

**REGIONAL PEACE THROUGH
AN INCLUSIVE DEMOCRATIC
PROCESS:
WHAT IS LACKING IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS**

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INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly evident that the state of political pluralism in the region of the Western Balkans is not at a sufficient level, and that there are many problems with civil liberties, elections, and polarisations. Political freedoms, and stable political systems, are necessary for the general stability of a society, which itself is a necessary part of a peaceful environment. While the region has what Galtung would call a negative peace, meaning a lack of open conflict and violence, it is still lacking a positive peace, which includes stable and democratic political systems, a respect for human rights, and civil liberties. We find political pluralism and well-functioning democracies to be a fundamental pillar of a peaceful society, and their improvement to be an important aspect of regional peace and stability. Therefore, we expect that as the countries of the region develop their civil liberties, free elections, and decrease polarisation, they will become more peaceful societies, which would lead to a more peaceful region, even without direct bilateral reconciliation.

POLITICAL FREEDOMS

Our research has found that civil liberties in the region are generally respected, with notable problems emerging with freedom of speech. The challenges faced by the various countries are diverse and the situations in the countries are diverse as well, however there are similarities in many of them. Croatia is an exception here, much like elsewhere, as its civil liberties are at a high level, and free expression is not in danger there. The freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected throughout the region, and there are regular demonstrations which are not repressed. In Serbia however, public demonstrations have turned into radical protests, which have been met with violence and repression by the government, and negative rhetoric has been used by the government against protesters and the organisations behind them. This follows years of protest in Serbia which are followed by media polarisation. The Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina also has very strong restrictions against civil liberties and civil society in general, further restricting free speech and critical views. Political interference is omnipresent in the media sphere, and many media outlets in the region depend on public funds, or private financing which endangers their independent and objective reporting. Journalists themselves face insecurity, both in the case of employment, political pressure, economic pressure, and in their daily work. The media spaces in the region are generally fragmented and small, with an even smaller space for critical opinions, and there has been an increase of media consolidation of the largest media outlets, further threatening the small markets. The protection of civil liberties is weakening, and this is an urgent problem for the region.

ELECTIONS

When we look at regional elections, we can conclude that they are all free, however that they are not all fair, with Croatia again being excluded. All the countries provide regular elections, however only in some of them are elections conducted in an inclusive and transparent manner. In Serbia elections are constantly marked by an unfair advantage for the ruling party, which includes misuse of public funds, control of the media space, and misuse of public institutions. This is worsened by electoral irregularities and pressure on voters and public sector employees. A similar situation is happening in BiH, especially in the Serb entity, however the situation there is further exacerbated by the ethnic division of the political system, in which major ethnic parties monopolise the political space. Montenegro and North Macedonia have had free and fair elections where the opposition was able to win power after a long period of democratic instability, showing their further consolidation as functioning democracies. Albania and Kosovo are continuing to develop their democracies and have functioning competition, however they also suffer from the regional problems such as a biased media, a mistrust of public institutions, and increased political polarisation. Years of clientelism and a lack of a political culture of democracy historically, have left a toll on the region, however there are developments in some countries which enable optimism.

POLARISATION

The worst situation in the region is sadly in the sphere of political polarisation. Apart from Croatia, as mentioned before, all other countries suffer from concerning levels of polarisation, in which some have dangerously high levels. There is an obvious lack of a positive political culture and tolerance in the political sphere and among the citizens themselves. The situation is continuing to decline, and this is seriously undermining democratisation in the region. The media are partly to blame, as they are generally very politically biased or financially dependent, having to limit their output to one political position. We have seen an improvement in North Macedonia, where the polarisation is manageable and related to political questions primarily, although identity-based polarisation remains in the background. Albania also has political polarisation and problems with corruption, but the other countries have ethnic, religious and therefore identity-based polarisation, which is much more dangerous. Respect for human rights is generally solid in the region, and this aids in the prevention of polarisation becoming overtly dangerous. In Montenegro we saw a deterioration of identity-based polarisation, which has not been solved by fair elections which brought the opposition to power. In BiH

the high level of such polarisation continues to undermine the unity and functioning of the country, as before. This opens the door to foreign countries to exert their influence on identity groups. Croatia remains a spot of positivity, being the only one with a low level of polarisation and with high levels of protections for human rights.

PLURALISM

Starting with Serbia, it has seen a mild decline in pluralism over the last year but has seen a significant decline over the past years. Its democratic system continues to undergo backsliding, and civil liberties are being further restricted. Years of public unrest and protest have destabilised the political system and have caused the government to enforce more restrictions on public life. There has been a decline in civil liberties, especially in freedom of speech, as critical views are unable to reach a national audience, while pro-government channels have not only easier access to the public but also receive untransparent funding from government sources. The government continues to have strong influence on the media space, and have negative rhetoric towards civil society, the space for which is becoming increasingly restricted. The most recent elections in Serbia have not only included multiple irregularities strong government advantages, but also an increased discriminatory pro-government media campaign. The elections were followed by public protests by the opposition who criticised and rejected the results, creating a situation where there is an increased public mistrust of institutions and the electoral process. Parts of the opposition also enter into boycotts as a response to a lack of transparency and dialogue. Political polarisation is very high in Serbia, with political opponents having not only almost no dialogue, but also no respect for the positions of others, leading to verbal and even physical conflict in the political sphere. The media are likewise divided, and in general give only one side of the story, being politically biased and not objective.

Croatia on the other hand is a positive example of a free and democratic country, continuing to be ahead of the entire region. It has a good level of pluralism, and civil liberties are respected and defended. Citizens freely express their political opinions and participate in the political system, which includes free and fair elections. As such, the situation after the elections is stable and positive, as citizens believe the government and the institutions to be legitimate and transparent. Polarisation still exists; however, it is at a much lower level than elsewhere in the region, and human rights are respected more. On the opposite of the scale is BiH, where polarisation is so high that it effectively has three parallel societies which attempt to function independently of each other, and which have divergent interests and identities. The ethnic groups have their dominant political parties which have political control over the communities, stifling free speech and undermining elections. The

high level of polarisation effectively prevents the further democratisation and liberalisation of BiH, and the attempts of the international community to reform it through a consociation model has not succeeded. Polarisation permeates every level of the political system and determine how civil liberties are respected or repressed.

North Macedonia still has problems with political polarisation that is identity based; however, these problems do not prevent the democratic functioning. Pluralism is at a solid level, and the country is very inclusive of its largest ethnic minority through a creative political solution. The identity issues are complicated by foreign relations, but generally the country functions democratically and elections are free and are becoming increasingly competitive and inclusive. There is free expression and other freedoms are respected, even though the media sphere is highly politically polarised as elsewhere in the region. Montenegro also has a good level of pluralism and continues to consolidate its democracy. It also recently had free elections where the opposition was able to win and take power, However, unlike North Macedonia it is much less stable post-election. The reason for this is that it is much more polarised based on ethnic and religious identity issues. These problems remain unresolved even with the improvements to civil liberties and the electoral system. The situation with human rights and social inclusion is improving, however the new democracy is far from consolidated. Political culture, like elsewhere in the region, is at a low level, with challenges to tolerance and understanding. Nationalism and religion are still important topics that undermine inclusive democratic functioning.

Albania has a stable level of pluralism and has continued to develop its democratic system. It also suffers from polarisation; however, it is not based on identity issues as the country does not have ethnic or religious intolerance, and as such is less destabilising. Elections are generally free and calm but are marked by strong divisions. With the media space being influenced by political elites and business interests, political competition is strong, however there is stability after elections and results are accepted by the citizens. Political culture needs to be improved like elsewhere, and the democratic system is far from being consolidated, but the situation is not critical. Kosovo has a similar situation, with the added problem being the Serb minority in the north which refuses to participate in the political system. Institution's function and elections are conducted in a transparent way. The successes of democratisation reflect the influence of the international community, which is high in Kosovo, and as such it is liberalising faster than its neighbours, but only at a surface level. Civil liberties are respected, and the government is trying to follow western models and to ensure human rights are respected. As such polarisation is at a stable and medium level, apart from in the north of the country.

We can see that regionally, political pluralism has not moved far in recent years, and that some countries are improving while others are deteriorating, while at the same time there are problems common to the whole region. The most important of these problems is polarisation, which is present both in politics and in the media, and which often involves identity-based tensions and intolerance. Ethnic and religious identity is an open question and even a problem in many regional countries, and this prevents liberalisation and stable democratisation. Political discourse is tense and harsh, political opponents see each other as enemies, and the media provide biased reporting almost exclusively. This leads to a deterioration of stability and a narrowing of rights and of democracy.

CONCLUSION

What we can conclude is that regional peace is still at risk, not only due to the lack of popular bilateral relations, but also because of the unfinished reforms and development of democratisation and liberalisation in the individual countries. Croatia has joined the EU, which further it improved its internal situation, and it serves as an example to the rest of the region of how a country can become more peaceful by becoming freer and by having free elections and protections of human rights. If we consider that political freedoms and free elections are necessary for a society to become peaceful, and that this is of high importance for regional peace, we see that there is a lot of work ahead to reform the regional societies. Democracy is under threat in several regional countries, and very easily there can be further deterioration for human and political rights, as well as democratic backsliding, meaning that citizens need to be more vigilant.

Policy Proposals

With media being threatened throughout the region:

- There should be financial and institutional support for impartial and independent media that represent diverse viewpoints.
- There also needs to be a greater transparency of government funding for private media.
- The institutions for regulation of the media sphere have to be independent of political influence.
- Programs of media literacy education needs to be organised, in order to assist citizens in critically assessing media content.
- Fact checking initiatives need to be encouraged and widely publicised.

As there is a high level of political polarization, dialogue needs to be encouraged at the political and educational level:

- A regular framework for dialogue between political parties themselves, and between the parties and civil society organisations, needs to be established within and without the institutions.
- Programs of community engagement and social inclusion should be organised.
- Increased transparency and accountability of political actors needs to be ensured.
- Education curricula need to be more inclusive and to teach different perspectives on history and culture, in order to reduce political and identity-based divisions.
- Education campaigns should be launched, that focus on democratic values, human rights, and conflict resolution skills, to improve the capacity of citizens to act politically.
- Third party mediation between political opponents, through regular forums, needs to be established, with results publicly available to citizens.
- Ensure that institutions such as electoral commissions, human rights bodies, and anti-corruption agencies operate independently.
- Support grassroots initiatives that encourage collaboration between different ethnic or political groups.
- Organise student exchanges, academic collaborations, and inter-community learning programs

As political institutions and procedures have problems, reforms need to be carried out:

- The legal framework for the institutions needs to be reformed to ensure fair representation, respect for minority rights, and equal treatment under the law, reducing grievances that fuel polarization.
- Policies need to be implemented that ensure equal opportunities and equal access to social benefits and programs.
- Economic development projects that supports independent actors, civil society, and underprivileged citizens, should be developed.
- Electoral reforms that ensure transparency, accountability, and equal media representation need to be developed.

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