to keep tabs on 'foreign agents', restricting the freedom of association and expression (Venice Commission 2023; Council of Europe 2023; Civil Rights Defenders 2023). Despite the challenging context, civil society's efforts led to changes in the law reintroducing criminal penalties for defamation, such as drastic reduction of fines, better protection for disclosure of information in the public interest, and the removal of provisions to criminalize insult (International IDEA 2023c).

THE MEDIA AS AN OVERSIGHT COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTION—INDISPENSABLE YET NOT FLAWLESS

Independent media has also served as a vital countervailing institution in the region, reporting on abuse of power and corruption, and giving voice to those who have otherwise been silenced. In Albania, an investigative report uncovered waste management fraud, leading to arrest warrants for the former Deputy Prime Minister, the sentencing of a former environment minister and other high officials, and the questioning of the Prime Minister and Mayor of Tirana (International IDEA 2023a; Erebara 2023). In Kosovo, journalists exposed the violation of anti-monopoly rules in the solar energy sector and conflicts of interest in oversight bodies, resulting in inquiries and a decision to end state-funded incentive tariffs to companies (Dahsyla 2020; BIRN 2020; Gazeta Express 2020).

The control of media by governments or financially powerful groups remains a major challenge to watchdog journalism in the region.

However, politicians, powerful groups and wealthy individuals use a plethora of tactics, including SLAPPs, to intimidate and silence journalists across the Western Balkans (Isufi 2022). In Albania, the journalist who uncovered the waste management case was verbally assaulted by the Mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj (Article 19 2023). In Kosovo's anti-monopoly case, the Independent Media Commission sided with the company accused of breaching anti-monopoly rules and issued a warning to journalists, who fought the decision and won after a three-year legal battle (Peni and Begisholli 2023). In Montenegro, journalists writing about corruption and organized crime have been targets of shootings and bomb attacks (Hervey 2018; Cooper 2018).

The control of media by governments or financially powerful groups remains a major challenge to watchdog journalism in the region. In Serbia, the only country with low scores for Freedom of the Press in the region, government-controlled media holds sway, and independent journalists are frequently subjected to credibility attacks, being labelled as traitors or foreign mercenaries (Higgins 2022). The shrinking independent space has also fuelled mis- and disinformation and the promotion of irredentist ambitions and of

the ties with non-democratic powers like Russia and China, giving growth to warmongering tendencies and anti-EU sentiments—direct threats to the region’s peace and democratic stability (Brey 2022; Horrocks 2021; EURACTIV 2022; Jefferson and Savic 2022). According to the International Federation of Journalists, the country is seeing the biggest crisis in independent journalism in years (IFJ 2023). When journalist Ana Lalić reported on the conditions of a Belgrade hospital during the Covid-19 pandemic, she was vilified and arrested on the grounds of ‘upsetting the public and spreading panic’ (Horrocks 2021). In the lead-up to the April 2022 elections, media monitoring for the month of January revealed that Serbian televisions featured President Vučić for more than 129 hours, with Prime Minister Ana Brnabić coming second with only 11 hours, and opponents receiving a mere 1 per cent of observed television time (Popović 2022).

SHIFTING DYNAMICS? POWER EXPANDING BEYOND GOVERNMENT WALLS

In a region plagued by prolonged episodes of state capture, corruption and ethnic conflicts, informal countervailing institutions, such as civil society and protests, and occasionally oversight institutions such as independent media, help limit the power of ruling elites from outside, and voice popular priorities. While some of the countries in the region face greater constraints due to limited civic space, resulting in fewer tangible outcomes, the actions of these countervailing institutions nonetheless remain essential to sustain any optimism for democracy in the region. A series of mass demonstrations against the culture of violence in Serbia, the biggest since the fall of Slobodan Milošević, is an example of movements that have the potential to gradually ignite change (Schultheis 2023; von der Brelie 2023; International IDEA 2023e). It remains imperative to strengthen civil society, a culture of civic engagement, and independent media to enhance the effectiveness of these movements, and champion their resistance as a beacon of hope for stable democracy in Europe.

While some of the countries in the region face greater constraints due to limited civic space, the actions of civil society and media as countervailing institutions nonetheless remain essential to sustain any optimism for democracy in the region.

ABBREVIATIONS

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
GSoD	Global State of Democracy
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SLAPP	Strategic lawsuit against public participation

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