

## Report

Online roundtable discussion: Media freedom in Serbia and the Western Balkans and its role in democratic society and European integration

17. 12. 2021



December  
2021

In the opening of the discussion, Jana Juzová from EUROPEUM introduced the project, the aim and structure of the event and the participants to each other. In the first part of the discussion, Jovana Vančevska presented her analysis of the European Commission's Progress Reports on Western Balkan countries, in particular the report on Serbia and assessment related to the areas of democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of media.

The floor was then passed to Nikola Burazer, the Serbian coordinator of the project and Executive Editor of the European Western Balkans portal, who shared his analysis and experience of the position of media in Serbia and the role they play in the process of democratization and European integration. Burazer emphasised the fact that the space for independent media reporting objectively on the EU and the government policies in the context of EU accession process is continuously shrinking. According to him, in the current situation the media in Serbia are not a part of the democratization process but rather a partner in "autocratization" as they fail to provide quality and objective reporting and instead give an unprecedented space to the government and President Aleksandar Vučić in particular. In consequence, the media serve as a tool in promotion of narratives preferred by the government, often helping to spread disinformation instead of playing the role of a watchdog. According to Burazer, the line between information and propaganda presented in most media in Serbia is becoming blurred. Burazer also raised the issue of perception among Serbian public but also pro-European actors, such as the civil society and independent media, that the EU is failing them. A particularly problematic example was the fact that after the publishing of the Progress Reports, Serbia was the only country from the Western Balkan region which was "rewarded" in the EU accession process (opening of the Cluster 4 - Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity), despite a steady democratic regression.

The moderator then asked Srdjan Cvijić, Senior Analyst from the Open Society European Policy Institute, to assess the strength of EU's conditionality towards Serbia and the influence it has as a normative power promoting democratization in the region. According to Cvijić's evaluation, the conditionality is currently failing to deliver to an unprecedented degree and there is an unseen gap between EU conditionality and the development in the democratization process. The European Commission vis-à-vis the Member States was according to him weak already before the nomination of Commissioner Varhelyi to the position and this change made it only worse. Due to this lack of trust in the Commission, the progress reports released by the EC do not have much relevance and are not taken very seriously. Cvijić also assessed today's Serbia as the least free it has ever been in its modern history (even under the regime of Slobodan Milošević) with media being overpaid by the government, resulting into a strong governmental influence over media. On the other hand, he emphasised the importance of "people power" in the democratic transformation, currently manifested in the mass environmental protests in Serbia. Interestingly, the protests are even completely dissociated from EU's agenda, as the lithium mine project is supported by some Western actors. The lack of support expressed to the protesters from the EU and West generally only further undermines the legitimacy and credibility of the EU among Serbian public.

The second part of the event was then an open discussion with the participants. The crucial topics of the discussion were the Kosovo-Serbia dialog and possibility of solution under the current Serbian government and ways how the EU enlargement policy could be changed in order to deliver better results in the area of democracy. The

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union



December  
2021

participating experts arrived at the conclusion that despite Aleksandar Vučić being seen first as the only one who could persuade the Serbian public to accept a deal with Kosovo, after almost ten years in power he rather radicalized the society and created an even stronger opposition to the solution of the Kosovo issue. In the current atmosphere in the society, it would be a political suicide for any politician to reach an agreement with the Kosovo representatives.

Regarding the EU enlargement process and ways how the EU could again strengthen the link between European integration and democratization, the main take away was that the EU's ambiguity when it rewards autocratic leaders as in the case of Serbia only harms both sides in the end. For example, in the current situation with the upcoming elections in Serbia, the EU should have waited for the result and manner in which the elections would be conducted and then offer a reward if appropriate, not the other way around.

#### **Participants:**

Jana Juzová, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy – moderator

Nikola Burazer, Centar Savremene Politike

Srdjan Cvijić, Open Society European Policy Institute

Igor Procházka, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

Irena Ober Leicmanová, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

Věra Stojarová, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University

Vladimír Ďorđević, Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies, Mendel University in Brno

Petr Čermák, Charles University

Žiga Faktor, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

Jolyon Naegele

Jovana Vančevska

# TRANSITION

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union



December  
2021

## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

[More about us](#)

## Contact

Web: [europeum.org](http://europeum.org)

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: [europeum@europeum.org](mailto:europeum@europeum.org)

**Brussels Office** address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: [brussels@europeum.org](mailto:brussels@europeum.org)

More publications can be found on [our website](#).

# TRANSITION

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union