



# Outta Trust? (Post)-Pandemic Trust and Democratic Resilience in the Western Balkans

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***Tena Prelec, Jelena Vasiljević, Vedran Džihic, Marko Kmezić  
with contribution by Miran Lavrić, Gjergji Vurmo, Srdjan Cvijic<sup>1</sup>***

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## Abstract

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In the Western Balkans, issues linking trust and democracy acquire particular importance and urgency in the wake of the Covid crisis. Based on a large-scale public opinion poll carried out in the six countries of the Western Balkans, this brief shows that the pandemic has exacerbated the region's issues with trust in public institutions even further. The study finds that the reticence of publics to undergo vaccination is directly linked with mistrust in governments, corroborating earlier research by BiEPAG that warned about the wide diffusion of coronavirus-related conspiracy theories in the region and their relation with vaccine scepticism. The brief also points to the profiling of a trend termed 'authoritarian production of trust' in the largest country of the region, Serbia. Yet, it also identifies a 'constituency of change' with similar characteristics across the region: a picture that opens space to invest trust in new actors able to advance genuine progressive causes in South East Europe, beyond and instead of captured institutions and the respective party establishments.

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**The study finds that the reticence of publics to undergo vaccination is directly linked with mistrust in governments, while pointing at the profiling of a trend termed 'authoritarian production of trust' in the largest country of the region, Serbia. Yet, it also identifies a 'constituency of change' with similar characteristics across the region."**

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# In mistrust we still trust: a pandemic double-down

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The relationship between trust and democracy is an uneasy one. Democracies are reliant on trust among citizens and trust in institutions: If we do not believe that institutions can work and if we do not feel represented by them, institutions cannot enjoy legitimacy; therefore, there is little chance of them performing a constructive service to democracy. And yet, a certain 'healthy distrust in the interests of the powerful' remains essential to ensure checks and balances in democracies.<sup>1</sup> Herein lies an apparent paradox: while democracy and trust go hand in hand, a dose of scepticism is key to keep democracies vibrant. COVID-19, and the layered crises that have ensued, provided a testing ground for such dynamics.

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In the Western Balkans, such issues acquire particular importance and urgency. As shown year after year by public opinion surveys such as the Balkan Barometer,<sup>2</sup> public trust in institutions has long been particularly low in this region. Furthermore, BiEPAG's 2020 brief on conspiracy theories during the pandemic<sup>3</sup> laid bare the fact that such theories were very widespread in the Western Balkans and warned that this might constitute a public health risk when it comes to vaccine take-up (as of autumn 2021, the region lags behind the rest of Europe considerably in terms of vaccination rate<sup>4</sup>). Research conducted globally

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1 Warren, Mark E. (ed.), *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

2 Balkan Barometer, RCC 2021.

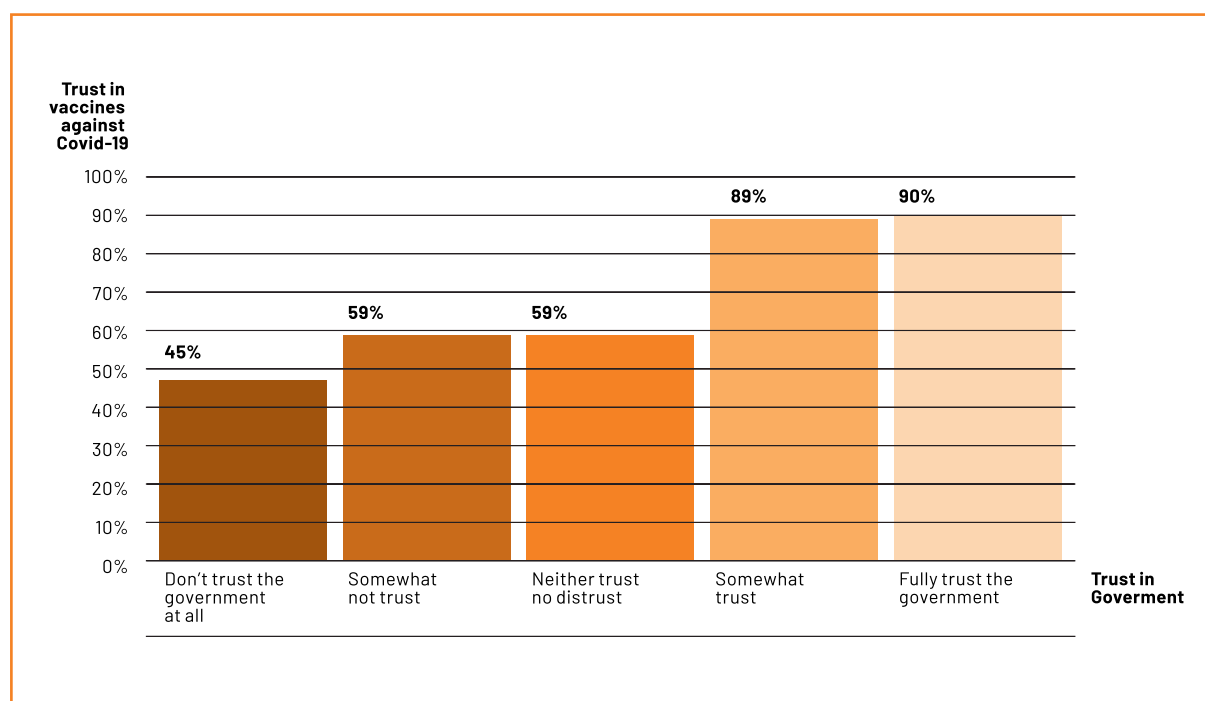
3 Bieber, Florian, Tena Prelec, Dejan Jović and Zoran Nechev, “The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans”, BiEPAG, December 2020.

4 Dunai, Marton, “From Baltic to Balkans, Covid crisis engulfs Central and Eastern Europe”, *Financial Times*, 22 October 2021.

has indeed shown that trust (or the lack thereof) in governments' management of the COVID-19 crisis was the single most important factor determining the fate of societies in fighting back against the virus.<sup>5</sup> The results of the 2021 BiEPAG survey add weight to these links, indicating that the pandemic has exacerbated the region's problems with public trust even further.

The survey results show that the second highest-ranking answer to the question Who has most won your trust during the COVID-19 crisis – closely following doctors and medical staff – is “nobody”. Digging further through the data provides more context: a statistically significant finding is that trust in government is a strong predictor of trust in COVID-19 vaccines [graph 1]. This correlation is very strong especially in Albania and Serbia: in the latter, 73% of those who fully trust the government have been vaccinated, against only 36% of those who do not trust the government. If these two takeaways are considered together – that trust in institutions is low, and that trust in vaccines correlates strongly with trust in institutions – it becomes easier to explain the reticence of Balkan publics to take the jab. It also goes some way towards explaining an apparently puzzling result: namely, the fact that citizens report to have relatively high confidence in vaccines (over 65% overall), although we know that real-life vaccination rates are considerably lower (ranging between 22% and 44% of the population).<sup>6</sup>

#### Trust in government as a strong predictor of trust in COVID-19 vaccines



<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Thing That Determines a Country's Resistance to the Coronavirus*, *The Atlantic*, March 2020.

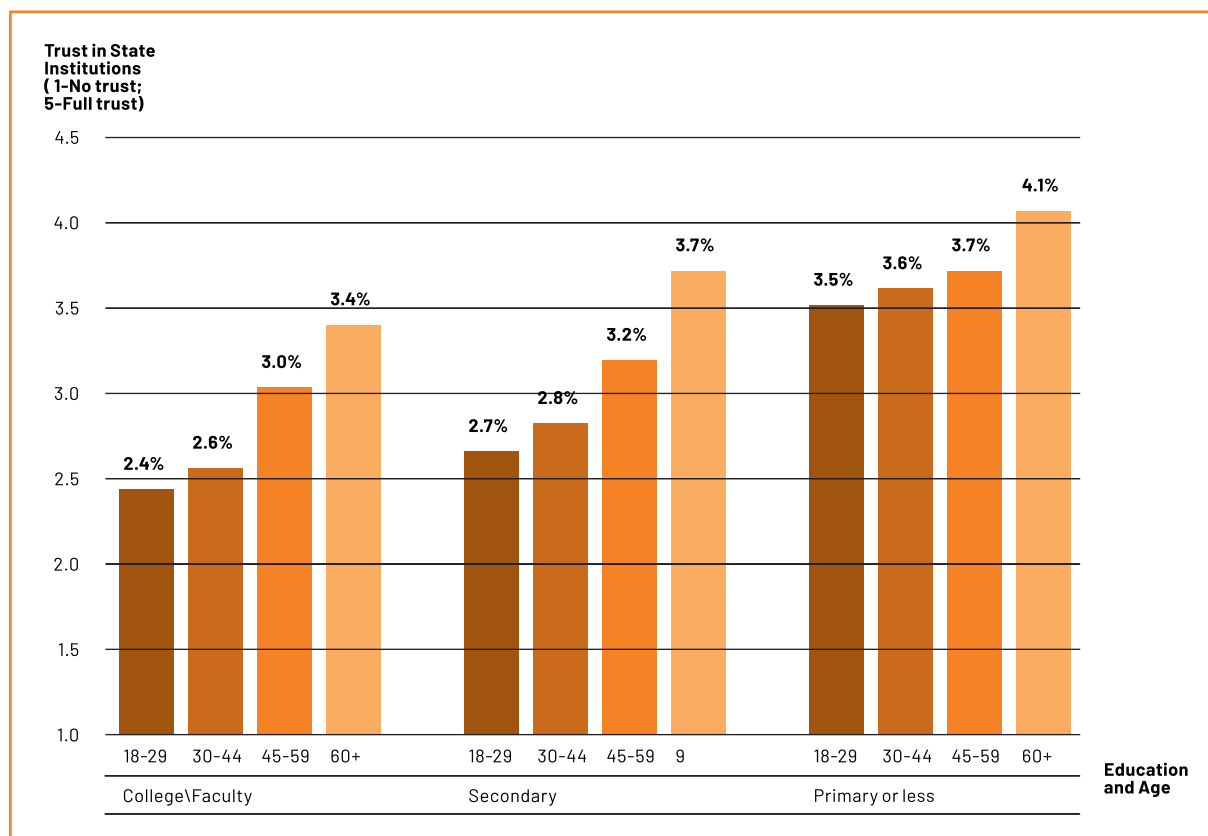
<sup>6</sup> Covidvax.live, webpage 2021.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an illustrative case in point in this respect. It has the lowest trust in political institutions across the region, with an astounding 2% of population with trust in government and only 1% in the Prime Minister/Council of Ministers. Young and educated Bosnians stand out as being particularly sceptical towards state institutions, with no statistically relevant variations between entities. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also the country with the lowest vaccination rate in the region (less than 22% as of November 2021)<sup>7</sup> and with a high rate of non-vaccinated respondents stating that they are not planning to take the jab in the future (almost 40%, with 22% who are not sure).

## An age divide

Zooming further into the survey results, a high level of polarisation of trust in state institutions is seen to be driven by the demographic factors, in particular age, education and type of settlement. In Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and especially in Serbia, citizens with a higher level of education express lower trust in state institutions. Additionally, Serbia stands out as a country where age and settlement in rural areas are positively correlated to trust in state institutions. Age is, indeed, a particularly striking element that sets Serbia apart from the other countries, as shown by graph 2. Therefore, Serbia exhibits strong polarization between those who are lower educated and older, and educated young people from urban areas.

**Trust in state institutions by education and age in Serbia**



<sup>7</sup> Reuters Covid 2021 <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>, 2021

## Authoritarian production of trust?

A particularly concerning finding relates to the extent to which trust in Serbia could be seen as mediated by the trust in the regime and in the ruling party. Here, we find the highest correlation between trust in government and reported vaccination – and consequently significantly lower vaccine take-up among those distrustful of the ruling regime; furthermore, respondents from Serbia express the lowest belief in the effectiveness of elections. This is especially prevalent among those with the lowest trust in government: only 25% of them believe the government can be changed through elections, while in the region as a whole, this share is at 53%. It follows that, in Serbia, those distrustful of the government have very little belief in the possibility of it being changed through democratic means.

**The Serbian population also places the biggest trust in China and Russia, two global autocratic role models, while the lowest trust in the region is placed in the EU (only 10%).**

Another important indicator is the correlation between distrust in international organizations and 'pro-authoritarian' attitudes in Serbia. Here we find, by far, the smallest share of population in the region (22%) who believe that democracies handled the pandemic the best – against 66% of respondents who either believe that, in decisive moments, authorities have to take over, or stating outright that countries with authoritarian leadership handled the crisis best. The Serbian population also places the biggest trust in China and Russia, two global autocratic role models, while the lowest trust in the region is placed in the EU (only 10%).<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these two worrying trends – a high trust in more authoritarian models, and a higher-than-average trust in their government – beg the question of whether, in Serbia, we can talk about a phenomenon that could be termed 'authoritarian production of trust'. This reflects wider trends: as John Keane puts it, we increasingly see the profiling 'a new type of pseudo-democratic government led by rulers skilled in the arts of manipulating and meddling with people's lives, marshalling their support, and winning their conformity'.<sup>9</sup>

There is a silver lining. For, however concerning, this statistically grounded

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that higher trust in China is partly linked with the fast delivery of Sinopharm vaccines to Serbia, which was accompanied by a strong pro-Chinese PR campaign run by the government and major pro-government media outlets. See also: Nikolaos Tzifakis et al., *Geopolitically irrelevant in its 'inner courtyard'? The EU amidst third actors in the Western Balkans*, BiEPAG, December 2021.

<sup>9</sup> John Keane, *The New Despotism*, Harvard University Press, 2020

analysis that applies to Serbia is not reflected elsewhere in the Balkans as yet. In particular, it stands in contrast with the other country in the region in which trust in institutions is high – Kosovo. Its high trust in institutions is particularly interesting against the background of a rather pluralistic and competitive political party scene and recent change of government through elections, in contrast to fully controlled elections, government and institutions by the ruling party in Serbia. Secondly, Kosovo stands out as the country with the highest share of the population thinking that democratic countries handled the COVID-19 crisis the best, and only one in four of respondents stating that strong authorities need to have the ultimate say. And thirdly, Kosovar respondents place the strongest trust in the EU when it comes to actors that are expected to help the most in the future in terms of overcoming the COVID-19 crisis (56% of the population). Three out of four Kosovo citizens trust full EU membership as the best future perspective for their country, which stands in contrast to Serbia, where only about one in four respondents state the same.



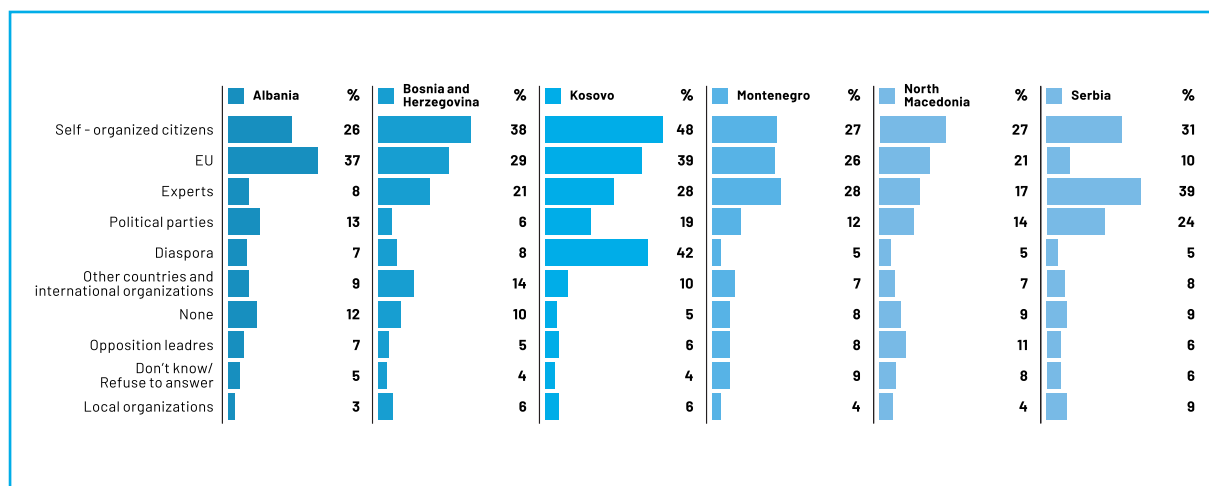
# Democratic resilience: Whom do citizens trust to deliver change?

If we read the picture presented above not only as an erosion of trust in the way social and political actors handled the crisis, but also as an opening of space for new actors to earn citizens' trust, we ought to look deeper into the answers given to the question asking which actors citizens trust the most to deliver positive change. In other words, whom do those distrustful in state institutions trust? Do any of the perceived trustworthy actors have the potential to bring about democratic change?

**The EU scored high everywhere except in Serbia (highest in Albania, 37%, and lowest in Serbia, 10%), while experts seem to generate most trust in Montenegro and in Serbia.**

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, among a range of choices including the EU, experts, political parties, opposition leaders, local organizations, diaspora, and other countries and international organizations, it was 'self-organized citizens' who received the most positive answers as a trusted factor for positive change (see graph 3). This was the only answer that gained more than 20% of responses in each of the surveyed countries; not a negligible finding, given the high number of possible choices in the survey. The EU scored high everywhere except in Serbia (highest in Albania, 37%, and lowest in Serbia, 10%), while experts seem to generate most trust in Montenegro and in Serbia. But while in Montenegro trust is almost evenly spread between self-organized citizens, the EU and experts (26-28%), in Serbia experts have won 39% of the responses. Opposition leaders do not fare well, with only 5-11% of respondents expressing their trust in them. It is furthermore interesting that Kosovo citizens have high trust in their diaspora (a very high 42%, just below self-organized citizens), and that local organizations have received the most positive answers in Serbia (9%).

### Which of these actors do you trust the most to deliver positive change?



An encouraging correlation, in this respect, is the one between trust in self-organized citizens and the belief that democratic countries handled the crisis the best, which holds true across all WB countries

Could this trust in self-organized citizens, experts, and local organizations signal a drive for more democratic engagement? An encouraging correlation, in this respect, is the one between trust in self-organized citizens and the belief that democratic countries handled the crisis the best, which holds true across all WB countries [graph 4]. This could perhaps support the argument that democratically organized citizen initiatives, currently emerging throughout the region, are in fact the “self-organized citizens” perceived in the survey as a trusted factor for positive change. It is particularly insightful that in Bosnia and Herzegovina self-organized citizens are the most trusted factor for political change (34%), while political parties are among the least trusted actors capable of delivering positive change [illustrated by graph 3]. This could signal that dissatisfaction with political parties’ and institutions’ performance in bringing about positive change does not only result in general distrust (Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest trust in state institutions in the region), but also opens space for citizens to invest their trust in new actors. This could be linked with a very vibrant and active scene of citizen activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but elsewhere in the region as well.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See also: EDI Convention, *Through solidarity to democracy in the Western Balkans*, September 2021. <https://www.balkanfund.org/empowering-citizens39-engagement/edi-convention-through-solidarity-to-democracy-in-the-western-balkans-belgrade-september-16-17>

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Demographically speaking, this potential resides mostly among the younger and more educated citizens, who exhibit a certain coherence in their value orientations: they are pro-EU, and have trust in international organizations, experts, and most of all self-organized citizens. A partial exception to this is the cohort of the youngest citizens, especially in Serbia, aged 18-29, who are among the groups who are least keen on joining the EU; but we also find that the highest trust in the EU, and high trust in international organizations and especially in self-organized citizens resides among the next age cohort in Serbia, e.g. among those aged between 30 and 59. Furthermore, what sets apart young people is media consumption: across the region, they predominantly choose social media as their preferred source of information, and there is a notable correlation between trust in social media and trust in self-organized citizens, potentially signalling their resilience to controlled media images broadcast by public and commercial TV stations, still overwhelmingly most trusted among the general population in the region.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

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The overall picture emerging from the 2021 BiEPAG survey is not encouraging. This brief's findings show that, during the pandemic, medical staff were the only category of actors able to garner trust from citizens. Importantly, the analysis of the survey is able to corroborate earlier theories linking trust in institutions and vaccination rate, showing that, in the Balkans, mistrust in authorities is at least part of the reason why vaccine take-up is so low. As long as trust remains low and conspiracy theories – linked to scepticism towards vaccination – widespread, the public health risk will remain high. Additionally, we see the profiling of a phenomenon of authoritarian production of trust in the largest country of the region – Serbia. The findings indicate the emergence of non-democratic regimes able to generate support for their policies and stances, thus contributing further to the erosion of democracy across the region and establishing an authoritarian-leaning model of governance.

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Yet, this paper also identifies a 'constituency of change'. It emerges that the younger and mid-aged cohorts (especially those aged 30-59), with a higher level of education, urban, and with stronger trust in social media, are also those who trust in self-organised citizens as bearers of change. This correlation cuts across the whole region, and it also aligns with a higher trust in the EU and in international organisations. Such a picture opens space for citizens to invest their trust in new actors able to advance genuine progressive causes in South East Europe, beyond and instead of 'captured institutions' and the respective party establishments. This type of bottom-up trust in a better future, coupled with a call for integrity, transparency and equal opportunities, has already

shown huge transformative potential to trigger social change in the region, be it at the national level – like the ‘colourful revolution’ in North Macedonia and partly the 2020 electoral upset in Montenegro – or at the local level, as seen in many successful locally rooted citizens’ initiatives across the region.<sup>11</sup>

For, however difficult a position the countries of the Western Balkans find themselves in – between a blocked EU perspective and captured domestic institutions – this brief has indicated a way forward. While trust in institutions is certainly lacking, this is not wholly bad news. This is because the second element of the trust & democracy equation – i.e. the ‘healthy distrust in the interests of the powerful’ is on full display among certain parts of the population. Self-organised citizen movements and initiatives with genuine platforms for political contestation, it would seem, have indeed the potential to destabilize the authoritarian political landscape in the region and to create a new paradigm of democratic trust in the Balkans.



By and large, the pandemic has exacerbated the region’s problem regarding public trust, with citizens only trusting medical workers, and ‘nobody’ as a close second. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance for all countries of the Western Balkans to increase investments in public health infrastructure and state capacity to address negative health, economic, as well as social consequences of the pandemic. The vicious circle of ineffective governance has preceded the pandemic in the region; the level of trust in institutions can only be strengthened through increased transparency, functionality, and accountability of public institutions.

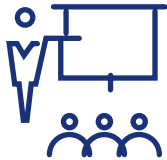


The vaccination rates in the region are stagnating and are overall very low in comparison to the EU average. The leaderships of the Western Balkans should offensively confront conspiracy theories and increase media engagement, explaining the need for vaccination. Greater access to vaccination possibilities, without the need for pre-registration, needs to be offered to the population. Furthermore, civil society and other political actors should also be more proactive in advocating for vaccination, helping to disassociate the link between regime (dis)trust and vaccination.

<sup>11</sup> Vedran Džihčić, Marika Djolai, Jelena Vasiljević, Alida Vračić, *Civic initiative and Citizens’ Activism in the Western Balkans. Unleashing the Potential for Change through Social Movements and Civic Initiatives*, BiEPAG, to be published, December 2021.



In some countries of the region – especially Serbia – there is a strong “authoritarian production of trust”, including high trust in authoritarian “role-models” such as China and Russia and low trust in the EU. The EU is called upon to confront more offensively authoritarian tendencies in the region and draw red lines in cases of violations of rule of law and human rights.



As ‘self-organized citizens’ are recognized as one of the most trusted factors for positive change, both the EU as well as progressive forces within the Western Balkan countries should forge new alliances with local and national citizens’ initiatives and movements, thus strengthening and supporting the emerging “constituency of change” identified in this brief.

## Methodology

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The primary data used in this BiEPAG policy analysis come from a public opinion poll conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, during July and August 2021. Survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample consisted of minimum 1000 respondents aged 18+, using mix mode: telephone and online interviews – CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) and CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing), while post-stratification was done by region, gender, age, type of settlement and education. Data collection was implemented by Ipsos Strategic Marketing and commissioned by the European fund for the Balkans.

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Contact: ALEKSANDRA TOMANIĆ, Executive Director,

[aleksandra.tomanic@balkanfund.org](mailto:aleksandra.tomanic@balkanfund.org)

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Contact: UNIV.PROF. DR. FLORIAN BIEBER,  
Professor of Southeast European History and Politics,  
[florian.bieber@uni-graz.at](mailto:florian.bieber@uni-graz.at)

