DEFENDING DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

REPORT AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the international conference “Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism”, Skopje, December 11-12, 2024, and the work of the Defending Democracy Initiative, founded in December, 2024

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Skopje, North Macedonia, 2025

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

Authoritarian rulers and far-right extremist movements are increasingly organizing on a global scale, sharing tactics and resources across national borders. These resources include a vast network of communication and media platforms, particularly social media, through which they spread disinformation, fake news, false narratives, and divisive, hateful content. This rapidly spreading propaganda sows fear, undermines trust in institutions, democratic governance, and even science, while offering deceptive promises of quick fixes and easy solutions.

This alarming trend was the catalyst for the initiative that led to the international conference[1] *Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism*. In this spirit, over 80 participants – including 30 keynote speakers and panelists, among them human rights leaders, international experts, and media representatives – gathered in Skopje, North Macedonia, on December 11-12, 2024, to engage in critical discussions on the most pressing issues of our time.

The conference was convened by the partner organizations CIVIL - Center for Freedom (North Macedonia), Media Dialogue, Youth for Media (Germany), and the New European People's Forum (international). The initiative received financial support from the government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and an in-kind contribution from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. Participants

[1] See: https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/

came from Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The event was part of the NRW Human Rights Week[2], which features various formats on this critical topic. It also marked the International Human Rights Day, and the 25th anniversary of the founding of CIVIL – Center for Freedom.

At a time of rising global extremism and authoritarianism, the fight for human rights and democracy must also be global. Political and societal actors, institutions, and initiatives with democratic and moderate orientations must urgently find ways to strengthen, protect, and elevate one another. They must share experiences, resources, and best practices while ensuring that these efforts reach broader audiences and decision-makers through media, legal action, and civic activism.

The conference conveyed its messages powerfully and effectively communicated key insights, fostering in-depth discussions that led to concrete recommendations. These recommendations were developed through an intensive three-month process, which included correspondence and online meetings among partners, as well as consultations with experts.

The conference program featured closed-door workshops in four working groups, networking meetings, and a press conference on December 11, followed by a four-panel, eight-hour-long conference on December 12, livestreamed in English, Macedonian, and Albanian.

[2] See: https://mbeim.nrw/woche-der-menschenrechte

Evaluation meetings with partners and experts on December 13, along with follow-up meetings and correspondence in the months that followed, further refined these recommendations.

This report presents the key outcomes of the conference – actionable policy recommendations that serve as a foundation for sustainable, strategic action to support and defend democracy and human rights globally.

As agreed upon by partner organizations on December 13, 2024, and endorsed by the conference participants, this work continues under the framework of the *Defending Democracy Initiative*. The initiative's founding members committed to regularly updating existing recommendations and introducing new ones based on regional and global developments. It will rely on relevant monitoring activities, reports, and analyses from prominent experts and leaders in fields crucial to its mission.

In addition to recommendations, this report includes edited presentations from keynote speakers and panelists, based on full transcripts, as well as a chapter on activities, links, and resources.

The Initiative's board of founders and the editors of this report strongly believe that this document meets a global need to defend democracy and human rights. They envision it evolving into a global platform for communication, mutual support, and coordinated action. However, its impact depends on broad dissemination and unwavering advocacy. The recommendations in this publication must not remain on paper – they call for urgent implementation, collective engagement, and sustained

efforts to counter authoritarianism and safeguard democratic values. We invite all stakeholders – activists, policymakers, media, and civil society – to champion these recommendations and turn them into concrete action.

What is at stake is nothing less than the future of democratic governance and human rights globally. As authoritarianism, extremism, and militant, warmongering imperialism continue to threaten democracy, the need for coordinated, sustained, and inclusive action from parliaments, governments, civil society, academia, and media has never been more urgent.

These recommendations provide a critical roadmap for all who believe in the power of truth, justice, and democracy.

The time to act is now, and the collective efforts of individuals, organizations, and institutions are essential to ensure that democratic values prevail.

Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann, Heather Roberson Gaston, Roger Casale, Xhabir M. Deralla

Policy Recommendations

Guiding Premises

> *Now is not the time for rivalry and division; it is a moment for cooperation, solidarity, and the unification of efforts to safeguard democracy. Political and societal actors must urgently work together, forging cross-political alliances and adopting coordinated strategies to protect democratic institutions.*

International conference *Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism*, and the teams of the partner organizations that carried out the initiative present these recommendations based on guiding premises that include:

- **Rebuilding political culture** to clearly demonstrate commitment to democratic values across political divides.
- **Reinforcing democratic institutions** through transparency, accountability, and – above all – flexible models of citizen control and civic engagement.
- **Countering authoritarian and far-right tendencies, nationalist radicalism, and extremism** through strategic policymaking, civic engagement, international

cooperation, and proactive media and educational initiatives.

- **Strengthening and protecting independent media and civil society** in their efforts to combat disinformation, hybrid threats, and attacks on democracy and human rights.
- **Rebuilding and strengthening international alliances** to foster cooperation and resilience in defending democratic values.
- **Developing and advocating for strategies to decisively halt Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine,** secure a lasting and just peace, and prevent further imperialistic expansion and aggression.
- **Developing and advocating for strategies to bring an end to conflicts in other affected regions,** such as the Middle East, Africa, and beyond, through diplomatic efforts, legal frameworks, international solidarity, and tangible support.

I. Building cross-political and societal alliances: Adopting coordinated strategies to counter authoritarianism and strengthen democratic institutions

Context

The rise of authoritarianism, radical nationalism, and warmongering has not only impacted the functioning of democratic institutions but also shaped people's perceptions, attitudes and expectations of democracy. The onslaught of propaganda presents a radical version of reality, and a simplified version of the "other," making it seem impossible to resolve conflicts through a democratic and legal framework.

Despite these challenges, people across different political and cultural backgrounds often share common goals—such as support for market economies, mobility, security, and, significantly, European integration. In EU-aspiring countries, despite setbacks, the majority of citizens still endorse the European integration process.

This presents an opportunity to rebuild trust in democratic values and institutions, both within and outside the EU, by fostering meaningful exchanges and cooperation programs. These could include joint policy initiatives focused on strengthening democratic institutions, cross-border dialogues to address shared political challenges,

and collaborative efforts – at regional level and beyond – in areas such as media literacy, democratic education, and citizen participation, including joint public advocacy actions to protect democracy and human rights, regional conferences, workshops, training programs, and digital campaigns aimed at fostering freedom of speech, while countering disinformation, hate speech, and hostile propaganda operations. These actions and programs, while commencing in Europe, may well serve as a positive example globally.

Recommendations

To address hybrid threats, democratic societies and their responsible political structures and democratic institutions must enhance their ability to identify and respond to vulnerabilities, from electoral interference to disinformation.

This requires concrete actions, including legislative measures and targeted technical and financial support. Strengthening electoral integrity frameworks, empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) and media to implement monitoring systems that detect and expose disinformation and malign influence operations, and supporting local citizen election observation through financial and institutional backing are essential steps.

Developing joint counter-propaganda campaigns by independent media and civil society can help combat disinformation and reinforce democratic resilience.

Pro-democracy movements, civic initiatives, independent media, and moderates across the political spectrum must

adopt coordinated strategies to resist authoritarianism and protect fundamental rights. This should include the creation of cross-party action working groups, joint advocacy platforms, and international partnerships aimed at defending democratic values.

Now is not the time for rivalry and division; it is a moment for cooperation, solidarity, and the unification of efforts to safeguard democracy.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Legislative and policy measures

- Introduce and enforce laws that protect democratic institutions, public discourse, and electoral integrity, while penalizing foreign and domestic interference.
- Establish independent regulatory bodies to monitor disinformation, hybrid threats, and political influence operations.
- Develop legal mechanisms to counter malign foreign funding in media, political campaigns, and CSOs.

2. Strengthening electoral integrity

- Implement comprehensive election monitoring systems to detect and expose manipulation, interference, and fraud.
- Provide financial and logistical support for independent citizen election observation initiatives.
- Enhance cybersecurity measures for election infrastructure to prevent hacking and foreign influence.

3. Empowering civil society and independent media

- Support CSOs and independent media in developing effective fact-checking networks and real-time disinformation tracking.

- Provide funding for CSO-based monitoring and media platforms focused on investigations and countering far-right and malign influence operations.
- Foster collaboration between media, CSOs, and academic institutions to improve media literacy programs.

4. Countering disinformation and propaganda

- Develop counter-propaganda initiatives in partnership with trusted and committed independent media and civil society.
- Launch large-scale public awareness campaigns on the risks and impact of disinformation.
- Encourage social media platforms to implement stricter content moderation policies on state-sponsored disinformation.

5. Building cross-sector cooperation

- Establish cross-party action working groups to promote democracy and counter authoritarian influence.
- Strengthen international partnerships among democratic governments, organizations, and institutions.
- Facilitate knowledge-sharing platforms between journalists, researchers, and policymakers.

6. Ensuring financial and institutional support

- Secure long-term funding mechanisms for democracy-promotion initiatives and hybrid threat monitoring.
- Allocate resources for training programs that equip civic actors, journalists, and policymakers with the skills to combat disinformation.
- Provide direct support to individuals and organizations facing legal and financial threats due to their pro-democracy work.

II. Rebuilding trust in democratic institutions and processes

Context

Democratic institutions worldwide are facing an unprecedented threat from malign influence operations that undermine public trust, distort political discourse, and disorient citizens. These operations, often fueled by state and non-state actors, are designed to erode faith in democratic processes, sow division, and promote extremist ideologies. Propaganda campaigns, especially those associated with Russia's hybrid warfare tactics and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have become central to this strategy, flooding media channels with misinformation, divisive content, and fringe narratives.

As a consequence, citizens are increasingly drawn to far-right populism, quick-fix solutions, and ideologies that promise simplicity in a complex world. This environment of confusion and manipulation diminishes trust in established democratic norms and institutions, leaving societies vulnerable to further destabilization.

To reclaim public confidence, it is essential to dismantle these deceptive tactics and work toward rebuilding the integrity of democratic processes, ensuring that they serve the needs of all citizens, not just the political elites or authoritarian interests.

Rebuilding trust in democratic institutions, processes, and the rule of law is essential. Immediate action, combined with a long-term revitalization process, is urgently needed.

The *Defending Democracy Initiative* recommends that for democracy to thrive, it must be actively embraced, supported, and defended—not only by official actors but also by the broader public.

The process of restoring trust in democratic institutions requires close cooperation among international organizations, donors, civil society organizations (CSOs), independent media, academia, and responsible businesses.

All stakeholders must work together to reinforce key democratic values, including mutual respect, inclusivity, and the responsibility to protect vulnerable groups. To foster a strong democratic culture, civil society, intellectuals, opinion leaders, and socially responsible businesses—supported by donor communities and democratic governments—should commit to implementing visible, effective, and impactful initiatives.

Recommendations

Show the benefits of democracy, through fostering dialogue - convening various groups across the moderate political spectrum, involving communities across the societal pallet, including representatives of various ethnic, religious, and cultural communities, while providing gender balance and equitable representation of various other communities. These activities need to be implemented at local and

national level, as well as through cross border cooperation at regional level; and in suitable formats introduce, promote, and upgrade at international levels, using experiential lines to work on problems that are cross-cutting and transversal.

> *For instance, convene groups to work on the issue of environmental degradation, to resolve economic suffering, and EU integration. To the extent that organizations already exist that are organized along ethnic lines (e.g., women's organizations from different ethnic communities), seek to provide space and support for collaboration.*

Recognize that building transversal movements is delicate work, particularly in the context of historic and ongoing oppression and the aftermath of wars. An environmental movement, for instance, can quickly devolve into rhetoric about protecting what is "ours" from historically hated and feared "others," thus reproducing historic domination and hatred. It is crucial, therefore, when bringing groups together, that all commit to protect the principles of inclusive democratic dialogue, while countering disinformation, false and hateful narratives, and far-right radicalism and exclusion.

Civil society organizations and initiatives need to develop and implement effective tools and methodologies that engage citizens.

> *One of the possible approaches, proposed by the New European People's Forum and the Defending Democracy Initiative is to introduce "citizens assemblies" where people from diverse backgrounds can come together to articulate needs and goals on issues that matter to them most, for instance, confronting environmental degradation; improving social services; improving the economic situation; European Union integration, etc.*

Provide safe spaces where people from multiple backgrounds can communicate, learn, and form bonds that transcend hardened markers of identity and community, developing a more civic-minded form of identity and community.

Overcome polarization and transcend nationalism by bringing people together at a municipal level, with events that help people find common ground and address shared interests.

Introduce methodologies that provide flexibility in the face of political, social, and security dynamics; and inclusivity along all criteria - political, ethnic, religious, cultural and other - to secure equitable representation.

Local and international democratic institutions need to communicate clearly with the public and invite an increase of community involvement.

Strengthen interaction between civil society organizations, academia and media; overcome academism and engage in substantial interaction and cooperation with local communities entities, while creating safe spaces for creative authenticity; make knowledge understandable and close to wider audiences. One of the ways to achieve this is to create inclusive and open ended programs of cooperation and exchange.

Opinion makers and civil society leaders should spearhead the national and global efforts to reclaim the concept of “Democracy” and agree around clear definitions of democratic values.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Demonstrating the benefits of democracy

- Foster dialogue by convening diverse groups across the moderate political spectrum.
- Engage representatives from different ethnic, religious, and cultural communities, ensuring gender balance and inclusive representation.
- Organize discussions at local, national, and regional levels, and expand them internationally through cross-border cooperation.
- Use experiential, problem-solving approaches to address shared concerns, such as environmental protection, economic development, and European Union integration.
- Facilitate collaboration between organizations that are traditionally structured along ethnic or cultural lines (e.g., Macedonian and Albanian women's movements) to build bridges and cooperative platforms.

2. Preventing democratic backsliding and polarization

- Recognize that building inclusive movements requires careful navigation of historical and ongoing injustices.
- Prevent democratic dialogue from being co-opted by divisive narratives (e.g., environmental issues turning into exclusionary rhetoric about protecting "our" land from "others").
- Commit to countering disinformation, hateful rhetoric, and far-right radicalism through inclusive and fact-based discussions.

3. Engaging citizens in democratic processes

- Develop and implement participatory tools, such as citizens' assemblies, where people from diverse backgrounds can deliberate on commonly recognized pressing issues (e.g., climate action, economic recovery, EU integration).

- Create safe spaces for dialogue where individuals and groups from different communities can interact, build trust, and form new civic-minded identities.
- Organize local initiatives that bring people together at the municipal level, fostering common ground and shared interests beyond political and nationalistic divisions.

4. Strengthening institutional communication and community involvement

- Democratic institutions, both local and international, must communicate clearly with the public and actively encourage civic participation.
- Increase interaction between CSOs, academia, and media to ensure that expert knowledge is accessible and relevant to the wider public.
- Move beyond traditional academia and engage local communities in knowledge-sharing initiatives, creating open-ended and inclusive programs for cooperation and exchange.

5. Reclaiming and defining democratic values

- Opinion leaders and civil society organizations should spearhead national and global efforts to reclaim the concept of democracy.
- Establish clear and widely accepted definitions of democratic values to counter the manipulation of these concepts by authoritarian actors.
- Promote civic education programs that emphasize democratic principles, critical thinking, and media literacy to equip citizens with the tools to defend democracy.

III. Defending truth: Rejecting false balance and strengthening democratic resilience

Context

False notions of balance and neutrality have become tools of manipulation, often substituting genuine objectivity and ethical journalism. When media, civil society organizations (CSOs), and think-tanks embrace these misleading concepts, they create space for disinformation and malign influences to spread unchecked. This concept of "false balance" manifests when media outlets present opposing viewpoints in an attempt to appear objective, but in doing so, they unintentionally grant equal weight to harmful, false, or extremist views. For example, in the context of global conflicts such as Russia's war against Ukraine, some outlets have treated unsubstantiated Russian claims and narratives or state-backed war propaganda as legitimate points of view, thereby presenting a distorted image of the situation. This undermines the public's ability to discern fact from fiction and clouds the line between truth and manipulation.

Furthermore, the widespread embrace of false balance contributes to the normalization of extremist and fringe ideologies. By providing equal coverage to misinformation and disinformation alongside verified facts, media outlets inadvertently validate harmful rhetoric, making it harder for citizens to distinguish between credible sources and those with ulterior motives. This approach diminishes trust in

professional journalism, as it places legitimate voices of dissent on the same platform as harmful and unverified claims. Ultimately, this creates an environment where the truth is obscured, and public opinion becomes increasingly susceptible to disinformation campaigns. Instead of embracing neutrality at the expense of facts, objectivity must be reaffirmed as a commitment to integrity, transparency, and the defense of democratic values.

To effectively counter the growing wave of disinformation, it is essential to adopt a more principled approach to media reporting and civil society engagement. Civil society and media actors must reject the misguided notion of false balance and prioritize factual accuracy and accountability. This means rejecting the false equivalence between legitimate criticism and harmful propaganda, ensuring that all claims are scrutinized against verified evidence. Only by restoring a commitment to truth and ethical journalism can democratic institutions and processes be safeguarded against the rising tide of authoritarianism, extremism, and manipulation.

Recommendations

Empower civil society and media actors: Civil society and media actors with expertise in countering foreign malign influences and hybrid threats must be empowered to share their knowledge, methodologies, and training with other organizations and media outlets to strengthen democratic resilience.

> *For example, organizations that have successfully countered Russian disinformation in Eastern Europe could collaborate*

> *with counterparts in other regions and across Europe and beyond facing similar challenges, providing training on identifying and debunking false narratives.*

Reform funding strategies: Donor communities must rethink their funding strategies to ensure that support reaches organizations that are truly committed to democratic principles. This includes ensuring that funds are directed toward independent media outlets and CSOs that focus on fact-based reporting and uphold democratic values, rather than those that produce superficial or artificial outputs. A commitment to transparency and accountability in funding would be critical to avoid inadvertently legitimizing harmful narratives or organizations that undermine democracy.

> *One of the crucial steps would be shifting funding from organizations that propagate false balance to those committed to fact-checking and media literacy initiatives.*

Reject false balance and reinforce democratic frameworks: By rejecting manipulative notions of false balance and neutrality, civil society and media can become more effective in defending democracy and truth. Media outlets must adopt clear ethical standards that prioritize accuracy and integrity over perceived neutrality. This can be achieved by setting editorial guidelines that explicitly reject false equivalence in reporting.

Since the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some media outlets in Western countries presented Russian state propaganda as legitimate viewpoints, creating a misleading "balance." Instead, such outlets must prioritize verified information and critically examine all sources to avoid enabling manipulation.

Promote media literacy and critical thinking: It is crucial to foster media literacy programs at a wide scale to educate the public on how to discern credible information from misinformation. These programs should be integrated into school curricula, workplace training, and public awareness campaigns, with a focus on recognizing disinformation and understanding its impact on democratic processes. Educational initiatives that specifically address the methods of hybrid warfare and propaganda can equip individuals with the tools they need to critically evaluate news sources and resist malicious influence.

Given the global nature of disinformation campaigns, international collaboration is necessary to combat the spread of harmful narratives. Civil society, media organizations, and governments should create platforms for sharing best practices and coordinating efforts to combat propaganda, such as through international coalitions of fact-checkers, independent journalists, and digital security experts. This could also include supporting the creation of cross-border initiatives that enable real-time sharing of information about malign influence operations and media manipulation.

Concrete Steps, Measures, and Actions

1. Strengthening the Role of Media and Civil Society in Countering Disinformation

- Reject false balance and neutrality by reaffirming objectivity as a commitment to truth, professional ethics, and fact-based reporting.
- Develop and promote ethical journalism standards that actively counter disinformation while upholding accuracy and fairness.

- Expose and discredit malign narratives through investigative journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and strategic counter-disinformation campaigns.
- Encourage collaboration between media and civil society to develop training programs that enhance skills in identifying and debunking false narratives.
- Utilize new technologies such as AI and machine learning to identify and combat emerging forms of disinformation and hybrid threats.
- Support media literacy programs that equip citizens with tools to critically engage with digital content and identify manipulated narratives.

2. Reforming Donor Engagement and Support for Civil Society and Media

- Prioritize funding for organizations with a proven track record and a genuine commitment to combating disinformation, hybrid threats, and malign foreign influence.
- Ensure inclusivity in funding decisions by recognizing organizations that actively address historical oppression and conflicts rather than those that reinforce false neutrality.
- Establish accountability mechanisms for donor-funded projects to prevent artificial outputs and ensure real impact in countering disinformation.
- Develop funding criteria that recognize authenticity, impact, and ethical standards in civil society and media initiatives.
- Promote long-term sustainable funding models for civil society organizations to ensure that counter-disinformation efforts are not short-lived but contribute to lasting democratic resilience.
- Support cross-sector partnerships that involve governments, international bodies, and private sectors in funding and implementing counter-disinformation initiatives.

3. Enhancing Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building

- Support civil society and media experts in developing methodologies, toolkits, and training programs to counter hybrid threats.
- Facilitate cross-border knowledge exchange among organizations experienced in countering malign influences.
- Encourage the creation of specialized research hubs and think tanks dedicated to studying and combating hybrid threats.
- Promote partnerships between academia, civil society, and media to develop data-driven approaches to counter disinformation.
- Develop and integrate regional and global networks of experts and practitioners dedicated to sharing best practices and resources for combating disinformation.
- Support the creation of digital platforms for real-time sharing of research, best practices, and case studies on countering hybrid threats.

IV. Resolve isolation, disaffection, and hopelessness

Context

The far-right, including neo-fascist and ultranationalist entities, thrive on the growing disaffection, loneliness, and xenophobia that have been exacerbated in recent decades by factors such as the physical isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fragmentation of the media landscape. As traditional information channels become more fragmented and vulnerable to manipulation, social media platforms have emerged as breeding grounds for extremist ideologies, where far-right actors exploit societal divisions to further their agendas.

These movements prey on individuals who feel abandoned by mainstream political systems, offering them a sense of community and belonging in an increasingly polarized world. The rapid spread of disinformation, often targeting vulnerable groups, has contributed to deepening divides within societies, leading many to seek refuge in the false promises of nationalism and authoritarian ideologies. These ideologies, however, not only provide simplistic and dangerous solutions to complex issues but also strip individuals of their democratic and human rights by undermining the very principles that ensure personal freedoms and inclusive societies.

Authoritarian narratives often exploit and manipulate public opinion by simplifying complex economic issues, spreading falsehoods about welfare, and offering deceptive solutions

that appeal to frustration, while undermining the true causes of economic challenges.

In this environment, individuals who once had opportunities for social, economic, and cultural integration find themselves isolated, vulnerable, and susceptible to manipulation. The promise of far-right movements to "restore order" or "take back control" can be alluring to those feeling disenfranchised, but it often leads to a cycle of further alienation, exclusion, and, ultimately, violence. For these citizens, reclaiming a sense of dignity and belonging is vital – but it must not come at the cost of democratic integrity or human rights.

Recommendations

Human Rights leaders, CSOs, and the international donor community should work collaboratively to provide ways for people to gather, communicate, discuss common challenges, and build a sense of common ground, common humanity, and a basis of social trust. When such gatherings produce recommendations, local and international democratic institutions must respond quickly, substantively, and transparently to the information and demands.

Local and international democratic institutions should engage critical media to publicize the impacts of engagement. They should engage with representatives from civil society and media to speak and present recommendations in official fora, at international conferences, as well as summits of EU, European Parliament, NATO, OSCE, etc.

International donors need to decrease bureaucratic barriers for CSOs and critical media, and increase value based criteria.

Democratic countries and their institutions need to be strengthened through introduction of more independence and power for bodies such as the Ombudsman, anti-corruption and anti-discrimination bodies.

CSOs should work together and with international institutions, donors, and critical media to amplify every success, and every official response to their work, making it clear that democratic engagement matters and gets results.

CSOs should gather regionally to exchange best practices and offer training with an emphasis on how activities and meetings can be replicated and built to scale. International donors and institutions should encourage and support these gatherings financially and with diplomatic support.

International donors and institutions should support CSOs that have demonstrated the ability to operate cross-culturally to help build the capacity of partner organizations to do the same.

International institutions, donors, CSOs, and critical media should work together to educate and address the causes of inflation and economic suffering, countering rising authoritarian leaders who present a simplified view of these issues and promise easy fixes.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Facilitate dialogue and building social trust

- Establish and support safe spaces for dialogue, such as town hall meetings, community gatherings, and online forums, where citizens, CSOs, and democratic institutions can come together to discuss common challenges and shared goals.
- Create and promote digital platforms that enable continuous communication between citizens, CSOs, and institutions, fostering regular updates and transparency regarding responses and actions taken on the gathered feedback.
- Strengthen collaborations between CSOs across regions and beyond to enable exchange of ideas and strategies, building mutual understanding and trust on a larger scale.

2. Engage democratic institutions and critical media

- Create mechanisms for timely and substantive responses from national and international institutions to recommendations arising from civic actions, ensuring transparency in the process.
- Work with independent media to document, report, and amplify the positive impacts of democratic engagement, making sure that the public is aware of the progress achieved through collaboration.
- Enable civil society and media representatives to present recommendations in official international forums, conferences, summits, and meetings (EU, European Parliament, NATO, etc.), ensuring that their voices are heard at the highest levels.

3. Reduce bureaucratic barriers and enhancing donor support

- Work with international donors to simplify the application process for CSOs, removing bureaucratic barriers that limit access to vital funding.

- Shift funding criteria to prioritize organizations that focus on democratic principles, human rights, and civil society capacity building, rather than merely technical or organizational efficiency.
- Provide more flexible funding for grassroots movements and initiatives that respond directly to local needs, allowing for more rapid adaptation to emerging challenges.

4. Strengthen democratic institutions

- Increase the autonomy and authority of democratic bodies such as Ombudsmen, anti-corruption, and anti-discrimination agencies to hold governments accountable and ensure the protection of human rights and freedoms.
- Advocate for laws and policies that protect the independence of democratic institutions, ensuring they can function free of political or financial interference.
- Offer training programs for independent bodies on how to better monitor and address issues like corruption, human rights violations, and discrimination; involve civil society and media in the process of training, to provide practical examples, and information on their experience in these areas.

5. Amplify successes and building awareness

- Actively promote the successes of CSOs and media, and democratic responses to their advocacy work, using media campaigns and public events to showcase the impact of their efforts on strengthening democracy.
- Host regional and international gatherings for CSOs and media to exchange best practices and offer capacity-building training. Focus on replicable and scalable solutions that can be implemented across different regions and contexts.
- Use international platforms (such as UN meetings, EU dialogues, etc.) to celebrate CSO victories and publicly demonstrate that democratic engagement leads to tangible outcomes.

6. Promote cross-cultural cooperation and capacity building

- International donors and institutions should fund programs that enable CSOs to operate cross-culturally and in ethnically mixed society, building relationships with partner organizations from different communities, regions and cultures.
- Facilitate partnerships between local and international CSOs, allowing them to share expertise, resources, and strategies for addressing common challenges.

7. Address and educate on economic issues to counter authoritarian narratives

- Launch educational campaigns that address the root causes of inflation, poverty, and economic suffering, providing citizens with a clearer understanding of these complex issues.
- Counter authoritarian narratives that offer quick-fix solutions to economic challenges by promoting evidence-based policies and realistic, long-term solutions to societal issues.
- Work with economists, social scientists, and human rights experts to provide policy recommendations that effectively address the economic realities that citizens face, while promoting democratic principles and human rights.

V. Support independent and critical media

Context

Freedom of the press is both a prerequisite and a barometer of respect for human rights, as well as a key pillar of the liberal democratic order. Without informed decision-making at all levels of society and government, democracy cannot function. Unfortunately, ensuring informed decision-making has become one of the greatest challenges democracies face today.

The rise of authoritarianism and the far-right has been aided by a fractured and increasingly unmoderated media and social media space – one that feeds off of and amplifies extreme views while constraining the boundaries of public discourse. This ecosystem enables authoritarian leaders and far-right movements to manipulate public perception, restrict critical voices, and consolidate control over what people believe to be possible and what they know, including about each other.

A key tool in this strategy is the systematic targeting of independent media. Authoritarian regimes and far-right movements use legal and financial pressure, physical threats against journalists, and the spread of propaganda to delegitimize credible news sources. Longstanding smear campaigns – often coordinated online and amplified through state-backed media or allied influencers – are particularly effective at silencing dissent and eroding public trust in journalism.

These campaigns employ tactics such as:

- Disinformation and character assassination through spreading false narratives, conspiracy theories, or doctored evidence to discredit journalists and media outlets.
- Online harassment and cyberbullying through deployment of coordinated online attacks, including doxxing and threats of violence, to intimidate reporters and activists.
- Deepfake technology and manipulated content by using AI-generated content to fabricate statements or actions attributed to journalists, further undermining their credibility.

State-backed propaganda and legal persecution where governments and far-right actors exploit state media and repressive legal frameworks (e.g., lawsuits, defamation charges, tax audits) to cripple independent outlets financially and legally.

Recommendations

To safeguard press freedom and counter authoritarian attacks on independent media, international institutions, donors, CSOs, and democratic institutions must adopt a comprehensive approach that includes financial, legal, and technological support for journalists and media outlets.

International donors and democratic governments must establish long-term funding mechanisms that prevent independent media from being financially strangled by authoritarian regimes. Funding should prioritize outlets and journalists who are targets of smear campaigns, financial suppression, and legal persecution, ensuring they have the resources to continue their work.

Furthermore, democratic governments and institutions, including independent bodies, such as anti-discrimination commissions, parliamentary committees, and others, should introduce and enforce laws that protect journalists from strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and other forms of legal harassment. International institutions should offer legal defense funds and advocacy support for journalists facing politically motivated lawsuits or persecution.

Civil society, media watchdogs, and international organizations must develop rapid-response strategies to debunk smear campaigns and prevent the erosion of public trust in independent journalism. Fact-checking networks, investigative journalism hubs, and standalone media and civic entities should receive support to expose and counteract coordinated disinformation targeting media professionals.

Digital and physical security for journalists must be enhanced through providing training, financial resources, and legal protection to help journalists defend against online harassment, doxxing, cyberattacks, and surveillance. Governments and media organizations must take physical threats against journalists seriously and ensure safe working environments, particularly for those reporting on authoritarian regimes and corruption.

Democratic governments and international organizations must impose sanctions and restrictions on officials and entities responsible for persecuting journalists. This includes demanding investigations and prosecutions in cases of violence, intimidation, and assassinations. Impunity for attacks on journalists must end.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Create emergency funds, safe relocation mechanisms

- Set up emergency financial assistance programs for journalists targeted by authoritarian regimes.
- Develop partnerships with democratic governments to provide safe visas and asylum pathways for at-risk media professionals.

2. Support rapid-response networks and cybersecurity

- Establish real-time monitoring units to detect and debunk smear campaigns against journalists and independent outlets.
- Encourage media coalitions to work together in verifying and countering false narratives.
- Provide training in cybersecurity, and anti-surveillance tactics to protect media against cyber threats.
- Develop and distribute secure communication tools for journalists operating in high-risk environments.

3. Expose and sanction perpetrators of media repression

- Democratic governments, parliaments, and international actors must take decisive action to prevent and counter attempts to silence media.
- Encourage democratic governments to pass and enforce anti-SLAPP legislation to protect journalists from baseless, punitive lawsuits.
- Compile public reports and launch advocacy campaigns to expose governments and individuals responsible for persecuting journalists.
- Push for targeted sanctions and diplomatic measures against regimes that systematically suppress independent media.

4. Integrate media literacy and public awareness campaigns

- Launch educational initiatives to help the public recognize and resist smear campaigns and propaganda.
- Engage with social media platforms to hold them accountable for hosting and amplifying disinformation that targets journalists.

VI. Protect Media in Fragile Regions and Journalists in Exile

Context

In fragile regions, exile, or occupied territories, independent journalists face heightened risks as authoritarian governments extend their influence within national borders and across borders to silence opposition voices. Protecting these journalists is not only a matter of human rights but also essential for safeguarding press freedom and strengthening democratic resilience.

Journalists operating in fragile regions – or forced into exile – serve as crucial sources of information on states captured by authoritarian regimes. They document repression, uncover corruption, and expose human rights violations that would otherwise remain hidden. Their work also extends beyond reporting: they contribute to media literacy, support journalism education, and provide insights to local and international institutions. By engaging with educators, universities, and media outlets, exiled journalists help train the next generation and share critical strategies for reporting under autocratic rule, coping with threats, and sustaining independent journalism.

However, journalists in fragile regions and exile face severe threats to their safety, well-being, and financial security. Many endure constant surveillance, intimidation, or even physical attacks – both directly and through pressure on their families and supporters. Infrastructural challenges such as lack of funding, limited access to legal protection,

and dwindling institutional support further isolate these journalists. Even in countries with laws guaranteeing press freedom, judicial systems are often co-opted by authoritarian regimes, leaving independent journalists with little recourse.

Recommendations

International institutions and donors should strengthen support networks and establish umbrella organizations to connect and support journalists working in fragile regions or in exile. There must be efficient mechanisms to ensure legal, financial, and social protection, safeguard at-risk journalists, including financial assistance, legal aid, healthcare, and other social welfare benefits.

The European Union and international donors should expand protection grants, and extend emergency protection grants to journalists and newsrooms in fragile regions and those forced to flee.

Donors and institutions should support and engage with CSOs that have a proven track record of defending press freedom to enhance their ability to support journalists in fragile environments. International institutions should help establish partnerships between journalists in fragile regions, exiled reporters, and media organizations worldwide. This includes developing media and safe houses across Europe, as well as creating platforms or networks to connect journalists in exile with media outlets in Western Europe.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Provide Emergency Support for At-Risk Journalists

- Establish emergency relocation and protection programs for journalists facing threats, imprisonment, or violence.
- Ensure financial aid and infrastructure support for journalists forced into exile.

2. Enable Cross-Border Investigative Journalism

- Fund and facilitate international media collaborations so exiled journalists can continue reporting on their home countries without fear of retaliation.
- Develop dedicated media hubs where displaced journalists can access resources, mentorship, and financial assistance.

3. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Protections

- Fully implement and enforce the European Media Freedom Act to safeguard independent journalism.
- Support CSOs and journalists in fragile regions in developing legal strategies to challenge repression.

4. Build Sustainable Networks for Journalists in Exile

- Create platforms where exiled journalists can collaborate with educators, CSOs, and fellow journalists to share experiences, insights, and best practices.
- Establish funding programs specifically for journalists in exile and those working in fragile regions.

VII. Defeating disinformation and countering nationalist propaganda

Context

Disinformation and nationalist propaganda are among the most powerful tools used to manipulate public opinion, destabilize societies, and undermine democratic institutions. Authoritarian regimes, extremist movements, and radical political actors systematically spread falsehoods to erode trust in independent media, distort historical narratives, and create deeply polarized societies.

The rapid spread of disinformation is fueled by social media platforms that amplify emotionally charged content—often driven by hate, fear, and paranoia—over verified facts. This dynamic allows false narratives to travel faster than truth, making it increasingly difficult for critical media and CSOs to counteract misinformation effectively. Disinformation and hateful narratives are aided not only by algorithms designed to maximize engagement but also by well-organized networks that exploit public grievances and uncertainties.

Disinformation fosters extreme polarization, which threatens democratic discourse and decision-making. Instead of engaging in open debate, societies become fragmented into in-groups and out-groups, making constructive dialogue nearly impossible. To counter these threats, a systematic approach is required—one that tracks, recognizes, understands, exposes, explains, and counters false narratives.

Unburdened by the constraints of truth, radical movements produce content rapidly, offering simplistic or exaggerated explanations for complex issues. This approach resonates deeply with audiences seeking quick solutions, further embedding nationalist and authoritarian narratives. The result is a deeply polarized society where democratic discourse is eroded, in-groups and out-groups are formed, and decision-making becomes paralyzed by distrust.

To address this growing challenge, a comprehensive, systematic approach is required—one that tracks, recognizes, understands, exposes, explains, and counters false narratives. Tackling disinformation effectively requires a concerted effort from critical media, CSOs, policymakers, and international donors to build resilience, strengthen independent journalism, promote media literacy, and hold social media platforms accountable.

Recommendations

To effectively combat disinformation and nationalist propaganda, governments, civil society organizations, media, and international donors must work together to strengthen independent journalism, enhance public resilience, and reform the digital media landscape.

A crucial step is ensuring the financial sustainability of independent and critical media by supporting investigative journalism and fact-checking initiatives. Independent newsrooms should be encouraged—and provided with resources—to develop their own verification systems, allowing them to systematically debunk propaganda and misinformation. Efforts must also be made to foster

collaboration among media outlets, civil society organizations, and researchers to produce reliable information at the same speed and reach as disinformation campaigns.

Equipping the public with media literacy skills is essential in building resilience against propaganda. Educational programs should be expanded to help individuals recognize manipulation tactics, differentiate between credible journalism and propaganda, and critically engage with online content. In parallel, citizen reporting mechanisms should be developed, allowing individuals to flag misleading or harmful content in real time.

Democratic governments and international institutions must take stronger action to regulate social media platforms, ensuring that disinformation is not amplified by profit-driven algorithms. The focus should be on creating transparent policies that reduce the spread of extremist content while protecting free speech. Additionally, AI-based tools should be further developed to track and counter false narratives, allowing for a more effective response to propaganda and hate speech.

At the same time, mainstream and alternative media should be encouraged to engage in depolarization efforts by promoting constructive dialogue and offering a counter-narrative to divisive, extremist rhetoric. International partnerships should be fostered to share best practices, strengthen global resistance to disinformation, and support those working to expose nationalist propaganda and authoritarian agendas.

Countering disinformation and nationalist propaganda requires a long-term, multi-layered strategy that involves governments, media organizations, civil society, and international donors. The challenge is not only to debunk falsehoods but also to foster critical thinking, protect independent journalism, and ensure that the digital information space remains grounded in truth. Through collaborative action, public engagement, and institutional reform, democratic societies can build resilience against the corrosive effects of disinformation and protect the integrity of public discourse.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Strengthen independent journalism

- Establish emergency funding programs to support independent media struggling under political or financial pressure.
- Provide financial and technical support for newsrooms to develop fact-checking and investigative journalism units.
- Encourage collaborative journalism networks enabling independent media outlets to share verified information and resources.

2. Increase media literacy and public awareness

- Launch national and regional media literacy campaigns in schools, universities, and workplaces to help citizens recognize and resist disinformation.
- Partner with educational institutions and CSOs to integrate fact-checking training into schools' curricula.
- Develop community-driven reporting systems, enabling citizens to flag disinformation and extremist content for verification.

3. Engage mainstream and independent media

- Encourage mainstream media to collaborate with independent fact-checkers and CSOs to reinforce public trust in verified journalism.

- Support the development of alternative, well-regulated digital communication platforms that compete with disinformation-heavy social media networks.

4. Implement effective monitoring and reporting systems

- Establish real-time monitoring systems modeled after Estonia's 24-hour media monitoring framework to track disinformation trends.
- Create independent oversight bodies that analyze disinformation threats and make recommendations to policymakers.
- Provide public reporting mechanisms, such as online portals and hotlines, for citizens to report propaganda and hate speech.

5. Regulate and reform digital platforms

- Encourage social media companies to enhance transparency by disclosing algorithmic decision-making processes and adopting policies that prevent the amplification of extremist content.
- Develop policies that ensure accountability for platforms that fail to curb disinformation.
- Support European regulatory efforts to combat the spread of hate speech and misinformation.

6. Utilize AI and tech solutions to combat disinformation

- Invest in AI-based tools for real-time fact-checking and tracking disinformation campaigns.
- Support regional research hubs focused on understanding and countering digital propaganda and influence operations.
- Develop automated content verification systems to flag misleading information before it spreads.

7. Depolarize public discourse

- Promote cross-community dialogue initiatives that bring together individuals from different ethnic, political and ideological backgrounds.
- Develop campaigns showcasing best practices in depolarization efforts from successful case studies worldwide.

- Support CSOs working to foster reconciliation and inclusive discourse in deeply divided societies.

8. Ensure a timely institutional response

- Strengthen early-warning mechanisms to detect emerging disinformation threats and enable swift countermeasures.
- Improve coordination between local and international institutions to effectively counter propaganda campaigns in fragile regions.
- Develop rapid-response teams within CSOs and media organizations to produce counter-narratives quickly and effectively.

VIII. Empower and Strengthen Civil Society

Context

A strong and independent civil society is essential in the fight against authoritarianism and disinformation. In societies where transparency is lacking and democratic institutions are weakened, conspiracy theories and propaganda flourish, filling the void left by unreliable or censored information. Civil society organizations serve as a counterforce by providing citizens with access to accurate information, promoting critical thinking, and fostering open debate.

Beyond their role in informing the public, CSOs act as watchdogs, holding governments and centers of power accountable. They create spaces for marginalized voices, advocate for democratic values, and build public resilience against manipulation. By educating people on the dangers of disinformation, these organizations empower individuals with the skills needed to recognize and reject false narratives.

However, not all CSOs contribute equally to democratic resilience. While some organizations are co-opted by political or special interests, those that are genuinely committed to democratic principles are instrumental in fostering real, lasting democratic resilience. These organizations do not merely react to crises; they build long-term capacity for civic engagement, institutional integrity, and the protection of fundamental rights. Their work is

essential for ensuring that democratic societies remain strong even in the face of authoritarian pressures.

To sustain these efforts, civil society must be financially supported, institutionally strengthened, and equipped with modern tools to navigate the rapidly evolving digital information landscape. International partnerships, media literacy initiatives, and fact-checking collaborations further enhance their ability to push back against authoritarian control and protect democratic discourse. A vibrant and active civil society is a fundamental pillar of democracy, ensuring that truth, diverse perspectives, and public engagement remain central to governance.

Recommendations

Civil society must move beyond narrow interest-based divisions, false balance, and elitist or overly academic approaches that alienate broader communities. To be truly effective, CSOs should embrace diversity as a fundamental principle—not just in rhetoric but in action—ensuring the inclusion of different social, ethnic, and political backgrounds. Genuine commitment to democratic values requires engagement with grassroots movements, marginalized communities, and independent activists, fostering broad-based alliances that reflect society's real needs. Only by breaking silos and rejecting exclusivity can CSOs fulfill their mission of defending democracy and countering disinformation in a meaningful and lasting way.

At the same time, civil society organizations, citizen initiatives, and think tanks must uphold accountability and recommit to their core democratic values. Admitting

shortcomings is not a weakness—it is a strength that reinforces credibility and trust. CSOs should cultivate a culture of self-reflection, acknowledge when they fall short of their mission, and take concrete steps to realign with their core values. This requires open dialogue, transparent decision-making, and a willingness to correct course when necessary. A genuine recommitment to the ultimate goal—defending democracy and human rights—demands integrity, adaptability, and the courage to put public interest above organizational pride or political convenience. Honest self-assessment strengthens civil society's resilience against growing threats to democratic freedoms.

To sustain these efforts, governments, international institutions, and donors need to prioritize sustainable funding mechanisms, capacity-building programs, and strategic partnerships with civil society—while ensuring that civic action remains independent and free from external influence. Financial independence is key. Many CSOs operate in restrictive environments where funding is scarce or politically controlled. Diverse, long-term funding sources—including multi-year grants, institutional support, and innovative revenue models—can shield them from financial dependency and external pressure.

Capacity-building efforts should focus on equipping CSOs with media literacy, digital security, and fact-checking expertise, enabling them to counter disinformation and authoritarian narratives effectively. Cross-sector collaboration with independent media, academia, and technology experts further strengthens their ability to combat propaganda and promote informed public discourse.

A more secure and resilient digital environment is also critical. Civil society actors frequently face hacking, online harassment, and state-sponsored cyberattacks. Investing in cybersecurity training, encrypted communication tools, and digital protection mechanisms ensures that activists and organizations can operate safely.

Non-EU CSOs can offer critical insights and practical expertise, especially given their experience operating in hostile political environments and low-income or resource-constrained settings. Their ability to work under pressure and navigate restrictive environments makes them invaluable partners in global efforts to strengthen civil society. By incorporating their knowledge into international networks, we can enhance the collective capacity of civil society actors to address the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes and disinformation. These organizations can also play a key role in shaping more effective strategies for engaging marginalized communities and empowering grassroots movements, helping to ensure that the voices of those most affected by antidemocratic practices are heard and acted upon.

International cooperation plays a crucial role in amplifying civil society's impact. Accessible forums must be created where both EU and non-EU CSOs, civic initiatives, and networks can present their ideas, actions, and policy proposals. By building cross-border alliances, civil society can share best practices, secure international backing, and push back against efforts to silence them.

Democracy is not just a political ideal—it is a pillar of security and stability. When democracy is weakened, so is global security. International donors need to provide both

emergency and long-term financial support to civil society and media committed to democratic values. Sustainable democratic engagement requires a nuanced understanding of local, national, and regional contexts, ensuring that resources are allocated where they can have the most impact.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Ensure stable funding and protection of civil society

- Establish long-term grant programs and institutional funding mechanisms to provide sustainable financial support for CSOs, including financial support for urgent actions.
- Develop hybrid funding models, including revenue-generating initiatives and public-private partnerships, to enhance financial independence and resilience.
- Strengthen legal frameworks to protect civil society actors from restrictive laws, government intimidation, and politically motivated prosecutions.
- Create rapid response mechanisms to provide emergency legal, financial, and security support to CSOs and activists facing threats.
- Foster regional and international networks for joint advocacy, knowledge-sharing, and coordinated responses to threats from far-right movements and authoritarian regimes.

2. Strengthen fact-checking initiatives within civil society

- Establish independent verification hubs that connect fact-checkers, journalists, and academic institutions to ensure cross-sector collaboration in countering disinformation.
- Expand media literacy programs, integrating them into school curriculums and community education initiatives to empower young people and vulnerable groups against manipulation.

- Provide CSOs, activists, and journalists with state-of-the-art digital security tools and training to protect against cyberattacks, surveillance, and online harassment.
- Support investigative journalism initiatives within independent media and CSOs to produce high-quality, fact-based content that challenges disinformation narratives.
- Utilize AI-driven tools for disinformation tracking, allowing CSOs to detect, analyze, and respond to emerging threats with greater speed and precision.

3. Support regional and international collaboration between CSOs

- Establish accessible regional hubs where CSOs can exchange strategies, develop joint projects, and strengthen cross-border collaboration.
- Facilitate grassroots initiatives that promote democratic engagement, public debates, and active citizenship in communities vulnerable to disinformation and authoritarian influence.
- Develop digital platforms that connect EU and non-EU CSOs, civic initiatives, and networks, enabling them to share policy recommendations and coordinate advocacy efforts.

4. Advocate for stronger global commitments to protect civic space

- Ensure that international institutions, including the EU, integrate civil society empowerment as a central pillar of democracy support and foreign policy strategies.
- Establish diplomatic and economic incentives for governments that actively support civil society, while imposing consequences on those that suppress it.
- Strengthen legal and institutional mechanisms to counter transnational repression, ensuring that authoritarian regimes cannot target activists and journalists beyond their borders.
- Push for the adoption of international agreements that guarantee the protection of civic space, press freedom, and the rights of civil society actors worldwide.

IX. Accelerate and strengthen European Union integration

Context

The momentum for European Union integration has stagnated in several candidate countries, leading to a significant erosion of public trust in the EU accession process. This is particularly noticeable in nations where the desire to join the EU has historically been strong. The delay and perceived lack of progress in EU integration have created a growing sense of disillusionment among citizens, weakening the EU's influence and diminishing the aspirations of many who once viewed EU membership as the pathway to political stability, economic development, and democratic progress.

This setback is compounded by the rise of authoritarian leaders who publicly claim to support EU membership while simultaneously engaging in corruption and undemocratic practices. These leaders benefit from the weak implementation of EU mechanisms designed to protect its core values, allowing them to unabatedly perpetuate their kleptocratic and authoritarian regimes and further entrench their power.

In addition to this, these leaders exploit public frustrations and insecurities by presenting a narrative that frames the EU as an uncommitted partner, casting doubts on its willingness to admit new members. By manipulating these perceptions, they foster nationalistic and anti-EU sentiment, positioning themselves as defenders of sovereignty against

an allegedly indifferent or even hostile EU. This rhetoric not only damages the EU's credibility but also contributes to destabilizing the political landscape, undermining efforts to promote lasting peace, inter-ethnic harmony, and democratic consolidation.

The EU's credibility is further challenged by the slow pace of integration and the perception that EU enlargement is a distant, unclear, or unevenly applied process contributes to frustration among civil society and the general public.

However, the EU remains a priority for the majority of citizens in aspirant countries. These countries must not only meet the technical and political benchmarks set by the EU, but also foster an environment where democratic norms, transparency, and the rule of law are deeply embedded at every level of society.

In this context, it is essential for EU institutions, national governments, and civil society organizations to collaborate more effectively to accelerate the EU integration process, not only of the Western Balkans countries, but also Ukraine, Moldova, as declared in June, 2024.

This collaboration must prioritize transparency, inclusivity, and democratic principles to ensure that the integration process is genuinely beneficial for the public and reflects the values the EU stands for. It is vital to create a more open and transparent dialogue between aspiring member states and the EU, ensuring that the voices of citizens and civil society groups are heard and that the benefits of EU membership are clearly communicated and felt at the grassroots level.

Recommendations

To rebuild trust and reinvigorate the European integration process, it is crucial to establish clear, accessible, and tangible milestones for candidate countries. These milestones should not only focus on technical reforms but also emphasize the societal benefits of EU membership, especially in areas such as democracy, human rights, and anti-corruption efforts. Moreover, the EU should play a more active role in supporting civil society in these countries, enhancing their capacity to hold governments accountable and ensuring the integration process is inclusive, transparent, and genuinely transformative.

The EU must redouble its efforts to admit countries where the population, if not their leaders, clearly aspires to membership. It should not allow bilateral disputes to derail integration processes.

Furthermore, the EU should engage directly with the wider publics of aspirant states, offering continuous education on the benefits of EU membership, the status of integration processes, and the standards related to human rights and democracy. A strong stance on democracy and minority rights must be taken, demonstrating zero tolerance for racism and discrimination within member and candidate states. This requires working with local CSOs and media to ensure the public is informed about actions taken against those violating democratic principles.

Historically, the EU has used membership conditionality to push for government reforms ahead of membership. This approach must continue, with more focus on tangible outcomes. In that context, the EU should continue to

publicize the societal and economic benefits of EU membership, particularly in light of propaganda efforts by authoritarian leaders that have caused confusion and skepticism among citizens in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Where there is broad interest in EU membership, particularly in the Western Balkans, the EU must demonstrate its commitment to integration by accelerating efforts and providing a roadmap that includes not just governments but also the general population in the process.

It is crucial that the EU must take decisive action to confront the rise of the far-right within its ranks, ensuring that democratic values remain central to its mission. This should include improvement of the EU engagement with the middle class and economically disadvantaged populations, ensuring these groups feel included and empowered by the integration process.

The EU must insist on promoting the core values of democracy and human rights, emphasizing respect for minority rights, non-discrimination, and the involvement of minorities in decision-making processes. Civil society should guarantee the inclusion of ethnic minorities in key decision-making and leadership roles, ensuring that representation is authentic and meaningful. Donors should prioritize funding for genuinely multi-ethnic CSOs that ensure minority groups are represented in significant roles. CSOs should collaborate with critical media to collect and disseminate information on best practices for combating hate speech and propaganda, strengthening the fight against divisive narratives.

By aligning EU integration with a focus on democracy, human rights, and transparency, and by engaging with local citizens, civil society, and media, these steps can help ensure a more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable integration process for all aspirant countries.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Engage with wider publics and strengthen communication

- The EU should establish regular communication channels to update citizens in aspirant countries on the integration process, explaining how reforms lead to societal benefits such as improved human rights, enhanced democracy, and stronger anti-corruption measures.
- Public campaigns should focus on the long-term benefits of EU membership, countering the anti-EU propaganda spread by authoritarian leaders.
- Engage directly with CSOs and local community groups to disseminate EU values, ensuring that they are represented in local and national discussions on integration.

2. Support civil society and media

- The EU should work closely with local CSOs to provide training and capacity-building in areas such as monitoring government accountability, legal reforms, and media literacy.
- Strengthen partnerships between CSOs and critical media outlets to promote fact-based reporting and counter propaganda in candidate countries.
- Ensure that media outlets have the tools and resources they need to play an active role in the democratic process and to challenge disinformation effectively.

3. Support the establishment of direct citizen involvement

- Organize a series of local, national, and regional events that directly involve citizens (e.g., Citizens Assemblies), where ordinary people are invited to engage in dialogue, learn about the EU, and express their aspirations for EU membership. These forums should be accessible to all, with a particular focus on including marginalized and ethnic minority groups.

4. Confront authoritarian leaders

- The EU should no longer tolerate leaders who sabotage the integration process through corruption, human rights violations, or inter-ethnic tensions. Publicly confront such actions through diplomatic channels and the media.
- Implement stronger sanctions or diplomatic measures against governments whose leaders obstruct progress toward EU integration or undermine democratic principles.

5. Address the rise of the far right

- Support initiatives that aim to counter the rise of the far-right, both within EU member states and candidate countries. This includes promoting inclusive political discourse, protecting minority rights, and supporting political movements that advocate for democracy and human rights.

6. Focus on youth and educational engagement

- Work with local educational institutions, youth organizations, and NGOs to provide education on democratic values, EU integration, and the importance of human rights.
- Engage young people in dialogue about the benefits of EU membership, empowering them to become future leaders who support democratic reforms.

7. Ensure transparency and access to information:

- Promote transparency in EU accession negotiations by providing the public and media with timely and accurate information about the process.
- Facilitate public access to key government meetings and discussions on EU-related matters, ensuring that the broader public can engage with and understand the negotiation process.

8. Promote multi-ethnic inclusion in civil society:

- Donors should prioritize funding for CSOs that are genuinely multi-ethnic and include members of minority groups in decision-making roles, ensuring diverse representation within the organizations working toward EU integration.

9. Provide clear roadmap for integration:

- The EU should develop a clear and comprehensive roadmap for each aspiring country that includes concrete milestones, transparent timelines, and specific objectives aimed at integrating both governments and citizens into the EU framework.

X. Countering aggression and imperialism: Europe faces a historic decision

Context

The current geopolitical climate is defined by the aggressive actions of authoritarian regimes, most notably Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the hybrid warfare that the Kremlin is waging against the West. Wars of aggression and imperialist expansion pose an existential threat not only to the affected nations but also to the broader principles of global stability, security, and peace. These conflicts erode the foundational values of human rights, democracy, and sovereignty that Europe has long championed. The international community is faced with the ugly reality that inaction or half-measures and appeasement in response to such aggression will have dire consequences for the future of the European continent, as well as for the world at large.

Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine is a direct challenge to the established post-WWII international order that emphasizes the peaceful resolution of conflicts, the inviolability of borders, and the sovereignty of nations. Russia’s imperial ambitions go beyond Ukraine and threaten to destabilize Europe’s security architecture. These actions have already resulted in immense loss of life, economic devastation, and the displacement of millions of people. Additionally, this conflict has exposed the vulnerabilities of a global order that was once thought to be

anchored in the principles of diplomacy, cooperation, and mutual respect.

Aggression, imperialism, and violations of international law are not confined to the region of Eastern Europe. If left unchecked, they risk emboldening other authoritarian regimes worldwide, who may view the world's failure to act decisively as an invitation to pursue their own imperial ambitions. The ripple effects of such aggression could have catastrophic consequences.

The unfolding crisis also presents an opportunity for Europe to assert its role as a defender of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Europe's response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine will set an example of how future imperialist ambitions are confronted. The stakes are higher than ever: Europe's ability to stand firm against this invasion will directly impact its own security and the future of democratic societies worldwide.

This is a moment in history when Europe must make a choice – not only about its immediate response to the war of aggression, but about the values it chooses to uphold. Will it stand with Ukraine, affirming its commitment to peace, justice, and sovereignty? Or will it falter, potentially enabling further aggression and undermining the very principles that have safeguarded European stability for decades? The answer to this question will determine the trajectory of Europe's role on the world stage and the fate of the international order.

The fight for Ukraine's freedom is, therefore, not just a fight for one nation's sovereignty. It is a fight for the survival of the principles that have defined Europe for generations:

democracy, peace, human rights, and the right of nations to determine their own futures. The outcome of this conflict will not only shape Europe's future but will send a powerful message to the world about the values that will guide global governance in the 21st century and beyond.

In the face of aggression, Europe must act decisively, resolutely, and with unwavering support for Ukraine, as well as the broader international community. The time for action is now – Europe's future depends on the choices it makes today.

Recommendations

Europe must commit to unwavering support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This support should extend beyond diplomatic pressure, sanctions against the aggressor state and its allies, but with substantial military aid and economic assistance for as long as it takes. EU and NATO member states and international allies must continue to provide robust military support to Ukraine, ensuring that it has the resources and capacity to defend itself effectively. This should include advanced weaponry, intelligence sharing, and military training. In parallel, the EU should offer economic and humanitarian support, helping Ukraine rebuild its economy, provide for displaced persons, and bolster the resilience of its civil society.

Europe and the democratic world must support Ukraine's right to choose its alliances free from external coercion. The EU should also accelerate Ukraine's integration into European institutions, ensuring that it can fully benefit from

the security and economic opportunities of membership as soon as possible.

Aggressors must face tangible consequences for their actions. The EU should intensify sanctions against those responsible for aggression and war crimes, including leaders, military commanders, and financial backers of imperialist activities. The international community must support and enhance accountability mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court, to ensure that war crimes are prosecuted, and perpetrators are held accountable in a court of law.

In parallel, the EU should work to strengthen global norms and institutions that support the rule of law and the prevention of war crimes, ensuring that aggressor nations face systemic isolation until they comply with international peace agreements.

Civil society organizations, human rights groups, and grassroots movements must be at the forefront of efforts to raise awareness, mobilize resistance, and create channels for advocacy. The EU should actively support these actors, both within Ukraine and in other affected regions, ensuring that local communities are equipped with the tools and resources to resist authoritarianism and military aggression. Civil society initiatives across Europe can play a pivotal role in highlighting the human costs of imperialism and aggression, advocating for justice, the safe return of displaced populations, and the rebuilding of social cohesion.

Moreover, civil society organizations in non-EU countries, particularly post-communist states including those in the

Western Balkans, possess significant experience and a deep understanding of how Russia's war propaganda functions. These CSOs need to be supported and recognized as valuable resources in combating disinformation, hybrid warfare, and external influence campaigns. By empowering these actors, the EU can leverage a critical frontline of resistance against Russia's destabilizing efforts.

Europe must take the lead in diplomatic efforts to counter imperialism and promote a rules-based international order. Diplomatic initiatives should include facilitating peace negotiations, offering incentives for adherence to international law (without resorting to appeasement), and building global coalitions dedicated to upholding sovereignty and self-determination. It is essential that such efforts also focus on holding war criminals accountable. Additionally, the EU should advocate for the establishment of new international norms to address and prevent future acts of imperialist aggression, ensuring that global peace remains a shared and collective priority.

By implementing these recommendations, Europe will not only help Ukraine secure its future but also send a clear and resolute message to the world: that democracy, sovereignty, and the rule of law will not be compromised, and that imperialism and aggression will be met with a united and unwavering response. This is a critical moment for Europe to define its values and its future in the global order.

Concrete steps, measures, and actions

1. Provide comprehensive military aid to Ukraine

- Continue the supply of advanced weaponry, including air defense systems, artillery, and armored vehicles.
- Increase intelligence-sharing agreements to enhance Ukraine's defensive capabilities.
- Support comprehensive military training programs for Ukrainian forces to improve operational effectiveness in combat.
- Coordinate with NATO allies to ensure a steady stream of military supplies and resources to bolster Ukraine's defense capacity.

2. Strengthen economic and humanitarian assistance

- Increase financial support for Ukraine's economic recovery, focusing on infrastructure rebuilding, energy security, and key public services.
- Expand humanitarian assistance, focusing on displaced persons, the provision of essential services, and psychological support for those affected by the war.
- Facilitate the safe return and reintegration of displaced populations through coordination with UN agencies and local governments.

3. Accelerate Ukraine's integration into EU institutions

- Fast-track Ukraine's application to EU membership, with clear timelines.
- Strengthen Ukraine's cooperation with EU agencies, focusing on economic, legal, and democratic reforms.
- Provide technical assistance to help Ukraine meet EU standards for governance, anti-corruption, rule of law, and human rights protections.

4. Enforce stronger sanctions and accountability for aggressors

- Expand sanctions targeting key individuals, including political leaders, military commanders, and oligarchs who support or finance the war of aggression.

- Work within the UN and other international frameworks to impose systemic isolation on aggressor nations, limiting their access to international markets and organizations.
- Enhance support for the International Criminal Court and other accountability mechanisms to ensure the prosecution of war crimes and violations of international law.
- Ensure that any peace negotiations or agreements include strict conditions for the prosecution of war criminals and perpetrators of atrocities.

5. Support media and civil society organizations to mobilize and contribute to the struggle for freedom and democracy

- Provide funding and technical support to media and civil society organizations in Ukraine. Help revitalize media in the so-called media deserts, particularly in areas close to the frontlines.
- Engage with CSOs in both EU and non-EU countries (particularly in post-communist states like the Western Balkans) to help counter disinformation, hybrid warfare, and Russian propaganda campaigns, and to promote freedom and democracy.
- Facilitate and support platforms for civil society to raise awareness of the human costs of imperialism and aggression, emphasizing the safe return of displaced persons and the restoration of social cohesion.

6. Lead diplomatic efforts to counter imperialism and uphold international order

- Coordinate with international partners to facilitate peace negotiations, ensuring that they align with international law and the principles of sovereignty and self-determination.
- Establish diplomatic channels for holding aggressor states accountable, including leveraging multilateral platforms like the EU, NATO, and the UN to pressure these states into compliance with international norms.
- Advocate for reforms of international bodies and development of new international norms that prevent future acts of imperial

aggression, ensuring that sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peace remain global priorities.
- Build and lead global coalitions that include both government and non-government actors committed to defending democracy and upholding international law.

7. Mobilize Public Opinion and Support for Ukraine Across Europe

- Launch public awareness campaigns across Europe to highlight the importance of supporting Ukraine's freedom, territorial integrity and sovereignty.
- Engage citizens in the EU and beyond by promoting understanding of the strategic, moral, and geopolitical importance of defending Ukraine against imperialist aggression.
- Support media outlets, think tanks, and civil society groups to provide accurate, fact-based reporting and analysis on the situation, countering disinformation and propaganda.

8. Create Platforms for International Cooperation on Peace and Security

- Initiate and participate in multilateral dialogues and forums focusing on global security, peace-building, and the prevention of imperialist expansionism.
- Work with international partners to develop common strategies for preventing further conflicts, with a focus on early intervention, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

Defending democracy in an era of rising authoritarianism, hybrid threats, and wars of aggression is not just the responsibility of governments but of all democratic forces – civil society, media, academia, and active citizens.

The challenges we face require a coordinated effort to uphold democratic values, counter disinformation, reinforce institutions, and defend human rights. Democracy cannot be taken for granted; it must be actively protected and strengthened through inclusive participation, civic engagement, and international cooperation.

The recommendations outlined in this document serve as a starting point – a foundation for the further development of strategies to counter democratic backsliding and hybrid threats. The founders of the *Defending Democracy Initiative* recognize that these strategies must remain dynamic and adaptable, and evolving in response to emerging threats, shifting geopolitical landscapes, and new opportunities for democratic advancement.

Therefore, these recommendations will be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in safeguarding democracy and human rights worldwide.

This is a call for solidarity, vigilance, and unwavering dedication to truth, justice, and democratic principles.

The time for action is now – before the space for democracy shrinks further and before authoritarian forces gain an even stronger grip. Defending democracy is not just a political imperative – it is a moral duty to future generations.

CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPTS

International Conference

Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism

Skopje, North Macedonia, December 11-12, 2024

Note: The transcripts of the International Conference *"Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism"* (Skopje, North Macedonia, December 11-12, 2024) are edited for flow and clarity.

These transcripts are from **December 12, 2024**.

For **full conference materials, video recordings, and additional resources**, visit:

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Panel 1: Democracy under Siege

A discussion exploring how wars and conflicts undermine democratic institutions and human rights, instill fear and spread disinformation and nationalist propaganda through the media.

Panelists:

Wolfgang Ressmann
President, Media Dialogue/Y4M, Germany

Christiane Eilders
University professor, Heinrich Heine University Dusseldorf, Germany

Sašo Ordanoski
Journalist, North Macedonia

Heather Roberson Gaston
Human rights expert, USA

Moderator:

Xhabir Deralla
President, CIVIL, North Macedonia

Sašo Ordanoski, journalist, North Macedonia

Xhabir Deralla: The opening theme of this conference is that democracy is under siege. Our first panelist, Dr. Sašo Ordanoski, publishes frequently on issues of democracy. Democracy is in Crisis. Are democratic powers, structures, individuals, and groups able to defend democracy?

Sašo Ordanoski: No, they are not. But I would like to concentrate here on one issue, and that is to answer your question in relation to the media.

I am always telling my students, over the last 20, 30 years, that journalism is not about truth. Journalism is about facts and a relevant context. And even with the same facts and with the same relevant context, you can have at least two truths, or a hundred truths.

Why am I saying this? I am saying this because we are in a critical time. In the recent past, there were three missions that journalists and editors and media were doing, three very important things.

One was gatekeeping. Gatekeeping amid the endless sources of information, deciding what information actually got to the public.

Another very important role was the agenda setting. So, out of these endless sources of information, the traditional media would look and say, “This will go on the front page, and this will go on the eight page.” So, deciding what is more or less important.

And the last role – and I will explain why I'm saying this – the last role is framing, that is, putting an angle to the already set agenda and after the gatekeeping process.

So it would be – “These are the 200 pieces of information we will transmit today out of 200 million,” and, “These are the most important or less important.” And “This is our angle of how we see it.”

So, that was how professionals in the media were doing their job in the last decades and what we were teaching at the universities. Because journalism is a set of skills. And to become a good editor is to understand and possess these skills that I listed.

But in the last 10 years, we have seen the rise of algorithms, and algorithms do not have this kind of editing process with skills. The business model of algorithms is different. When the internet began 20 or so years ago, we thought it would be an expanding marketplace of ideas, a broadening exchange of ideas.

But today, the internet is a rabbit hole.

Why?

Because algorithms respond to your clicks, not to the importance, or framing, or gatekeeping. And negative news gets more clicks than positive news.

Whereas liberal democracy draws upon hopes, algorithms respond to fears. It is fears that receive more clicks, not hopes. And we can see people jumping into this rabbit hole of fear, and algorithms push us lower and lower.

And there is a lot of research in the last 10, 15, 20 years, a mountain of research to prove all these things. Just last week, a study was published that found that 75% of reposts are done without people actually clicking into the content. Instead, people react emotionally, and according to their

ideological value, without even opening the news. They click *emotionally*, and this is a huge thing for manipulation.

I can see this tendency in my students. In the past, I had students who would go to their phones, and start at the first screen, and then they will go at least one screen more to go deeper into the information from the first screen.

But today, they are simply swiping and scrolling. So, if you cannot explain the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in one screen, you are lost. Now, can anybody explain the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or another complex issue in one screen?

So, this is where we are. And this is why regulation is very important. This is why we need some kind of moderation that professional journalists and media previously would do. It is one of the biggest problems, that it is Elon Musk who is creating public opinion, and not the editor-in-chief of New York Times.

It is a problem especially for liberal Democrats, because these kinds of media platforms are stolen by populists, who play on emotions, on personal reactions, and on hate. All because the algorithm itself supports and encourages that kind of a rabbit hole.

In terms of solutions, I have suggested that Macedonia, along with other small countries in the Balkans, should look at best practices from other countries. I recently traveled with a group to Tallinn, Estonia, which is the most digitalized country in the world. And what I learned is that Estonia has a 24-hour police office open for Internet monitoring. It is there checking for any kind of disinformation, and any citizen can send an email and say, look, this person is spreading misinformation. And the police office has the

capacity to actually fact-check this. Then, if they find that there is disinformation, they first establish whether it's a person or a bot, and if it is a person they call the person in, and if they find that the person is spreading misinformation, they are warned by the official office of the police that he is doing harm. While

I don't know the capacity of this operation daily, when we were there, they had something like 10 people working on that. We immediately said, look, in Macedonia, you will need 10 offices like this. But Estonia is, like North Macedonia, multi-lingual. Twenty-five percent are so-called Russian speakers.

The important thing here is that monitoring of the internet, and monitoring and addressing the spread of disinformation, can be part of the official system. None of the Western Balkan countries has a system like this. We only have "initiatives." Germans finance one effort, Americans will finance another, and maybe there is conference, and another, and sometimes the interior minister will do something. But there is no system.

We need a system. Not a Big Brother system, but something that will be a kind of a midway between this huge pressure of anger, hate, misinformation, and the general public. While I am not very optimistic that things are moving on. Until we get to that stage, I don't think that we are going to win this.

Christiane Eilders, University professor, Heinrich Heine University Dusseldorf, Germany, Expert on Polarization

Xhabir Deralla: Professor Eilders, drawing on your extensive research into media practices, and behavior on social media, what can you tell us about how pro-democracy forces can defend democracy in the face of war, far-right nationalism, authoritarianism, and authoritarian tendencies?

Christiane Eilders: This is a broad subject, but I am a researcher on polarization, and I would like to focus there, on the role of media in polarization. It is also about emotions and hate, but the focus is a little different.

I do also think that wars and conflicts, of course, are very important topics for this conference because they're very likely to disturb and disrupt democratic processes, and that's what we are here for – to talk about disruptions and how we can prevent that.

Conflicts might divide societies into camps of supporters and opponents of, let's say, Ukraine or of Israel, but also think of less severe conflicts, such as domestic policy conflicts on taxes, COVID, or migration. They also have the potential to polarize society.

And what's so bad about that? What's so bad about opposing opinions? And that's my starting point: Isn't that just pluralism?

Not always. If there are distinct and strong opinions and there are strong feelings involved, a conflict can threaten democratic processes because it might develop into a

standstill of discursive exchange, and that exchange is needed for democratic opinion formation and decision-making. Discourse is a prerequisite of democracy.

I would like to focus on the particular role of social media in this: How does mediated public communication drive or deepen conflicts? And how does it ease conflicts and bring people together? So, both directions are perfectly possible.

So, I wouldn't be so pessimistic about the media systems contributing to better democracies. Media has been suspect of deepening conflicts, of weakening democracies and so on, and that is alarming, because media used to be regarded as infrastructure for democracies, bringing people together, helping people to form opinions, and so on. So, the fact that that's not always the case anymore is already alarming.

So, why are we talking about the malfunctions of media? It is not a new topic, but a very old one, and the discussion about the decline of political communication has started in the 90s by Blumler and Gurevich. And they identified for four ages of political communication and showed how the democratic functions of communications deteriorated over time.

In the Third Age, that was just before the social media became popular, they already showed a strong decline – intensifying professionalization pressures, increased competitive pressures, anti-elitist populism, and centrifugal diversification, the first sign of polarization, and changes in how people receive politics. All that contributed to a decline in democratic functioning. So, not everything was good before social media came about.

But now we're in the Fourth Age, and that is the age of online communication and particularly of social media. And all these types of malfunctionings have become more pronounced, and now we have another problem, the linkage between social media and journalism, because people encounter news via personal networks now.

And this brings in more emotions, and more chances to change opinions through media content, because people receive the news through trusted, like-minded peers. So, they encounter a mass media piece, some sort of report on whatever, let's say Israel, via friends, and that increases the chances of adapting their opinions in the direction of this media item. And this increases polarization, or the chances of polarization.

But so far, there is not much evidence of ideological polarization in many countries. At least in Germany, there is little evidence of ideological polarization, including through social media, although it has the potential.

So why worry? Why worry if there is little evidence of ideological polarization right now? Because things can change, and because it's completely different in other countries. Let's just think of the red and blue media communities in the US. So, we have to watch closely what is happening in other countries, and how the increasing ideological gaps can be prevented if that's the case.

The ideological gaps that is what is referred to as *ideological* polarization. And as I said, there is little evidence of that kind of polarization via social media, but it can still pick up.

There is more evidence of *effective* polarization, and effective polarization is an emotional rejection of an out-group through the in-group. There is a lot of hate involved, and devaluation, and basically it's all about the rejection of the out-group. Social media fosters this rejection, because it relies on emotions, it relies on outrage, because this is how people are kept on the platform. So that's the business model in a way.

And in networked publics, the in-group is more likely to come into being, because that's how they find like-minded peers and form a camp which is likely to reject other camps. So, this emotional rejection of a group, this is what effective polarization is all about, that indicates a lack of willingness to compromise on political issues.

It makes discourse across opinion camps more difficult. But democracy needs discourse across opinion camps. We have to interact, we have to compromise and find solutions. And this is also how we integrate society, and integration is how we form a stable foundation of democratic societies.

Now, if things are lost already, how do we depolarize society if we are already split up into opposing camps? Of course, media education and media competence help a lot, especially if disinformation is the cause of polarization or other sorts of malfunctioning. But sometimes a society polarizes even without disinformation. Sometimes, opinions just move away from each other.

So, what can we do, and what does research tell us about possible ways out of that? There's a lot of research on the effects of moderation in discourses, of human moderation or bot algorithm moderation. The findings on moderation

are a little optimistic, but it's not clear. And it depends very much on the type of moderation.

The findings on cross-cutting opinion presentation are also inconclusive. We don't yet know under which conditions someone changes his or her opinion. Sometimes the presentation of opposing opinions drives people even more towards the extremes of the spectrum. And we don't know when that happens and when different opinions help.

So, what do we do? There is so little research so far on the effects of polarization and on ways to depolarize societies that I would recommend we just try it out. We have to collect more best practice examples and more experiences on ways to depolarize discourses, because that's the only way to go. We can't just accept it. We have to prevent further disintegration, because that threatens democratic decision-making.

Heather Roberson Gaston, human rights expert, USA

Xhabir Deralla: And now we shall move on to Heather Roberson Gaston, who is a human rights expert joining us from the United States. And I would like for you to speak, if you would, about the recent election. What happened with the U.S.?

Heather Roberson Gaston: Well, I think I can bring some insight here to this question, because while I study North Macedonia, and have written on issues of democracy and human rights in Macedonia, I also work on these issues in the United States. I have worked on Democratic campaigns, on good government campaigns, and on issue campaigns. Primarily I have worked to organize people to get involved in areas that they care about, encouraging them that they can make a difference, and giving them useful things to do so they can see that their work has an impact. As for Macedonia, I have been researching the country for something like two decades, traveling here to speak with people, and I am very grateful for how much time people have spent with me and helped me understand things.

And the reason I bring up both places, the United States and Macedonia, is that I see some similarities right now, between the two places and our recent elections.

In both the United States and Macedonia, you can see the problem of rising racism, very much connected to a deteriorating economic situation and inflation, and connected to the ongoing war in Ukraine and the

disinformation and polarization that goes along with that. So, both countries have those similar issues.

In terms of the economic crisis, the rising inflation, obviously everyone in North Macedonia is very familiar with this. People talk about it constantly, about how everything costs so much now, and it is so hard to afford basic things. People in the United States are also struggling with this.

And I think what tends to happen is that, even though this economic constriction and inflation is a global phenomenon – a global phenomenon that the price of medicine is higher than it should be, that it's harder to get a doctor than it should be, that it's harder to get housing than it should be, that every last thing feels so incredibly *dysfunctional* – even though it is a global issue, people experience these things locally and they don't necessarily *know* that almost the whole rest of the world is experiencing this. So they turn against those who are closest to them, against the people and the leaders they can see.

In this condition, it is very hard for *any* incumbent party to stay in office in that situation because people think, well, who am I going to support? Well, I'm *certainly* not going to support the party that has been in power and has failed to fix these issues. Instead, maybe I will take a chance on a change. Maybe I'll take a chance on this other party that is promising it will fix the problems. Let them try. This is something I have seen in North Macedonia and in the United States.

But there is also a connected problem, and that is the disaffection that can be seen in both places, this desire to retreat from the democratic process. In North Macedonia, I

saw this disaffection before the May elections. I met many people who just didn't plan to vote and who announced it very quickly to me. “I won't be voting.” “I'm not voting in this election.” Almost as a way of punishing the party in power and punishing democracy for not working better.

And I do think people are so frustrated with political processes, and with lack of progress, even when progress *is* being made. It just takes such a long time. It's not easy to repair an economy after COVID, or to repair an economy after the previous regime spent hundreds of millions of dollars on buildings and statues and things like that. It is not easy for a new government to take over and make everything right. So we saw this in North Macedonia, and we saw this in the United States. It wasn't easy for the Biden administration to just fix everything. As I was saying, this economic crisis is a global phenomenon.

I do think that this state of disaffection can also make a person feel quite clever, like they have figured something out, that they have one up on everyone else, and now this system, which actually takes a lot of time to understand, well, you can just exit that, say it’s all corrupt, end of story. Just exit, retreat into one’s own life, and stop engaging. So, like I said, I saw that here in North Macedonia before the most recent elections in May.

As for the U.S., there, after the most recent presidential election, I am seeing people say things like, “We'll never have another democratic election again. There's no chance. Democracy is over. It has no chance from here on out.”

Meanwhile, there are people like me saying, oh, really? Because, the reality is there are elections coming up, in every state, and in all the cities. And these elections matter. So there is always a lot to do. You can also run for political office yourself or engage in any number of ways. It isn't as if autocracy is built overnight. Autocracy wins when people withdraw, when they stop challenging. That is what helps autocracy win.

In terms of solutions, I should be clear that it would be impossible to point to just one problem and if it is solved everything will get better. In the U.S., Donald Trump won in so many different contexts that you cannot ascribe it simply to racism, or sexism, or any of the other reasons I listed. But the issue of disaffection and lack of interest in democracy is truly toxic, because when people stop valuing democracy, when they stop believing it can deliver on its promises, then they are less likely to be upset, I think, when somebody comes to take democratic opportunities away.

Given that, what I will say in terms of solutions is that there are people out there who are truly talented in the art of bringing the disappointed, and the disaffected, back into the fold. And it's such a skill, and like I said, not everyone has it, but it involves empathy, it involves forgiving someone for being different from you. It involves being able to share space with people who are unlike you, and allowing them to save face when they come to the realization that they have perhaps done something wrong, that shouldn't have voted the way they did, or that in fact they should have voted. It involves extending kindness and saying, well, please come and meet other people, anyway, and come into the fold instead of retreating.

It is very rare that a political campaign can do that, but we do have people and organizations who excel in this, and who do this again and again, all the while leading people towards human rights and democracy. And those are the people, in the United States, and in North Macedonia, really deserve our support.

Wolfgang Ressmann, President, Media Dialogue/Y4M, Germany

Xhabir Deralla: Now, I would like to invite Dr Wolfgang Ressmann, the president of the Media Dialogue from Germany, a very important person for CIVIL – Center for freedom. He is highly experienced in these areas discussed here today. He will briefly introduce our joint project, and will say more while being a moderator in one of the next sessions at this conference. Thank you for being here.

Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann: Thank you very much, Deralla and CIVIL for this great event today. I am very happy to be part of this event. We are here for the second time with the support of North Rhine-Westphalia.

I am coming from public access media, where participation of young people is crucial, particularly enabling media education of young people, as well as fostering the responsibility in media, based on democratic values. I'm the chairperson of the Public Media national organization, with 150 public media, from university to free radio radios in Germany. Based on this, we started with Media Dialogue project in 2015, with the idea to support the Ukrainian society after the Maidan Revolution, in their development, and their process for self- finding. It was an opportunity to discuss on an eye-level, which is very important for democracy development.

We bring young people also from Georgia and Armenia, and other countries in the region, to discuss on democracy together, and produce their own media outputs, without censorship. Those media outputs are broadcasted on German public screens, which encourages engagement.

This is also important in North Macedonia, to reveal what is happening in the political system, justice, and election processes, to make sure people are well informed.

The political system, both within parties and at a broader level, is facing a significant crisis in Europe today. I believe this crisis is also evident in North Macedonia. One of the most crucial challenges we face is the process of rebuilding trust in democratic institutions. This “re-trust” building, as I call it, is essential for the future of our societies.

Rebuilding trust requires international cooperation. It is crucial to bring together people from different democratic and democratizing countries – young people, experienced professionals, university lecturers, and working journalists. That is why we are honored to have Mika, the chairman of the German Association Journalists, here as a guest. Such exchanges allow us to discuss the issues at hand, expose the failures in our societies, and address the challenges that democracy faces – whether in politics, justice, or the fight against corruption.

Educating people about how parliamentary democracy functions is also part of this process. Events like today’s conference serve as an invitation to collaborate in building a world without war. If we fail to act, we see the consequences—whether in Belarus, under dictatorship, or in Ukraine, where the dismantling of democracy has led to war. The connection is clear: when democracy is abolished, the risk of war increases.

Despite these challenges, I advocate for *realistic optimism*. We must be strong democrats, defending not only our own rights but also the rights of others. This must be done

democratically, through dialogue, not polarization. The media play a crucial role in this effort, serving as a tool for overcoming divisions and fostering international cooperation.

When we look at Russia's propaganda machine and the brutal consequences it has produced, there is no alternative but to fight for democracy. This is the core idea behind media dialogue – using communication, cooperation, and truth to strengthen democracy and counter authoritarianism.

Panel 2: The Rise of Far-Right Nationalism

Examining the surge of far-right movements and their impact on democracy and social cohesion: what media and civil society can do – setting basis for further cooperation on an actionable plan and strategy.

Panelists:

Roger Casale
Secretary General, New European People's Forum, UK / Italy

Kseniya Halubovich
Journalist, German-French Journalist Award 2021, Belarus (in exile)

Mika Beuster
President of German Union of Journalists, DJV, Germany

Aleksandar Spasov
Associate Professor in Legal Theory and Philosophy of Law, North Macedonia

Admir Lisica
Regional political relations researcher, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bojan Maričić
Expert for EU accession, law and politics, Former Deputy PM for European Affairs and Minister of Justice, North Macedonia

Moderator:

Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann
President, Media Dialogue/Y4M, Germany

Introductory Remarks by Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann

As a German, I have long believed that, after the Second World War, nationalism was far behind us. I believed that Germans had seen what nationalism caused on the whole continent and how important are democracy and the rule of peace. But now, we see what is happening in Ukraine: a full-scale attack from Russia – from the right-wing nationalist regime of Putin, which shows that right-wing nationalism can mean war and the abolition of democracy.

And now, in Germany, and in *all* European countries, we have this new problem with right-wing extremists with new parties that want to divide nations, want to divide us. This is what we will discuss on the panel.

Kseniya Halubovich, Journalist, German-French Journalist Award 2021, Belarus (in exile)

Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann: Kseniya Halubovich, you reported on the pro-democracy demonstrations in Belarus, and then the authoritarian regime of Aleksandar Lukashenko enacted a violent crackdown against those protesting against him. Because of this, you were forced to leave the country and now you are working in exile. Still, you show us what it means when human rights are no longer in place, when even very small parts of democracy are abolished, and the terror that right-wing nationalism can bring against journalists.

Kseniya Halubovich: I am from Belarus, which is a big silent gray zone in the center of Europe. Belarus is a big, silent, gray zone because the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, with the support of Putin's regime, makes it impossible for people inside the country to speak, to write, to express their minds openly. It is impossible, because, in Belarus, you can be imprisoned for years for something so small, for simply writing one comment in messenger.

In the last four years, as many as one million people left Belarus and thousands cannot return home. Most of the journalists and activists now live in exile and work in exile and it is only those people who can be the voices of Belarusian people. The Belarusian people cannot leave the country. They must live in this silent gray zone under this pressure. Yesterday, we had terrible news that one woman killed herself because of the political repressions in Belarus. This is what happens when people can't speak anymore.

They can’t speak and they don't know what to do with the terrible conditions in which they live.

This regime tried to harm our relatives. When activists and journalists go into exile, and the regime can no longer easily hurt them physically, it will sometimes comes to our relatives inside Belarus. And all of this is with the support of Putin, because most of Belarusian people want to be free. We know that we have these Russian troops inside our country and, in my opinion, it has become something like a hybrid occupation of Belarus.

For this reason, our situation depends totally on the victory of Ukraine now and many of our people do fight inside Ukraine for the freedom of Ukraine and freedom of Belarus. We have maybe the strongest in the world. We have great organizations in exile that help people, that help families of political prisoners, that help people to leave the country, help people with money, with documents.

I am proud of this, because we have shown and we will show the world that we are strong and that we will continue our fighting. And of course, I am tired, speaking of the same things again and again, and for years. But it's very important, because millions of Belarusian people can't speak, can't write, and all the people in exile must continue to speak for them, to speak about our problems, and to tell the world that we are not Russians. We have our own problems, our own language, our own culture. We are not brothers. Unfortunately, we will be neighbors in the future, but never brothers.

Aleksandar Spasov, Associate Professor in Legal Theory and Philosophy of Law, North Macedonia

Wolfgang Ressmann: I have said during this conference that trust is one of the most important things we can work for, and I think trust in justice is one of the main parts of that, that people in society must trust in the justice system when they have trouble. They must trust that the justice system will work, and that it will preserve and protect their rights.

So perhaps, Dr. Spasov, you can give us some spotlights to the situation in North Macedonia and in the surrounding areas.

Aleksandar Spasov: I will address this issue with the rule of law in general and the justice in North Macedonia, but also in the region of the Western Balkans. But before that, since the general topic is the rise of far-right nationalism, we usually speak about far-right nationalism, and of course it's all right to brand it as a far-right nationalism. But I would say it's the rise of political extremism in general, whether it's far-right, far-left. Of course, far-left is not so present in Europe, because Europe has a tragic history of far-right nationalism, but what we can see is that this is not a new phenomenon and for the last decade. People have been saying all this time that far-right nationalism proposes a danger for our societies, that we have to find a way how to face it. Meanwhile, far-right nationalism has been constantly growing.

So first, we must face a situation now where we have to admit that far-right parties and political forces are among us and they are here to stay and we will have to accept that

reality, learn how to live with that, and not let them prevail and become governments. If they prevail and become governments as in Russia or Belarus or in Hungary, then we have a real problem, because then we must fight them from a completely different position compared to when moderates, center-right, center-left governments are in power.

And why do I say that. I mean, we have for a very long time been speaking about the problem of far-right nationalism while doing practically nothing to face it. I remember eleven years ago, in 2013, I was in Heidelberg at the Max Planck Institute for International Law and Public Law. The elections in Germany had just taken place months after the AfD party had been established in Germany. And the day after the election, after the results came in, I remember that there was a jubilant atmosphere among some of the researchers, who were happy that the AfD didn't manage to pass the 5% precondition. It was 4.98% and they said, “Oh good, at least the AfD is not in the parliament.”

Meanwhile, a party formed only months before the election almost managed to enter the Bundestag. I gave only one comment then. I said that I was sure that on the very next elections, the AfD would be able to enter the parliament and they become as they are now, the second political force in the country that is stronger even than the old German social democratic party. I am speaking very emotionally about this because I am myself a social democrat, and it is very hard for me to understand how many people, many clever people, didn't realize and didn't manage to develop some strategy of addressing the causes – not the AfD party itself – but the causes for the rise of the far-right nationalism.

And I think that one of the problems is that we, I mean, the moderate people, not just politicians, but also activists, were avoiding admitting what is now inevitable to admit: that the social contract established after the Second World War, as you said, is no longer enforced. There is decreasing trust of people in the institutions. People feel that the institutions are not working for them. People feel that they have no dialogue with the institutions and that the institutions are not delivering what they are supposed to do. Of course, most of these feelings are irrational and we can regret that they are irrational, but we have to face that that's politics. It's not only about making rational choices. It's also about perceptions and irrational fears that were not addressed by the mainstream political parties, but that's a problem, let's say, for Europe.

Now I will go to our region and the problem of justice. We see in all of the countries of the Western Balkans and now in North Macedonia that anti-democratic forces, I would say, and political extremism is also on rise here and one of the reasons in the Western Balkans, and for most of the so-called democracies in transition or underdeveloped democracies, is the problem of the functioning of the rule of law. It's the rampant corruption, especially high corruption, and organized crime. Many promises were made to the people that this issue of corruption will be addressed, that justice would be delivered, and then these promises were not fulfilled, and painful compromises were made, as parties put other important issues before the rule of law and at the expense of the rule of law.

And now, for example, in North Macedonia, we see that the people are completely disillusioned with the justice system.

Less than 2% of the population here believes that the courts are able to deliver justice and this is not only a problem for the functioning of the judiciary. This is problem for the stability of the entire society. Why? Because when people feel that they cannot receive the justice in front of courts, they incline towards more radical, more revolutionary measures that promise that instead of corrupted elites ruling the country, and the courts, that *they* would bring justice and that this justice will not necessarily be in the courts but also in the streets.

One fortunate element in this unfortunate situation is that the Balkans has a long history of nationalism. So, nationalism is part of the political mainstream for a very long time, and our mainstream political parties are still controlling the people, not to go too far right. So, our parties on the right are practically covering the large space from the center right to almost far right.

But we now also see, in North Macedonia, that parties that are even more right than the right-wing parties are emerging. One party is practically trying to cover everything from far left to far right, everything but the center, and it is becoming more and more populist. Their appearance in the public is very radical and any moderate person would imagine that, if we think rationally, such rhetoric and such actions should lower their popularity. But after every radical action, their popularity grows and I am confident that in the next elections in this country, we will see. We will see how strong this far right and political extremism will be.

We shouldn't be surprised by the strength of this political extremism because, while there has been some action in the fight against organized crime and corruption, it is

unclear whether this commitment is really a sincere commitment, or if it will always be limited only to the formers. The question is will it be expanded to those who are currently exercising political power? It is quite easy to combat corruption among the formers who are no longer in power. The problem comes when the ruling party must combat corruption in its own ranks.

And to be honest, although the former government enjoyed vast popular support to confront the rampant corruption in society, it did not really manage to do that, even though some steps were made. In this way, it bears the responsibility for the rise of the far right or of the political extremism in our country.

So, to conclude, I think that it is a much better approach to speak sincerely about the problems and weaknesses of the mainstream, rather than only the problem of the far-right. We agree that the far right is dangerous. We know that the far right is dangerous. So now the question is how to oppose the far right and how to make the mainstream attractive again for people, with all their rational and irrational nature, with their fears, with their problems, with their hatred, with their nationalism, with their cultures, identities. Those people are here, and we in the mainstream will have to learn how to make ourselves attractive for them instead of putting the blame on political radicals.

Bojan Maričić, **expert on EU accession, law and politics, Former Deputy PM for European Affairs and Minister of Justice, North Macedonia**

Wolfgang Ressmann: Now we move to Mr. Maričić, a civil society activist and an expert in EU accession, and law and politics. Mr. Maričić, what does right-wing nationalism, and far right-wing nationalism in the Balkans mean for North Macedonia? What does it mean for the region and its process of becoming nearer to the European Union or a member of European Union?

Bojan Maričić: The issue of the nationalism on the Western Balkans, but also in the EU is a longstanding one. I would agree with Professor Spasov that nationalism is not new in the Western Balkans. But I think what is new is that it has dominated the European political scene in the past, let's say, past decade in particular.

In the Western Balkans, there were always two competing narratives – the narrative of European integration and the narrative of right-wing nationalism that dominates the conflicted narrative in the Western Balkans. Usually, when one of them doesn't work, the other dominates. So, whenever the European integration as a narrative doesn't work and doesn't show results, then right-wing radical nationalism dominates the narrative of the conflict.

That is unfortunately part of the political battle in all the European societies. What we are witnessing in the past decade, and particularly past several years in France, in Italy, in Hungary, in Germany, as was mentioned, in the Netherlands, in many of the Višegrad Group, is something

that is making us think that this is not only a Balkan specialty, but it is now pan-European. And I truly think that it is a pan-European battle. And that pan-European battle, at the moment, in particular, in the countries of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, has taken a radical form and has become not only a political battle but a societal battle with a huge gap between the two parts of the society.

To solve this challenge, we must go to the root. The root is how the politicians, and the mainstream political parties, and the institutions are dealing with the emotions of the people. Because apparently politics, not only in the Balkans, but also in the EU, politics is about emotions. It's not only about plans, laws, and programs. It is also about emotions. And I think that the rise of the radical nationalism, right-wing nationalism in North Macedonia, particularly, was a result of some unaddressed emotions of most of the Macedonian citizens who felt, in some way, disappointed, in some way, played out by the European Union and by parts of the government. I was for seven years in the government, so I have a special responsibility, also, to speak about this. And also, I think that now we need to deal with those emotions and to translate them into action, to translate them into political action that will counter the radical right-wing nationalism.

I think that we also have to bear in mind that the EU narrative, the narrative of pro-integration, or pro-enlargement narrative, is still valuable and is still an asset of the progressive societal groups, because at some point, it was in crisis, and I think it's still somehow in crisis, that it's not very popular to talk about European Union and European accession. But if you follow closely, you will see

that even the governments that are pleading or pledging more to right-wing nationalism, they are afraid to openly criticize the EU accession. They are afraid to openly give up of the EU accession, and they don't want to leave the impression to the citizens and to the voters that they're not interested in EU accession.

To the contrary, they use the narrative that they are genuinely pro-Europeans, that they genuinely work in this area, but even though sometimes they don't deliver the right results, and this is our hope, this is our field of battle that we need to take.

I'll finish by saying what I think is necessary to do, because, first of all, we have to be aware that we need to be ready for a fight. For a political and societal fight, that does not mean any violence, but it means fight for the minds and the hearts of the people, fight for our arguments, and fight for our new narrative, a new progressive and pro-European narrative that will bring hope and bring optimism to the people, that that option is much better and should be embraced rather than the radical far-right nationalism.

When I say this, I think that all the political actors, including the political parties and the civil society, needs to be ready to fight for what they believe, and to fight for the values they believe in, because we can see how our friends and our like-minders fight in very severe conditions in Ukraine, in Moldova, in Georgia, in Belarus, we have heard what the colleague said about Belarus, and if they can do this fight in such difficult conditions, with such a high level of threat to their existence and their lives, I think it's much easier for us in the Western Balkans to fight for these values and to fight for European integration in which we believe.

I will finish by saying what we need. We need a clear plan for joining the European Union that will be approved and adopted by the European Union itself. We cannot succeed in the efforts without a clear and honest intention of the European Union to get us in the Union as members. I know that Montenegro and Albania are working very hard to finish the negotiations in the foreseeable future by the end of 2026, or for Albania by the end of 2027, and I think that that should be done by all the countries in the region, that we all need to make a clear plan on how to finish the accession negotiations and how to make the necessary reforms as soon as possible. But that needs to be approved and embraced by the European Union as a real plan if we want us to succeed.

And if we do that, that will give us fuel to fight on in each of our societies, to fight in order to succeed and to stop the radical nationalism that has brought a lot of tragedies and a lot of unfortunate situations in our region in the Western Balkans, thank you.

Mika Beuster, President of German Union of Journalists, DJV, Germany

Wolfgang Ressmann: Before we have a closer look also to Bosnia-Herzegovina and the surrounding area, I want to ask Mika Beuster as a president of the German journalists union to show what right-wing nationalism and this right-wing party, even in Germany, means for journalistic work and for producing a democratic audience, or to informing the democratic audience.

And there I think this is also very interesting that you are not alone with the pressure of right-wing nationalism, that in Germany, you mentioned it in your statement before, which the AFD with 18% means 82% are against them. Let's say it in a positive way, Mika, but you have also had a lot of experience with what it means for freedom of speech for journalistic work when far-right-wing nationalism is coming to the stage.

Mika Beuster: Yes, it's coming to the stage and it's coming to the stage with force. We have an election of the German parliament, the Bundestag, in February, and as you referenced, the AfD, the so-called alternative for Germany, will be expected to be maybe in second place, 18 to 20% roughly of the votes. And they are a right extremist party. They turn right at every election, far more right, up to the place that you could say they're openly using Nazi language and references to the Nazi regime, unheard of in German politics before, to reference the Nazi regime as positive in any political wing.

But now it's common for the AFD to reference it and what we realize in the German public is that there's no outcry

anymore when that happens. You grow insensitive to these references and that's also due to the media reporting. It's a sensation the first couple of times it happens and after that you say, “Okay, that's what they do.” And that seems to be what the reaction to the reporting about right-wing nationalist movements is, once the sensation wears off. So you have to talk about the contents.

And Heather, I really like what you said before when you were talking about how countries with right-wing movements and parties share one thing and you put it very interestingly. You said the circumstances people face are part of a global phenomenon, but people experience it locally. So they do not abstract and say, “Oh, that's a global trend that we're experiencing.” Instead, they say “My personal situation is due to the elites in my country not working right. And thusly, nationalism is the answer to the problem.”

And when we're in this room discussing solutions to the problem, we tend to focus on the national level, and solutions at the local level, but we disregard the global aspects of the thing. And one major aspect is – and we see this in German journalism as well when we report about right-wing extremists and national movements – is the use of platforms such as Facebook, X, Twitter, or you can just call them Silicon Valley platform industry, that controls a huge percentage of what content actually reaches the audience.

And this happens with no regulation whatsoever. We have tried, in Europe at least, we have the Digital Service Act XX, we have the European Medium Freedom Act, but the regulation is not strong enough to regulate those platforms.

So, what do we see? These platforms are the ones that make right-wing extremists great all around the globe. Think of Donald Trump. Where would he be without Elon Musk and X? Where would he be without Truth Social? Think of the Chinese government and TikTok, and consider that TikTok is the preferred medium of the AfD amongst the youth. They score very high well with the younger population in Germany because that's how they reach their audience and traditional media doesn't.

So, we have to think, *How do we reach our audience as traditional media?* It's not just about reporting the facts. It's getting the reporting to the audience. But how do we do that if we don't have an infrastructure? And so, we need to talk as Europeans about a European infrastructure to get our news to the people. Here, at this conference, I see a lot of cameras. I see a lot of microphones. That used to be the way how we reported. But that larger audience, we don't reach anymore. We do not have the infrastructure to do that. And we need to talk about that in a European sense. We need European infrastructure. We need European independence from infrastructure abroad, from Silicon Valley technical companies, and from Chinese TikTok. We need, let's say, a European Facebook, one that is under European regulation. And then we dry out that swamp in which disinformation, propaganda, and fake news can grow.

So, looking back to Germany and zooming back in on Germany and how it will affect you here in the room, in the Balkan region and the whole of Europe, I do not expect a landslide victory of the AfD. It will be around 18 to 20% and that also means that about roughly 80% of the Germans do

not vote for right-wing extremists. It might seem a naive viewpoint, but you have to keep it in mind to keep the real perspective because it's a narrative that *they,* the AfD spread. “We're the second largest political force in Germany.” They're not a force when what they say is not acceptable in 80% of the political spectrum. We have to keep that in mind.

But, it’s not only the AfD. We have a new political party on the left wing that's pro-Putin, pro-Russia, and shares 80 to 90% of the ideology of the AfD, only it is on the left side of the spectrum, all centered around one person, which seems to be a new trend in extremist and populist politics. And her potential is 8 to ten percent in the election, so that is thirty percent populist to extremist votes, and these are very much media aggressive parties that rely on platforms to reach the audience, working *against* the media, against traditional media, public broadcasting, and journalism. If they have the opportunity, put into effect legislation that will hinder the free press.

So, we should be worried about strengthening, but we should not be worried that they will have a majority, or even be part of a government in Europe in this election. But we need to keep an eye on the still stable countries in Europe, because they're the beacons that shine the light to the regions that are fragile. So, the more important thing is that we talk about this here, Wolfgang, and connect people, journalists, and civil society, because we cannot rely on the governments in Europe to do the job for us. It is our job to provide stability in society, and journalists can be part of that solution if they act smartly, and I'm very interested in what else we can learn today from that.

Admir Lisica, regional political relations researcher, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Wolfgang Ressmann: We now have a view from Bosnia-Herzegovina where we can see how problematic the situation is with nationalism, and how dangerous the situation can become when nationalism wins.

Admir Lisica: Thank you. In the recent period, in Europe, we can see that far-right movement have gained much support from people. I often wonder how this happened in Germany, in The Netherlands, in Italy, and other states where you can see support for nationalism and far-right movements. This situation in Europe is very dangerous for Bosnia-Herzegovina and other places in the Western Balkans. For example, if you remember ex-Prime Minister of Great Britain, Mr. Cameron, said that Serbia is the Russian proxy in the Balkans. This is a problem for Bosnia-Herzegovina where we have the rise of nationalism, and the rise of rigid and malicious politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Serbian side. And we know from relevant research that Russia supports the rise of far-right, and supports radical projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Western Balkans, and that similar projects are supported across the Europe.

For me, the symbol of the far-right in Europe is the Prime Minister of Hungary, Mr. Orbán. After Trump's win in last month, in the US President elections, we had a big event in Banja Luka. People went to the streets, the Serbian people, they went to the streets to celebrate Trump's win. And Milorad Dodik, the man behind the Republika Srpska, and one of the most problematic politicians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Balkans, he said, "I have a good

connection with Orbán, and Orbán has a good connection with Trump." And that's the point, that this is the big chance for Republika Srpska and for Russia to have influence in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

I think, because of extreme nationalism, and because of the past, because of genocide, we have lasting problems in Bosnia-Herzegovina. More than 800 people were killed in Srebrenica genocide and I am grateful to the German people, and the German government, for bringing the resolution at the United Nations that Srebrenica should have a day of Remembrance. Meanwhile, the far right movements grow in the Balkans.

And in Bosnia-Herzegovina, we have a big problem with Russia. Not like Belarus, but if you read in the Bosnian media and media in region, the Ambassador of Russia to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mr. Kalabuhov, last week said that a bomb was planted under Bosnia. A bomb was planted under Bosnia, because the Bosnian political support sought interconnection in the federal parliament of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

And we don't have support from European Union in this critical period. And we need the strong decision from EU to say, okay, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, if you want to join us, and want to join to European family, we will support you. The policy of enlargement of European Union is our priority, but I think the far right and this situation in Europe and the USA can be threat for us.

I also think the far-right politics played with emotion of people. Far right politics in the Balkans and Europe give us

simple solution for big problems. And I think that's a big problem for us in Bosnia-Herzegovina. For me, and for people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, joining NATO and the EU is the more important issue in foreign policy. And I think this is a good place to see that we have a problem with Russian influence, and we need support from EU and NATO.

Roger Casale, Secretary General, New European People's Forum, UK / Italy

Wolfgang Ressmann: Last, but not least, Roger Casale is a former member of the British Parliament, founder of the New Europeans Party and now the first Secretary -General of the New European People's Forum.

Roger Casale: Thank you very much, Wolfgang. I do want to tell you that yes, I am British, I am a British European. I am not rushing back to Britain to try and make Britain great again, but I would like Britain to be more European again, and I hope you can help us with that. I would like North Macedonia to be closer to Europe as well, and I am glad to have the opportunity to be here to be part of these conversations.

You know, Wolfgang reminded us that nationalism and authoritarianism march down the same road, side by side, and it's the road to war. So we need to reflect on that, not just this week, Human Rights Week, a week of democracy, but at all times. And you know, as a European, I know that Europe is a peace project. While I'm not old enough – none of us are old enough – to have had direct experience of the war, I did have direct experience of the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989. I lived in Berlin at that time, and I know that it is not naive to believe that big changes are possible, and that big changes can come. And I was living in Italy, studying in the Johns Hopkins SAIS program in Bologna, when the Italian Republic fell, under the weight of its own contradictions and bribery and corruption.

And so, I don't want to be told that it's naive to believe that change can come. I know that change can come, I've seen

it. I went back to Britain in the early 1990s, and I became a member of Parliament for the Labour Party. I won a parliamentary seat that had been conservative for 50 years and people told me, “You're naive to believe that change can come.” But change did come. We live in a constant time of flux, a time of constant change, and the climate is changing, not just the natural environment and the climate, and the rising temperature, but the political climate is changing, and there is big storm coming, storm after storm coming towards us, and we've seen this in Britain as well, with the rise of right-wing populism, that pushed Britain out of the European Union, and brought the worst post-war government that Britain has had, in the form of the government led by Boris Johnson.

And I just wanted to share, if I may, a couple of reflections about that.

I think the first lesson would be that, when you look at these right-wing populists, like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, and so on, we shouldn't have any illusions about them, and especially we shouldn't have the illusion that they really want what they say they want. Nigel Farage, I don't believe, actually wanted Britain to come out of the European Union. He had a very nice job as an MEP, and he was on television all the time, and what he wanted to do was to stoke this sentiment against the European Union, to further his own political aims. In fact, I don’t think he thought he would win the referendum on Brexit. The look on his face when it happened, it was clear he was shocked. So, don't confuse what they say they want with what they actually want. What he wanted was to feather his own nest, as we say, to build up his own power and his own interests.

And I think, once in power, they're not going to do what they said they were going to do. It's one thing to win the election. Boris Johnson won the election on, again, a big majority. He was Prime Minister with a small majority, and then a big majority, on a platform of lowering taxes as a share of government income, of reducing migration, and none of these things happened while he was Prime Minister. Migration doubled in Britain. It went from 600,000 a year to 1.2 million, which was completely unprecedented. And yet, he'd won the election on the basis of an anti-migration ticket. Government spending also went up, it didn't go down, and they made a total mess, as we know, of COVID. So, they're not ideologically committed to what they say they're going to be. This is a trick that they play, to raise the feeling and to get them into power.

So, you have to think, what is it they actually want? And a lot of the time, what they want is to use power to their own personal advantage. So, you're going to see corruption, you're going to see crime and so on, as a result of these populists coming into power.

I think the other thing to say about it is don't confuse the voters with the leaders. Looking at other parts of Europe, for instance, Italy where I live now, I think that some of the right-wing leaders are committed, and do believe what they say. They are very right-wing, and they come from a kind of heritage and legacy that, in some cases, is very authoritarian, even fascist. They can dress themselves up in a different way, they can speak a different language, they can try to pull off the trick of normalizing the idea that you've got extremist right-wing leaders in power. So, you say, well, she's not so bad, she sounds nice and so on. It's easy to

think that, because there's an agenda to normalize this, to make us think that it's normal to have extreme right-wing people in power. It's not normal at all, it's dangerous.

But I think one shouldn't confuse that with saying that all the people who vote for these parties are extreme right-wing populists. They're not. Often the left and the center will react by saying, “Oh, they're all fascists, they're all right-wing, they're all extremists.” But not necessarily the voters. Not necessarily all of the people who vote for the AfD are Nazis or fascists or whatever you want to call them. And I think it's a mistake to label them as such. So we have to understand why are people who are not fascists voting for parties that are fascists? That's the question we have to ask ourselves and find an answer to that.

The other lesson is that right-wing extremists benefit from polarization. They provoke and they polarize and that's their pathway to power. And then, when they're in power, there's a pot of gold, not for you and me, but for them. People used to say about Boris Johnson, he thinks it's one rule for him and one rule for everybody else. And I said, no, it's a mistake. He thinks it's one rule for everybody else and no rule for him, no rule at all. They want to get to power so that there's no rule for them.

What do we do? Well, I think we have to address this issue, and I'll just finish with this. This issue of polarization. We have to start with ourselves, actually. There's a tendency when you see the monster on the horizon to focus on the monster and attack the monster and so on. They have to be held to account. And we have to do all the things we've been talking about as well. There are other things that we need to do, too. It's not either or. There's a lot that we need

to do about ourselves as Democrats, committed Democrats. You know, the new vision for Europe has to be a vision that is going to be not just a peace project, but also a Europe that is a safe space for democracy and human rights.

We as citizens and civil society organizations, we have a responsibility to build that new Europe from the grassroots up every day. I think a lot of it is about a culture of civility. A lot of it is about how we relate to each other. It's what Heather was telling us about earlier, finding empathy. When I was an MP, I represented one constituency, Wimbledon. And one of the nicest things that people could say to me was, “Look, I didn't vote for you, but you're doing a good job as my MP.” So, they respected the fact that I was trying to be there for everybody. I was proud to be a labour MP, but I represented everybody.

And when I lost, in the end, the person who replaced me was a conservative. And I said to him, I hope that people will come to you and say, “I didn't vote for you, but you're doing a good job for my MP,” in the way that they used to come to me. Because what's important is not conservative or labor. What's important is that people's lives are getting better in this community. And I think we've lost that sense of the common ground, of the center ground, where there are things that would divide us and that we differ about, but there are also things that we can agree about.

I hope we can agree that the future of Europe is to be a safe space for democracy and human rights, whether we're on the center left or the center right. And we can work together to reinforce and to build that center. The organization that I

lead now, in European People's Forum, is a consortium of organizations, and we specialize in citizens' assemblies.

I would like to offer our help in coming here to Skopje and to other places, and having citizens' assemblies, holding the space where people with different points of view can come together. They don't necessarily walk out of the room agreeing with each other about everything.

I hope they walk out of the room with a better understanding of why they feel what they do, and why the other people feel what they do, and that we can build a common ground and common space that isn't just about lying and negative emotion and polarization with the sole purpose of leading one particular political formation to power. We can build a space where our dialogue serves the public interest and the common good. In the end, don't we *all* want politicians who are in politics for the right reasons, trying to do good for the public, trying to make life better for citizens.

And citizens are smart. They find you out. They can see if you're not genuine or authentic. So we need a different political culture, a different public conversation. And I think that starts with each one of us. That's something that each one of us can do. And I hope that that will be something that each of us take away from a conference like this at this important time in this important week. Let's work together to make Skopje, North Macedonia, Britain, Europe a safe place for democracy and human rights. Let's go out with that commitment. Each of us. No contribution is too small. Each of us do what we can towards that end. Thank you very much indeed.

Panel 3: Countering Authoritarianism

A discussion of various strategies and best practices to resist authoritarian tendencies and strengthen democratic governance. Special focus within this panel is on media literacy as one of the ways to counter malign operations of influence and antidemocratic trends in our societies.

Panelists:

Gudrun Steinacker

Vice president of the Southeast Europe Association SOG, board member EuroNatur Foundation, former ambassador, Germany

Erwan Fouéré

Associate Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, Belgium

Kateryna Pavlova

Expert on disinformation and propaganda, Ukraine / Germany

Konstantinas Andrijauskas

University professor, Vilnius University, Lithuania

Srdjan Cvijić

President, International Advisory Committee of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Serbia

Moderator:

Ana Chupeska

University professor, Ss Cyril and Methodius University, North Macedonia

Introductory Remarks by Prof. Ana Chupeska

Let me express my deep appreciation to CIVIL – Center for Freedom – my sincere compliments to you. It is my great honor to moderate this panel with such a challenging title, Countering Authoritarianism. The topic of our discussion, undoubtedly, is more than relevant for our era.

And having in mind that it might be true that our democratic processes are under attack by the ongoing illiberal expositions, our democratic environment is faced with its own inherent defects and that is populism, illiberalism, authoritarian proceduralism, also, to put it simply, with authoritarianism.

In this line, my first and short intervention refers to the fact that from one side, many of the elective and nominal democracies currently are exhibiting a democratic regression, but on the other hand, those prospects were fully legitimized by electoral procedures. That leabes the of should democratic elections again be put under microscopic observation and are elections an adequate and still sufficient tool for organizing our political life on genuine democratic ground? Or, should we bring about more substantive gears on the table and that is the question that I would like to discuss with you today.

Secondly, as we are witnessing an ongoing interconnectedness and bonding of the authoritarian alliances and political actors, the question is, how should we as democrats and as progressives act? In Europe particularly, this becomes so evident that it is hardly possible to ignore it.

Although our eminent speakers probably will deliberate on various strategies and best practices to resist authoritarian attacks, as a moderator of this panel, I would strongly appreciate if they can put a special attention to the useful tactics against disinformation that can have a capacity to counter malign influence and, of course, that is because those are such powerful instruments for enabling authoritarianism.

So, now let me shortly present to you our panelists. First, today with us is Her Excellency Gudrun Steinacker, the Vice President of the Southeast Europe Association, Board Member of Euro-Natur Foundation and former Ambassador of Germany here. Steinacker also served as diplomat in embassies of Moscow, Roma, Oslo, and Zagreb, and she has really excellent experience.

Gudrun Steinacker, Vice president of the Southeast Europe Association SOG, board member EuroNatur Foundation, Germany

Ana Chupeska: I would like to pose the question to Her Excellency Steinacker. As a former diplomat and now a person very active in the civil society, can you share your findings on the state of democracy and human rights in Western Balkans and beyond, and what you're your perspectives are on these topics?

Gurdun Steinacker: I have to say a few words to our host and organizer, CIVIL. I met Xhabir Deralla shortly after my arrival in Skopje, in 2011, and during my three years in the country I learned to appreciate CIVIL as one of the best organizations in the field of enhancing civil society, protecting human rights, and promoting a free society.

I particularly appreciate the very clear position CIVIL took from the beginning regarding the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, maybe the greatest danger right now for our part of the world. Green Civil is addressing the other most imminent global danger, that of climate change. Both challenges, as well as many others, are used by the intensive hybrid warfare from Russia and its allies.

Authoritarianism is indeed an overarching danger for the so-called free world, now more than ever before. The definition of authoritarianism, according to the Oxford dictionary, is the enforcement or advocacy of strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom and lack of concern for the wishes or opinions of others. If this is the definition, I wonder why people around the world and recently in many European countries vote for persons

and parties which are clearly in favor of authoritarianism. This is a warning sign which we should take very seriously.

In these extremely difficult times, facing multiple crises, many people are afraid and intimidated. They understand that huge changes are taking place, but do not know how to react to them.

It is of course the choice of each individual group of people how to respond to these challenges, but politicians, business elites, and intellectuals should play a leading role according to their responsibility.

But often the opposite is happening. The political, economic, and so-called intellectual elites rather misuse their influence to intimidate the citizens further. They look for personal or group interests and for authoritarian solutions.

Hypocrisy is a widespread phenomenon in international politics. It has a huge impact on ordinary voters because they see the failure of the ruling elites and ask for alternatives. This must be discussed and tackled wherever possible.

I do not know the solution, of course, but I know that freedom is crucial. Solutions can only be found by free persons in a free society with free media and a free discourse.

This would be in accordance with the thoughts of one of the greatest Germans, the philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose 300th birthday we celebrated this year. This is not the place to discuss Kant's philosophy. It's too complex, too huge. But in view of the complex problems that mankind must resolve now, I think it's justified to refer to Kant.

I am referring here to one of his best-known theses: “Human dignity is a status which puts the life of men above any price. All human beings, irrespective of their position or social class, possess the same inner value and the same dignity. This became the charter of the German fundamental law after the Second World War, the first charter of our constitution. Human dignity is inviolable. Protecting it is an obligation of all state power.”

I am proud that the founding fathers and few mothers of the German fundamental law after the Second World War, after the darkest period in German history with Nazi barbarism, that they took this Kant principle as the first chapter of the German constitution, and it also became the first chapter of the EU charter of fundamental rights. “Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected.”

Looking at the definition of authoritarianism, which I cited above from the Oxford dictionary, it is very clear that an authoritarian state can never be a solution. I think we must take the worries, fears, and anger of people these days very seriously. The problems we are facing are extremely complex and therefore there can be no simple solution. But it is the task of politicians, intellectuals, and business elites to explain to the ordinary people that solutions will be difficult and painful. For me, there is no question that those who are richer and stronger must shoulder the heavier part of the burden.

The supporters of authoritarianism promise easy solutions, but in fact these solutions will only lead to more problems and more injustice. The promise of easy solutions for complex problems is a lie, and we have to say this every

day and everywhere. We have to say and to prove every day that the human dignity is inviolable.

And I think there must be also a limit to tolerance. Democracy is, of course, based on debate, on discussion, on discourse. But with some people it's not possible. You cannot have a discourse with Putin, in my view. I spent six years in Russia, and I think I know the Russian system a little bit in depth. And he will not be able. He understands only the language of force.

And let’s not have again a very weak compromise, which will lead only to further problems. It may stop the war for some time, but it will not be a solution. So, no easy solutions to complex problems. And I hope that we can discuss this a little bit more.

And I'm glad that I'm sitting here beside a woman from Ukraine, because they have been feeling this Russian dictatorship on their shoulders for more than almost three years now. And young people here in the region don't understand it. Recently, I spoke a Serbian woman who was relatively young and I said, isn't it terrible what's happening in Ukraine with all these bombings every day and many, many other crimes? And she said, yes, but we suffered also when NATO bombed us. She's a nice person, but she simply didn't understand what had happened and what is happening now. And that is because Serbia is under a full-fledged attack of Russian propaganda every day. And people really have a disturbed mindset in my view. But in any case, so I will put this forward and say, if we do not take human rights and this human dignity as the basis of all our thinking and speaking every day, then things may go very wrong. Thank you.

And you know, there are quite a few intellectuals who actually are in favor of authoritarianism. Even in Germany, I am sometimes frightened that people who are professors, who have had long careers, really well-known intellectuals, that they do things like, they just signed a new letter, 32 intellectuals, arguing that Ukraine should compromise and give up.

Kateryna Pavlova, expert on disinformation and propaganda, Chief Operating Officer and a trainer at CRSP, Ukraine / Germany

Ana Chupeska: What is also interesting is how authoritarian alliances bond. How do they share their know-how? What are they doing? I have an impression that our progressive families, human rights defenders, are in a way weaker in their ways of bonding. What do you think on this, Kateryna?

Kateryna Pavlova: Thank you. I am representing a German NGO here, but on my badge it says Ukraine. And I always, wherever I go, I represent Ukraine too. And what it means to me is this feeling of never doing enough. And I'm not on the front now, but I choose to wear military shoes when I go on this stage, because it somehow helps me to reconnect with what it is actually about, and to be grateful to the people who could also sit here in a nice warm room, but instead they decided to go to the front and fight for democracy with their bodies, and maybe also to die for that. And we definitely need to remember that yes, we are not doing enough, that we have to do more.

What it's also about for me, it is, you know, going from one country to another to try to somehow reconnect and connect the democratic forces. And I see it as problem number one. The authoritarian dictators are really good at bonding, and good at networking. And the democrats are thinking 10 times before they network with someone. Are you good enough for me? Are you professional enough? Is it comfortable enough for me to cooperate with you? We

need to face this problem…We need to become better at networking and keeping the connections.

The second problem is that disinformation and propaganda target people on the level of information, emotion, and values. And what we were also asked to talk about in here was media literacy. But media literacy is only about information. And this is where we are weak. Our weapon is not good enough. Disinformation is working with people on three levels, ubt we counter it on only one, on the level of information. We have to go deeper. We have to go to search for something more.

And the third problem that I would like to tackle is that the main effect of disinformation is that it's not that the fake news is spread. It's not that people believe in false information. It's that people don't believe in *anything*. People think we live in the post-truth society, so there is no need to search for the truth. I just give up.

Still, in the end, they believe someone. So, it's like the facts don't matter anymore. If Trump says migrants are eating cats and dogs, sure, people somehow know this is not true, but they decide to trust him. They decide to go with him. And this is what we are really losing, the trust from the people. People don't want to search for truth.

That's why also media literacy is not an answer. Because we can have people who are really good at defining what is fake news and what is not, but they would still go for authoritarian regimes.

So, it is not enough to work on the level of information. We must work at the level of emotions and values. We need to go into the streets, into the cafes and bars and face the

people and to speak to them. This is extremely emotional and time-consuming and very uncomfortable, but I don't see any other way. We, as CRISP, the German NGO, do it in Eastern Germany. So, I let people who are brainwashed by Russia throw their narratives on me. And it's no pleasure, but I can then somehow bring them to some empathy. I can try to change their perspective. I can search for some emotion, some value that connects us. Because they are in their echo chamber. It doesn't matter how good my reels are, how great my articles or books are.

I recently published a book, and for that we analyzed narratives that are most widely spread in Germany, like the anti-Ukrainian myths that are widely spread in Germany. It is a nice tool if you want to prepare teachers to fight disinformation. But it's not for those who are not with us.

If you want to mobilize people who are not with you, you need to go on the level of emotions and of values with them. And there was a nice research done by the journalist Peter Pomerantsev on how to work with this connection. And he says you should not fight against disinformation. You should try to destroy the bond between the leader and the followers. So, if they are saying that it's all about security for them, and this is why they do not support Ukraine, be it in Germany or anywhere, then I go to this feeling and need for security. And I connect to that, and I say, I also want security. Believe me, I also want peace. And I want to keep this word for myself too. Because when you say peace, then you might mean giving up Ukraine, or giving up the democracies, or cooperating with Russia. I just came from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, countries that are saying they are neutral. And I get it that in the position that they are in,

economically and geographically, it is a great courage to say that they are neutral. It actually means being anti-Russian. It actually means being pro-Ukrainian. And I see it as my task to value that. To say, okay, you are neutral, let's go with that. This is what works for you now. Let's build something upward on that.

This is about street dialogue and dialogue in everyday places. We have a project with not such bad financing, but unfortunately, we need to find people who are not just fans of democracy, but who are fans enough to go out of the seminar rooms. Because we are too comfortable for that. And this is my task somehow. And I hope that you will also join me on that mission to mobilize people for democracy.

Another one is this post-truth society. I think what helps here is non-formal education. What we do here is developing educational materials together with the teachers from Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. We base the method on dilemma-based learning. So, we say if we have students in the classroom who are already reproducing this information, then we need to bring them back to taking the decisions. We motivate students to take moral decisions and then bring them more into, okay, so what about consuming news? How do you take decision there? You cannot always stay balanced. You need to take some decisions and you need to base them on morality.

Then, the third thing about this is that with alliances, it's not just enough to be connected. It should be connection on the eye level. I think that it is somehow interesting that today we've been speaking, so it's the third panel for now. I think we talked more about Germany than about North Macedonia. This is connected to our somehow imperialistic

connection of the knowledge. Who are the experts? Who is bringing the expertise to the room? I have to admit, Germany is really bad at countering disinformation. I think that North Macedonia is very good at countering disinformation, that we see such resilience here and we should learn from this and hear why is the North Macedonia's society so resilient and take this knowledge to Germany and to destabilize this monopoly of expertise.

I also see this in Central Asia. Countries there also don't learn from each other. They always need an American, or anyone else who is seen as an expert, to come and teach them. They will still criticize, and will say it doesn't work for us here. You didn't localize your knowledge. But it doesn't lead to inviting more local experts or experts from unpopular countries just to see, what out of there can we take?

Autocracies invest huge amounts of money in disinformation. But because they take the decisions as one person, they can pull all resources together. We don't have that. We take the decisions together. But we need to be better at countering them.

I see how new methods are being used by autocracies and how they are being neglected by democracies. We look at TikTok, and AI, and we say, oh no, that's too tricky. But AI is a great tool. It has the potential to help us fight disinformation. We could have, in every country, chatbots checking the Russian disinformation and offering narratives to counter them. It's not such a complicated thing to create.

Same with TikTok. The right-wing parties are so present there and we are saying, oh, but it's not very ethical and we don't want to go there and probably it will die anyway, and

we're not fast enough, we're not professional enough, we are not networked enough.

Regarding the Russian war against Ukraine, and ending the Russian war against Ukraine, I think that this debate about ending this war is based on large misunderstanding of what Russian occupation is about. Russian occupation means torture, execution, deportation of kids. Russia started this war out of imperialistic reasons and it will only voluntarily end this war if it reached its imperialistic aims. Otherwise, an end to the war in Ukraine will just be a break to prepare for another wave of escalation. So, ending this war is about your own security, because if you and the whole world today do not fight for democracy, you might one day have to fight for autocracy, because your country will be invaded and then you will be the one forced to invade other nations in the name of your ruler's imperialistic aims.

For instance, there are North Korean soldiers in Russia now. They are not in Ukraine yet. But did they go there voluntarily or were they sent there? Russia is connected to that and I think we really misunderstand this. Everybody's tired of Ukraine, everybody's like, okay, can we get back to things that are about us now. But this *is* about you. It is about everybody, and we need to have a better understanding.

Russia has clearly said there is no there are no limits to the Russian world. Everywhere there are Russians, or where the Russian language sounds, this is all Russia. So they never showed any willingness to stop when they invited the Ukraine it will go further.

Dr. Konstantinas Andrijauskas, University professor, Vilnius University, Lithuania

Ana Chupeska: Dr. Konstantinas Andrijauskas, what is the effect of your aggressive neighbors, Russia and Belarus, including the everlasting open questions of Kaliningrad on democracy and respect of human rights in your country? What can we learn from the Lithuanian example?

Konstantinas Andrijauskas: I am representing Vilnius University in Lithuania and obviously for us Lithuanians, the Russo-Ukrainian war is a key issue, but it happens to be an extra personal issue for myself as well. My father is ethnically Lithuanian. My mother is ethnically Buryat, the largest ethnolinguistic minority in Siberia, and at the same time, the Buryats have been very much prominent in a negative way, in a negative fashion throughout the entire decade of this war.

And I've got an anecdote, a story to tell and two conclusions, two recommendations that complement the previous esteemed speakers in this regard. Back in July 2014, I was in Russia, in Siberia. My mother was attending to the graves of her parents. This was not my first time in Siberia. I spent quite a lot of time there, roughly every summer of my life, over three years altogether, and I had friends there. And while I was there, in 2014, I had a birthday party with my friends, and then the next morning, you know, just woke up, and saw the news about the Ukrainian military plane being shot down by the so-called rebels representing the so-called People's Republic, the Donetsk. And my friends being, well, my friends, knew perfectly my political position on the issue, but our relationship was, you know, we were kind of pinching one

another when it came to understanding what had been going on in Ukraine, and they were like, “Look, we shot your plane again.”

And this appeared to be the case because throughout several months beforehand, the Russians had indeed shot a couple of planes, transport planes, including with Ukrainian paratroopers on board. But several hours later, the narrative from the federal media switched like this because it turned to be clear that it was Malaysia Airlines 17 or MH17.

My friends, the same people who, just a couple of hours before were laughing and making jokes – they were like, “Look, it was Ukrainians who actually shot the plane.” And I was like, “Are you stupid? What is going on? How come that you are interacting with reality in this manner? Whatever the federal box is telling you, you're internalizing it.”

And, you know, this is the key issue. The Russians are not stupid. This is simply how authoritarian countries work. If the Russian reality about the war, about their predicament, about the entire history of the country, particularly since Putin's arrival to power in 1999, if the Russians would suddenly internalize the entire story of their life – because, remember, we've got a generation of the Russians who knew Putin only, for whom he is their father figure in many ways – then their reality would crumble, and this is their personal choice, a very problematic one.

Now, complementing the esteemed contributions just made, I have two key recommendations. The first has to do with the fact I very much liked your point, [Gudrun

Steinacker], about Emmanuel Kant. He was born in Königsberg, right? The Russians would call it Kaliningrad, an occupied city in an occupied region, and in fact, and the region is very dear to our hearts, because we happen to be neighbors.

And look at what the Russians have done with the legacy of Emmanuel Kant, it is very telling. There is a house, yes, but other than that, it is non-existent. Emmanuel Kant, a representative of enlightenment, and the key principle of enlightenment is reason. It is this belief that reason trumps all of the other considerations.

The reality that we're living currently in is quite different. Our philosophical tradition these days, the writing one, is about deconstruction. It's post-modern, right? In many ways, it is about questioning everything. It is about questioning the objective truth, right? This brings quite a lot of problems, you know, the Trump effect, the Brexit in general. It creates the environment for propaganda to truly thrive, and this is a big challenge that we've got.

So, one of my key recommendations is to make clear whenever we're interacting that there is something called objective truth, and this should be the underlying principle. What the Russians did with MH17, they threw in so many versions, and used them to mix up reality, and then the people say, look, you know, maybe the people on board were killed beforehand. Maybe they were the Ukrainians, maybe Americans, maybe the entire thing was stage managed. The point is to confuse.

And then, the Russians come up with, look, us shooting up the plane is merely one of the versions. It's not one of the

versions, it's the fact, right? It's the fact. So, this is the first one about the objective reality.

The second point is about how to speak about the objective reality. It is about the vocabularies that we're using. What the authoritarian countries have done in the informational domain, in particular, and what they are continuing to do: They're taking the concepts that we deem to be objective, that are describing social, political, and other phenomena, they're twisting those, and then provide those back to the informational domain, to the informational market, if you will. It's really fascinating.

For example, I also happen to be a China specialist. How would you call the leader of China? You would say President Xi Jinping, and you would be right to a certain degree. His power lies not within this particular position. His power lies within the position of being the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. This is what we have to talk about, right? We are neighbors to Belarus. You would say the President is Lukashenko. But President Lukashenko is not the president. The president of Belarus is located in my hometown, in Vilnius, and that's Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. The president of Russia is not Vladimir Putin. We don't know who that is, because what he did during the latest elections was, in effect, an usurpation of power, even according to the Russian constitution. Let us be plain about that.

So, this is only one of the examples of how we are actually playing the wrong game, and there are so many other examples.

Srdjan Cvijić, President, International Advisory Committee of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Serbia

Ana Chupeska: Our next speaker is Srdjan Cvijić. What are your perspectives on democracy and human rights in Serbia? How do Serbia's authoritarian regimes affect the overall stability and security of the country, but also the region, particularly in reference to Kosovo-Serbia relations.

Srdjan Cvijić: Thank you very much, Ana. Well, I would like, yes, to start maybe by, and it is a direct answer to your question, by the way, by trying for us together to explain what we are talking about when we talk about the authoritarian countries. Because there is a certain tendency to put aside Russia, Belarus, obviously authoritarian countries, and treat countries such as my own or Hungary as something different. And they are not. And this is what I want to explain here.

In my country, concretely, for almost 10 years, we do not have media freedom. Practically all television stations with a national frequency are controlled by the government and by the president himself. Only less than 10 percent of the share is held by independent television stations that are basically on cable only. And in Serbia, still, the majority of the people get their information through the public service, through the TVs with national frequency, and this is what shapes their minds about what we were talking about.

The second thing is we refer to these regimes as competitive authoritarianism. This is one of the terms used. But they are not competitive. Serbia is not competitive since December last year. In December last year, the ruling party

bussed tens of thousands of people from Bosnia and Herzegovina to vote in the Belgrade elections and in other elections. And I think you had this in 2014 in this country. So, it's just, I think, yes, been there, done that. I think that maybe you would beg to differ, but I think in my country, it was done on steroids in comparison to 2014 here, but I might be wrong on that one.

And lastly, since August this year, the freedom of assembly is threatened in a serious manner. And I think these things then come together because how we look at these particular type of regimes that we sometimes call competitive authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, they're not separate types of regimes. They're just in a process that is going towards complete authoritarianism and you can stop it with a snap.

Regarding media literacy, the ambassador mentioned something about Serbia. I think that's an interesting case. Actually, it is not Russia to be blamed for the way in which Serbian people think about the world, their own country, relations with other countries in the region. Their minds are shaped by the media machine of the ruling party in Serbia.

And why am I emphasizing this? You may call the ruling party in Serbia useful idiots. This has been said before. But I think it's deeper than that. This distinction needs to be made because our president was just received by the German chancellor as a legitimate partner in Germany because, yes, we do have lithium that everybody wants and then our competitive authoritarianism is considered, well, kind of more acceptable. So, I think this is a big problem that we have right now.

And I want to mention a piece of research that is really interesting that explains what I am saying, about how it is the Serbian media machine that actually shapes hearts and minds of the people when they think about the war in Ukraine. In 2022, Open Society Foundations and the UK-based organization Data Praxis conducted a big global public opinion survey in numerous countries of the world. I think that there were more than 20 countries and Serbia was amongst them. They didn't publish the data on the war in Ukraine and Serbia in particular in their own publication, but my think-tank was given access to the raw data of this research. So, we published in cooperation with them a separate study, and a separate publication called Beyond Sputnik and RT. And it explains that Serbia is a global outlier in pro-Russian narratives. For example, people were asked, *Who do citizens think is responsible for the beginning of the war in Ukraine?* and the options offered were Ukraine, Russia, the West, and I don't know. Well, 63% of Serbs think it's the West.

And I understand these beliefs are strong in North Macedonia as well, probably because people here are enormous consumers of TV Happy, TV Pink from Serbia, and probably there are other reasons, but I think this is a very important reason why this is so in Macedonia as well.

So, this is one thing and there are other countries in the global south that come close to this, like Senegal 52, Indonesia 50, but no one was as much as Serbia.

But now, interestingly, an answer to another question: *How does the war, I'm paraphrasing, but how does the war in Ukraine end?* And there were several answers offered as option. One of them was Ukraine should give part of its

territory that Russia currently controls, so to have a ceasefire and peace talks and so on. The other one was that Russia should withdraw from all territories that it occupied. And interestingly, on average, when you look at the global south, that on the first question was weaker than Serbia, but you know kind of there, 57% of the global south do not agree with the statement that Russia should leave all the territories of Ukraine. In Serbia, only 12% agree.

So, why is this? You cannot say that there is more Russian propaganda in Serbia than in Moldova for example, because Moldova in this research was not agreeing with this statement by far. And interestingly we also, well, at least a majority of the Serbs think that parts of our territory were taken in the past as well. So, how this paradoxical result here that they think that you know it's okay to take Ukrainian territory but not theirs and this is something that we have been talking about. It's not about the truth. It's about emotions. And why Serbs are pro-Russian? It's not because they know anything about Russia or that they really like Russia. They like Russia not because of what it is, but because of what it is not. And it is not the West. And this is not as much intellectual, as it is emotional.

And the question is how do we get to that? How do we make change, at the level of emotion? You know this is a big puzzle. In Serbia now, we have a huge mobilization of students and I think they're managing quite well to do that, to address people in a way that politicians and maybe traditional civil society that we are we haven't been able to until now.

Ana Chupeska: Well I was just wondering if you can explain to us a little bit more on references how Ukraine and

the question of Ukraine and intervention within Ukraine and intervention in NATO and the question of Kosovo on the emotional level is explained between regular people in Serbia.

Srdjan Cvijić: I think they don't really. I think it's more about not knowing what's going on and not caring, probably, which is not only in Serbia, let's face it, but across Europe, as the war goes on, people are like kind of looking the other way.

So, I think being exposed to the people from Ukraine and being able to go there changes your views enormously, I think. Obviously, not many people will go to Ukraine for obvious reasons, though I did, but most Serbs wouldn't and you wouldn't blame them for that. Ukrainians didn't come to Serbia much when we had wars and stuff, but I think it's about being exposed to the reality.

When I was in Ukraine last year, I wrote a reportage about it from a human point of view and it did have an impact I think on the readers of the newspaper that I wrote for. But in general, the problem is that our government is playing a duplicitous game. On the one hand they spread this pro-Russian anti-western propaganda when, for example, the first lady of Ukraine came to Serbia, the foreign minister this visit went almost completely unnoticed in the media under the control of the government. Usually when foreign dignitaries come to Serbia, and this is one of the things that our current president introduced, their flags are flying from the airport to the city center, of both countries, and well guess which country didn't get its flag. It's Ukraine. So, while the President is abroad he brags about selling ammunition to Ukraine, which is good you know, but there

is a dark side of it because it fuels an enormous corrupt machine within the country and Serbian whistleblowers and investigative journalists wrote about that, but obviously in geopolitical terms, lithium is something that buys him favors in the in the west. So, there is this side, but he doesn't talk too much about it in Serbian media.

He is, we should understand, an authoritarian who is as authoritarian as he can be within the circumstances that he is in. We should not forget we're a candidate country for EU membership, so you know, if nothing else, the Belgrade regime sees the EU as a cash cow and they need the money from the EU, so I think there are limits to the authoritarianism.

But increasingly, less so. I think many red lines have been broken this year. But you know maybe I could quote another study from 2021 December of BPPC, because you mentioned this other affiliation of mine. We did a survey of the geopolitical views of the citizens of the western Balkan countries and in Serbia it's interesting when you cross the political affiliation of the citizens and their geopolitical preferences you see that by and large the ruling party voters are pro-Russian and pro-Chinese, so pro-authoritarian in that way, so why they do this as well, why they don't display Ukrainian flags, it's also because of internal political reasons. So, they're kind of it's you know like this tail wagging the dog scenario where you know they create a narrative that that like bounce them a certain you know limits their actions.

Erwan Fouéré, Associate Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, Belgium

Erwan Fouéré: First of all, there's no doubt that we have been far too complacent in the European Union in the protection of fundamental freedoms and for human rights and democracy. We have taken them for too long for granted and we only started seeing a pushback very late in the day look at the European Parliament for example. It took a long time before the European People's Party suspended the governing party of Victor Orbán despite the fact that he was demonstrating very clear actions and tendencies that undermined the basic principles of the rule of law which are sacrosanct and are part of the commitments that all member states must adhere to.

And of course, speaking of candidate countries we know how the European People's Party also supported and protected former Prime Minister of North Macedonia even when he was under investigation for corruption. So, the European Parliament is at fault as is, I'm afraid, the European Commission. The European Parliament had elections earlier this year and we've seen a growing rise again of those populist tendencies. We will see how this will impact on the various policies of the European Union. We've already seen a rather negative impact regarding climate change and the green deal. Let's hope that similar negative impacts don't happen with regard to the critical policy agenda of the European Union which is the enlargement in the coming years and making current negotiations successful.

The European Commission is, we forget, sometimes a guardian of the treaties. It has a binding commitment to ensure that all member states fully respect the basic principles of democracy, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. And yet, it took quite some time for the Commission to introduce some of the measures that are contained in the basic treaties of the European Union, to take measures against countries such as Hungary to mention that were not respecting the basic principles of the rule of law. Because it took them so long to initiate those legal proceedings, we saw Viktor Orbán trying to do whatever he could to see how far he could go before the Commission would act.

This is a constant challenge. We saw how during his current mandate as President of the Council, which fortunately is ending at the end of this month, how he again tried to undermine and how he displayed his dismissal of EU institutions. So now, we have a new European Commission and it is absolutely vital that they should do everything possible to make sure that within the European Union there is full respect and that if some member states continue to disrespect the rule of law and the basic principle, that it must immediately launch the legal proceedings, because it does have all the instruments at its disposal, not just the Article 7 suspension of voting rights, but also the conditionality attached to financial assistance from the European Union. As we know in the recent past there were several large sums of money that were kept back from Hungary, because of the fact that they were not respecting the rule of law. So that needs to be used much more effectively and to ensure that the principles are not undermined by these authoritarian tendencies.

And of course, it is also the Commission's role to make sure that similar actions are taken with regard to candidate countries. Of course, you see there are the annual country reports for each of the candidate countries. I have to say, as Srdjan was mentioning Serbia, that I find it quite extraordinary that several EU leaders have been traveling to Belgrade, including the President of the Commission, and praising Mr. President Vučić for progress in the rule of law when at the same time if I'm not mistaken, and Srdjan please correct me, but the government is detaining more and more representatives of civil society purely because they are criticizing the government or campaigning against this lithium agreement that was signed some time ago. So, this is not conducive to making sure that those candidate countries like Serbia will fully respect the principles that they should be respecting as candidate countries. And I think it behooves the European Eommission to make sure that it is not complacent or does not try to gloss over many of the issues concerning the violation of the rule of law happening in countries such as Serbia.

I would also emphasize two other aspects: One is the role of civil society, and we have seen that this is a requirement for all candidate countries, because we all know that civil society is a critical element in ensuring accountability of the governments. Of course, if they are put in jail, as is happening in certain in a number of instances in Serbia, it doesn't help and this should be called out by the European Commission and not accepted as unfortunately it seems to be happening. I am delighted to see that the new Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, last week at an event I attended in Brussels she was very clear and she says that I will do everything possible to ensure that the

governments fully respect the critical role of civil society. She also said she will go out to meet with human rights defenders and this was really a breath of fresh air compared to the dreadful record of her predecessor who did very little in this respect. So, I am hopeful that the new Commission with the new Commission for Enlargement will really turn the page and ensure that there's a far greater attention on all of these aspects with regard to the accession process.

And lastly, with regard to independent media and there we have seen it was mentioned by Srdjan and others, but also in north Macedonia we have seen instances of where journalists have been attacked criticized on social media merely because they presented objective views with regard to current events and many of them have been subject to lawsuits as well as a way of silencing journalists. And here again we are fortunate that finally the European Union now has, following the adoption of a directive, now has an instrument which will ensure that the EU will try to reduce the these lawsuits. It's called the so-called SLAPP directive – on strategic lawsuits against public participation.

Of course, legislation is fine but it's not enough and what we need to do is to ensure that the mindsets are also changed so that governments accept that it is the role of journalists to be critical of governments and like civil society to hold them accountable. So I will conclude there by hoping and relatively optimistic after my discussions last week in Brussels and hearing statements like the one from the new Commissioner, I am hopeful that there will be a change of approach and that there'll be a far more rigorous attention to ensuring that both inside the European Union, and with regard to candidate countries, full respect of the principles

that are at the foundation of the European project which we mustn't forget is a peace project.

Recently, it is clear that the North Macedonia is facing some difficult challenges with regard to its accession process, and not least the issue of the ongoing bilateral dispute with Bulgaria. I asked a question about that to the Commissioner last week and she was very clear. She said that the it is her wish that bilateral disputes do not impede the accession process and she admitted that the Commission has not been as successful as it would wish in preventing bilateral disputes from undermining the accession process and also undermining the credibility of the European Union. Imposed solutions are not ones which will guarantee long-term reconciliation.

Be that as it may, an agreement was presented and so I think it will be important for the government to continue on this path to try to resolve this problem. But it is quite clear that bilateral disputes must be dealt with separately from the accession process. If bilateral disputes are allowed to impede the accession process, if we allow history and identity and other such issues to enter into the accession process, then the accession process of the European Union will be a failure, and it's absolutely vital that the European Commission sets up a separate mechanism to deal with these bilateral disputes and to find common solutions that will not impede but promote reconciliation in the region.

And that's another point that the Commissioner said that was part of her initial statement is to promote reconciliation, again, admitting that not enough had been done in this respect, and this will now be also one of the important priorities for the European Commission in the region.

And with regard to the media, as I mentioned, there have been, and the Commission's report mentions that, in the recent progress report on North Macedonia, mentions the various attacks and that have been perpetrated verbally, but also I understand physically, against journalists and the way social media is being used by government supporters to undermine the credibility of journalists who are just fulfilling their professional duties.

And there again, it is important that the government do everything possible to prevent this happening. Accepting criticism should be a normal part of a democracy and like in Serbia, unfortunately, we see that the governing parties don't seem to want to accept that.

So, there's still a lot of work to be done for North Macedonia in the accession process. Corruption is still a terrible problem, as we've seen the latest United States declaration on the blacklist, and this shows in order to continue on its journey towards the European Union.

Panel 4: History and future of democracy, human rights, and media freedoms

A panel examining the past and future of civil society's commitment to democracy, human rights, and media freedoms. Speakers explore actions and strategies to empower media and civil society in combating disinformation and promoting democratic values.

Panelists:

Prof. Edward P. Joseph
Conflict Management Expert, Johns Hopkins University, USA
Petrit Saracini
Media expert, IMA, North Macedonia
Olha Danyliuk
Editor-in-Chief, Volyna Gazetta, Ukraine
Astrit Istrefi
Political and security analyst, Kosovo
Xhabir Deralla
President, CIVIL, North Macedonia

Moderator:

Heather Roberson Gaston
Human rights expert, USA

Edward P. Joseph, Conflict Management Expert, Johns Hopkins University, USA

Heather Roberson Gaston: Hello, everyone. I am Heather Roberson, and I want to welcome you to this panel on the history and future of uncompromising commitment to democracy, human rights, and media freedoms.

I want to start with Professor Edward P. Joseph, who we are honored to have here today. He is coming to us from, I hope you can all hear me, from SAIS, in the United States. That is a wonderful institution, at Johns Hopkins University, where people like Professor Joseph can teach conflict management, of which he is an expert. Professor Joseph has more than 12 years of on-the-ground experience in the Balkans, negotiating, including negotiating between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians. So, I think I want to start with you.

I have so many questions that I would really like to ask you, but just given what we have talked about today in terms of polarization, anti-democratic forces, media disinformation, all of these things, if you were to kind of be able to collect a group of actors into a room for a negotiation to be able to resolve these issues that the region faces now, who would you bring into that room, what kinds of things might you talk about, and what resolution would you drive towards?

Edward P. Joseph: I actually have a direct answer to Heather's excellent question. I don't know if it's the one really for this theme that we have today, but there is actually an answer. There is an answer to the difficulties in the Balkans. There is actually a clear answer.

First, I want to thank Xhabir for organizing this outstanding conference, that is really exceptional, and Wolfgang as well.

Thank you for the invitation here. Quickly, this is the last panel. I am going to end with the way it began with my good friend and co-director, Sašo Ordanovski. You mentioned recommendations, so we have them, and these are broader than the content. I want to emphasize what we did. We are coming now from NATO headquarters. We have discussed these recommendations in-depth with the new Deputy Secretary General, Radmila Shekerinska, the former Defense Minister of North Macedonia, who is obviously well known. I also have the honor not only to meet with Radmila, but also to present this to Secretary General Mark Rutte.

The point is this, Heather. It's not that you all need to dive in and get these recommendations. These are from youth leaders around the region. The point is to be concrete, and we asked these youth leaders from each of the WB6, including North Macedonia, plus two SAIS students, what should NATO do?

Let me tell you, they are very interested. Let's just say, the Balkans were the topic of the day, of the very day that we were at NATO. So, they are interested and they want ideas. And so my message is about recommendations is be concrete with them and be proactive in sharing them, and I'll share this with you. To answer your question, I will segue and give you the answer. You asked, Who would we talk to, to actually resolve and stabilize this?

I would say the other point, that you're absolutely correct that there is a lot that we, the US and EU together, NATO, can learn from this region. I think it's actually very interesting, in many respects, the Balkans, and here's the key word, the Balkans have been a harbinger. It happened first in the Balkans, and then it happened everywhere else.

It's actually a harbinger. Think back to the late 1980s. What was happening? The rest of Eastern Europe was a completely quiet column. You had Slobodan Milosevic, you had Kosovo, you had the end of Kosovo autonomy, and in fact the removal of Kosovo's autonomy happened before the fall of the Berlin Wall. So, you had these processes in motion, which then, all of a sudden, you had the reawakening of history, all these ethno-national tensions, war, Russia and Ukraine, these type of aggressive power wars that were based on, in many respects, and promoted and accentuated real differences, that were promoted and exploited by leaders like Milosevic, like Putin. So you have that, it's a harbinger. There's a harbinger here in North Macedonia.

How? When? In 2006, you had a new prime minister came in. I don't want to mention the name, because it's unnecessary, but you had a prime minister who swiftly eroded the democratic constraints and essentially had the elements of what autocrats dream of, of perpetual power, and then there came the wiretapping scandal and the protests, public protests, in 2014 and then the Pržino Agreement of 2015 that changed that.

So that was, again, a harbinger, a harbinger really before Orbán, before Viktor Orbán. You had that model, this electoral authoritarianism. You had that model here in North Macedonia. And so you see that.

Then, you had also a false comparison. Many people lumped Montenegro and Milo Djukanović with Serbia and Vučić, and said that they were the same. Freedom House even ranked Montenegro in a lower category and so forth. But it turned out not to be true. It turned out that Milo

Djukanović and his party suffered a defeat. And when he suffered that defeat, what did he do? He recognized the result. His party still exists, of course, and there is certainly a greater Serbian influence, but we see that it was fundamentally different. Djukanovic did not say I'm gonna burn the house down if I'm not calling the shots. No. He had been in coalition before, and he backed out. You can have criticism and so forth, but we can also have, sometimes we get into these false comparisons.

So I will answer your specific question with, I think, one of the most remarkable statements by a political figure in the Balkans that I can remember hearing in a long time, a statement from Serbian president, Alexander Vučić, just 36 hours ago. It was absolutely astonishing. I couldn't believe that he would say this. This is not the exact quote, but it's a completely fair paraphrase. He said, “I am not Assad. I am not Assad.” This is Alexander Vučić, well, really?

I thought this was absolutely astonishing that he would invoke such a comparison, and then, of course, you know, he turned it into his a statement about how he will not run away. It was about the protests, and he used this statement in an attempt to delegitimize the protesters, but in a very strange way, you know, and it shows you, that even very shrewd leaders like Alexander Vučić can make mistakes. It's almost always a mistake to use those words, “I am not.” We have the famous case in the United States, Richard Nixon, saying, I am not a crook.” In saying this kind of thing, you're invoking the negative, you're inviting people to make comparisons, in Vucić’s case, with Assad, and what is the point of that? What is the point of the comparison? Is the of the autocrat, the hollowness of the base of power of the

autocrats, that something or someone that seems so invincible today with all his command of the media, the courts, the military, with all the arrests of journalists, that even with all this seeming invincibility today, he can still vanish like that. Whereas democracies, messy as they are, inefficient in many respects, don't often just crumble in a moment as the house of cards falls down.

And so, I think that's really a striking reminder. It is striking, again, that Vučić invoked this comparison himself, and I think, in that respect, he has invited us to make that comparison as well, and we should take him up on that.

There is a solution to the Balkans. The fact is, the Balkans are in a state of artificial suspension, and there is no better example of this than this country, North Macedonia, which has twice been held hostage by ethno-national issues for which it is not culpable. It took the Prespa Agreement with Greece to relieve the veto on the NATO path. And the Prespa agreement is an outstanding agreement. Greece made important concessions that support the Macedonian identity and the strength and sovereignty of this country, which is very important. Now there is a veto from Bulgaria. It is completely outrageous. It is against the so-called Friendship Agreement. Sofia has behaved in anything but the spirit of that agreement, and it's wrong. And I of course I have my views about what the government should do regarding EU integration, but Macedonia is qualified, and it is clear that the obstacle is not within the country.

So, what is the solution? The solution brings me back to the point I mentioned at the top about Alexander Vučić and Serbia and his statement that he is not Assad. I will put the point to you this way very clearly. You cannot have a

democratic stable Balkans with an anti-democratic Serbia. It doesn't work, and in part, it's just size. Serbia is the biggest of the WB6. It has the biggest economy of the WB6. If you take it in comparison to Montenegro, the smallest of the WB6, the Serbian GDP is 14 times bigger. For Montenegro, Serbia is its number one trading partner, for both exports and imports. So do the math, politically and economically.

If Serbia is in this continuing neo-Greater Serbia posture, and is able to, as we heard on the last panel, pollute the media sphere in North Macedonia with so many Serbian channels, it's an enormous problem.

So, you cannot have this democratic advancement of the region when the largest country has these interests in subverting neighbors, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo. We don't have time, but there is a solution. It's very clear the solution is Kosovo. Serbia is able to sustain this position because of the exploitation of the Kosovo issue.

Those of you who are interested, I published recently about this with co-authors from Serbia and Kosovo, and the key is the non-recognizers. Even North Macedonia's situation with Bulgaria and Greece would not have happened but for the fact that Serbia has never progressed, which gave opportunities to Bulgaria and Greece. That is the main reason these countries are not in the European Union, because Europe is divided on Kosovo. That is the reason. It's so obvious, people don't even think about it. This is the source of the stasis in Serbia. It's really just the four NATO non-recognizers, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. This is spelled out in our report.

Our report is from Johns Hopkins SAIS, Wilson Center, and it's called From Crisis to Convergence, a strategy to tackle instability in the Balkans at its source. As you can see in the executive summary, it is all spelled out. Those four countries, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, have handed their leverage to Belgrade because they say, we won't recognize Kosovo until Belgrade does. They're basically giving their leverage, as if Serbia is a member of NATO or a member of the EU and is able to block an accession process. So, all Belgrade has to do is to act as if it is participating in the dialogue, and get EU money, but it has no real interest in resolving this issue. It has no interest in resolving it, because it has the leverage. It continues to isolate Kosovo, to weaken Kosovo, to get de-recognitions, and yet we're in a position where we need Serbia now even more – its lithium, the ammunition to Ukraine, all of which of course is financially beneficial to Serbia. They're not doing it as a favor to Ukraine.

That is the reason, and I just have to add, of course, that doesn't excuse Prime Minister Kurti from his own responsibilities. He has them. He has Kosovo's Serb citizens, and he must treat them as full citizens, and that's true, but the structural problem is not in Pristina. The structural problem is in Belgrade and those non-recognitions.

And it is important to remember that the Serbian people do have power. They have a vote, and this is why Vučić said that he is not Assad. He was referring to the protests. That's why he was foolish, in my opinion, very foolish to make that comparison, but he was saying – I will not run away. I will serve the Serbian citizens even against all of these

protesters who are just Western stooges. I'm paraphrasing now, but this is essentially his message, his ridiculous message, that when a train station collapses, the people need to be motivated by Westerners to protest? In fact, it is a spontaneous and understandable anger, and it is for a reason. People understand, finally, the cost of corruption, the relationship with China, and ultimately the point about democracy, what it is, what's the essence of democracy. It's about accountability. That's the essence of democracy. People always say transparency and accountability. It's not true. Democracy is about accountability. Not everything can be transparent. Even democracies have to be able to have discreet conversations. It's about accountability. It's ultimately the accountability of the government to the people. That's the essence of the democracy, and that's what he's being called to account for.

And so, even with all the disadvantages, they have shown their power. They proved it three years ago on lithium, which still remains very unpopular. I hosted last week a panel of Serbian experts, an event anyone can find online, and we called it a Serbian Lithium: Geo-Economic Boon or Environmental Disaster, and we had five very respected Serbian experts on that panel explaining why it's a problem. And it's across the political spectrum there, and they forced the government three years ago to shelve the project.

And now, of course, Vučić has been in Germany, with Chancellor Scholz, and Scholz was saying that Germany needs Serbia’s lithium. But guess what? The Serbian people have a vote in that, and that's really the point. They are not powerless in this.

Olha Danyliuk, Editor-in-Chief, Volyna Gazetta, Ukraine

Heather Roberson Gaston: Next, we will go to Olha Danyljuk. Olha is a Ukrainian journalist, living and working inside of Ukraine, which is, of course, not the easiest thing to be these days.

Olha Danyljuk: Yes, I am joining this panel from Ukraine because it was very hard to get to North Macedonia, unfortunately. I'm very happy to be here to talk to you all and to share some of my experiences, and to hear your voices. I might be a little bit pragmatic today. I will talk a little bit about numbers, a little bit about some information about local media in Ukraine because I'm not just a journalist. I'm a journalist and currently I'm the editor-in-chief of a local Ukrainian newspaper, which is located in the north of Ukraine and borders with Belarus and Poland. I just started my position last summer. I stepped in because my dad, who was editor-in-chief of this newspaper for a long time, now is serving in the Ukrainian army. And I will also talk about this today a little bit because this is also one of the problems that media in Ukraine are facing currently.

I would like to share some numbers and talk about problems that media in Ukraine are facing because of war, obviously. First, the main challenges are obviously shortage of staff, psychological stress, and lack of funding. What I wanted to say about shortage of staff is obviously because lots of Ukrainians evacuated, moved to European countries, or just fled the country. Lots of Ukrainians are currently serving in the army, including my dad, who would like to be in this conference too today, but he cannot. This is the main problem that we are facing today, as well as

psychological stress. I was even today worried if I would have electricity to be able to talk today with you because as you know, Ukraine suffers from blackouts, and even now I was checking if we have, if I would be able to speak freely and normally because of that.

We're facing these problems every day, and it's not about theory. We face problems with democracy and threats to media in real life, with real problems that we see every day, as I mentioned before, with psychological stress, obviously a shortage of staff and so on.

I would also like to mention that about lack of funding, because as I mentioned before too, I am a journalist of western, northwestern local media and for example, I would share with you that there was a recent study by the Media Development Foundation. This is a Ukrainian center for development of independent local media and they said that local media in western and central Ukraine receives less financial support than in frontline regions. And we were also, for example, in our media, we were thinking what can we do because, for example, only 45% of income of local editorial offices in the western regions of Ukraine have funding from donors and they can work freely and independently. In comparison, 73% of regional media in northern Ukraine, 87% in south and 93% in eastern Ukraine, which is obvious because this region suffered the most from Russian occupation, from Russian invasion, also missile attacks and so on.

But this is a very bad comparison, I would say, because all of Ukraine suffers a lot in different ways from war and what it causes, but the problem of underfunding of western, and some other parts of Ukraine in terms of media, is that it

creates news deserts. And this is when people in certain regions don't have access to information freely, so they are in a bubble. They don't know what's happening and it happens a lot in my region too, because, for example, northern parts of our region that borders Belarus, they don't have access to Ukrainian media freely. People there are forced to listen to Belarusian propaganda from the border and we also face this problem, because it's hard to fight that. These news deserts harm the democratic development of our country and the region.

We try to fight propaganda with our own forces. We try to, when we see fake news or when we see like ritual propaganda, we try to counter it. We try to reach to people from northern parts of our region with our newspaper. We try to talk to them, we try to build some dialogue.

All of us, not only people of Ukraine, but also people from all over the world – we are all victims of propaganda. We are all kind of victims of Russian propaganda. One of the solutions might sound crazy, but every time you read the news, it's important to ask yourself, you know, what am I reading now, am I a product of Russian propaganda. What is the source of information?

I think it's important to say that Ukrainians face these horrible crimes against humanity, horrible crimes against our democracy face-to-face. In the two years and nine months, since the start of Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there were 762 crimes against journalists and media committed in Ukraine. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war, 329 Ukrainian media outlets have shut down, according to several studies of Ukrainian NGOs who are supporting independent local media.

Our media, where I work as an editor-in-chief temporarily, we also face the problems, as I already mentioned, with financial support from donors abroad.

We also suffer from staff shortages, because two of our workers are in army, including my dad, who was editor-in-chief, and our designer. We also have problems with blackouts, and so on, so on, so on. But not only that. I think it's important to mention that we need to somehow mobilize all together to think of ways how we can find, how we can protect, for example, our regions, northern regions of Ukraine, who also face Belarusian propaganda. And not only that. Our region, which is said to be rear from the front line, here we still suffer from more air raid alerts since December, because of military trainings in Belarus, and it affects what we can do, because people have to hide when there is air raid sirens to go to the bomb shelter.

I might have talked about a lot of problems here, but as you can see, people are still working. People are still writing news, fighting for democracy and free regional local media, and we still have hope that soon we will write not only about war and war crimes and casualties, deaths, and destruction, but also about a free and independent future of Ukraine.

Thank you so much.

Petrit Saracini, Journalist and media expert, IMA, North Macedonia

Heather Roberson Gaston: We have Petrit here, and I know it's the most broad question in the world, but I do think that it's important. How do people like you, how do you keep going, how do you encourage other people who might want to be independent journalists who are actually reporting on important news in a context where you're facing constant attacks online, all sorts of attacks. How do you deal with that and keep doing what you're doing?

Petrit Saracini: Thank you for your question, Heather. I would like to greet you all and to thank CIVIL and its partners for this opportunity for having me here. It's really a tremendous and important event. We heard a lot of good things, a lot of bad things, unfortunately, what is happening in the world, in our region, but we heard also a lot of thoughts about what are the ways, let's say, out of this situation.

Obviously, we cannot be compared to Ukraine. The situation there is extremely difficult. We wish all the best to our colleagues, but also to the Ukrainian people in dealing with this unprecedented aggression of the Russian Federation towards the sovereignty and the territorial integrity, but also to the people of Ukraine, where we cannot be compared. In that sense, we may feel lucky that we are dealing with the problems that we are dealing with, which are very also difficult problems, problems that people in North Macedonia and the media community face, but also the region, and also Europe, which is under attack of authoritarian tendencies of political extremism, extreme

ethno-nationalism, and this has all taken toll to the capacity of our democracies and media in general.

I come here from the Institute for Media and Analytics, which is an organization that deals with disinformation, hate speech, discrimination, and violation of human rights in our country. I would like to focus especially on dealing with disinformation, because I think that is the main threat to the security of our countries, to the stability of our countries, but also to the very existence of the professional media as we knew them in the past, and as we hope to see them existing in the future as the key or the main pillar, the watchdog of democracy.

Our institute has been working on debunking and dealing with disinformation. We have produced many analyses, debunking false stories, fact-checking stories. We have also been the only organization in the region to produce jointly with the national TV station a short TV show of 10 minutes, which was debunking information in the media and the public discourse. And we still believe that the fight against disinformation should be mainstream, and that the media, professional media outlets, influential media outlets, and mainstream media outlets should be at the forefront of this struggle, because, let's be frank, civil society organizations, fact-checking organizations are doing a great job, but they are unable to reach mainstream audiences. And what we are seeing is that this disinformation industry that is undermining democracies, attacking human rights, producing violence, hate speech in the society, is predominantly threatening the professional media. It is taking audiences from them. And if it continues like this, most of the media outlets, professional media

outlets, as we see, the newsrooms are shrinking. Lots of them are having difficulty surviving.

We can see how the disinformation travels to the mainstream as well. Recently, Russian propagandists placed false information on a profile on Twitter, and it got picked up by lots of media in Serbia, and then this piece of disinformation was published by over 30 media outlets in North Macedonia, including two national TV stations. And regardless of the fact that we had a fact-checking piece on that, and regardless of the fact that there were also prominent international media such as Reuters and the Associated Press fact-checking services and debunking this disinformation, our media outlets, among them several that define themselves as professional and who have newsrooms and people who could do this fact-check, didn't even bother to check whether this is true or not. We saw this piece of disinformation later appear on the Telegram channel of Zakharova, and it was obviously a manipulated image from a billboard that never existed. The company that owns the billboard issued a statement for one of the fact-checking services that it never happened that they didn't have a billboard for Ukraine at all. But nevertheless, our media outlets published it, including two national TV stations, several news media, online media outlets that are deemed by the public as professional and credible media outlets.

So, if this is happening for a piece that is not so, let's say, not so important, that is really just clickbait, but it taps into the beliefs of a great portion of the Macedonian public, what happens when we face more challenging stories, events, and incidents that happen in our country more and more

frequently. We have seen the effects of disinformation during the time of the Prespa Agreement. We have seen what disinformation they produced, and that it led to violence and violent protests.

We can see disinformation and attacks on democracy and human rights, not only on interethnic issues, not only related to NATO and the anti-Western propaganda produced by Russia, and some media outlets in Serbia, but also by domestic political actors. We have very active, even parliamentary parties, also non-parliamentary political parties that openly propagate and use this information to attack NATO, EU, and generally the Western concept and democracies. We see the spread of disinformation against vulnerable minorities and marginalized groups and I'm afraid that we democratic societies are not able still to find a solution to these problems.

Just imagine how much disinformation can spread in a 30-second video on TikTok. You can spread five sentences, each containing disinformation. But to debunk this disinformation, you would need to do thorough research, finding the facts, and explaining why it's not true, and that is something you cannot put into 30 seconds. Also, the disinformation pieces that spread, these are very clickable, very sensationalistic pieces of content. They tap into the previously formed beliefs of the people, and they tap to the habit of the audience, which is becoming more and more dominant. It is confirmation bias; people watch the media and choose the content that confirms their beliefs.

This is why it is very difficult for pro-democratic forces to counter this harsh propaganda and the overwhelming flood of disinformation. It's very difficult because if you want to do

it, you have to use their tools and that's not democracy. And that is not what we are about.

So, what are some of the possible solutions? One solution is to mainstream the fight against disinformation. As I said, there should be coalitions between civil society, fact-checking organizations and mainstream media. This should be something that is the focus also of the international donor community, because yes, social networks are becoming more and more dominant in the way people consume content, but if this content is more professionally produced by professional TV stations, professional newsrooms, and if they use their strong channels also on social media to spread this content, I think that they can somehow counter this flood of influencers, podcasters, and YouTubers, who are being used as tools for spreading propaganda and disinformation.

Also, what is very important, and what we are not seeing, is a consistent and active role of institutions in this regard. The only part of the society in North Macedonia that is fighting disinformation is civil society organizations. We are not seeing concrete actions from the institutions, from the media, or other parts of society. We are constantly speaking about the whole society approach. Unfortunately, it is not happening and it should happen.

In the long term, of course, we can speak about media literacy, about educational interventions, because our books in the primary and secondary education system are filled with disinformation and outdated information. We need an enormous effort to fix those and incorporate media literacy in all the subjects, not just as some voluntary course in some of the stages of education.

Let's not forget that the disinformation industry, people, and anti-democratic forces, they use lots of money. They invest lots of money, lots of human resources in what they do for their personal political gain, for their gain of their companies, and other interests. It's like facing an army who is coming to you with tanks, with guns, with nuclear weapons, and you are taking out swords and horses. This is not the way to enter this fight. This fight should have adequate human and financial resources if we want to be successful. If not, I'm afraid that I don't have such an optimistic picture about what is going to happen in the future, also with the impacts of social media, artificial intelligence, the degrading of professional media, degrading of education throughout the world. I think that we are going to face more and more difficult times before we come to grasp with reality and maybe try to make a more active fight against threats to democracy and human rights.

Astrit Istrefi, Political and security analyst, Kosovo

Heather Roberson Gaston: We now move to Astrit Istrefi, a political and security analyst who also has had a long career in civil society in the Balkans. How do you get organizations from across the Balkans to kind of set aside probably very large differences in order to find common ground?

Astrit Istrefi: Thank you very much, Heather. I shall admit, though, that I have failed in my mission, but Balkan Forum didn't fail yet. So, but I'll say a couple of words, and if you allow me, as I would like to just, you know, highlight three issues that concern the discussion that we are having here, and it's about actions and strategies, but also about the sources. Now, first, I would like to really thank CIVIL and all of CIVIL's partners. I think that the determination and courage of the CIVIL colleagues should be celebrated, as many people do not have this. Being under attack, being threatened, being, you know, in all sorts of situations, that takes a toll on their lives and on the lives of their families. So, I proud to be here with you.

But let me tell you what my views are. When we are talking about the actions and strategies, I think, you know, there should be a matter of prioritization, and the prioritization may mean, well, what is it that should be addressed and should be addressed now, immediately, because that is having the highest impact in Europe and wider world.

Second would be what could be mid to long term, medium to long term. The one that we should recognize, and I think we should recognize also the inaction, is that Ukraine,

people in Ukraine, every second is life or death. And it's three years since 2022, but it's 10 years since 2014. And I think our freedoms, our freedom, our democracy, our security is threatened by Russia.

And we cannot say we stand by Ukraine. I think we should say Ukraine should win the war. Not we will stop the war, but Ukraine should win the war, and we will help them. And Russia should be defeated. I think that is really critical. We were talking here about empathy. We were talking here about kindness. I think it depends, to whom do you show that empathy or kindness? To Russia? How? Nobody can say that we will beg Russia to stop the war and they will just leave. They will never do it. They have to be defeated. They have to. Wars in former Yugoslavia did not stop because somebody was begging, because we should have shown force. Not we, we could not, as Albanians in former Yugoslavia, nor Bosnians could do that, but someone did. And that was United States, that was NATO countries that put an end to the war. And I think that should be the action now, for the sake of all of us, but mostly for the sake of people in Ukraine.

I think where we stand now, it's just repeating the same things that we have been saying for such a long time. I may say I'm the youngest one here in the panel, but I have 50 years, half a century of life experience in the Western Balkans and work experience on peace building.

And it should be recognized that the Western Balkans cannot be business as usual. When we talk about European integration, there should be bold steps made to ensure that EU accession is successful and NATO accession for the countries that want to join.

There is, by the way, one country that doesn't want to join. But for the other countries there should be more bold steps and decisions made. And I think this may be a weakness that authoritarian leaders recognize. The European Union needs to talk for 10 years about whether it's good to act on this or that. You don't need that time when you are Putin. And I'm not saying Europe should become Putin, but I'm just saying that if we recognize the threat, if we anticipate what's coming, then we should act more quickly and boldly.

And I think what we are losing in the Western Balkans, we are losing young people. We are losing a new generation of young people, of young leaders who may well strengthen the democracy in our countries and build a different vision for the Western Balkans. We don't have them. And the longer it takes, the less democracy we will have and more authoritarianism we will have.

I think also, when we talk about disinformation, it is about the narrative, who constructs and owns the narrative. I think for all of us, I think we would agree that democracy means something. And what it means, we feel those are the fundamental values that we are fighting for, and we are fighting for those common values for ourselves, for Europe and European Union.

But for Orbán, democracy is something different. He owns that narrative. For Fico, democracy is something different and they are demonstrating that every day. And what is important is the narrative. We don't own the narrative. We don't produce the narrative. Therefore, we are losing the fight. And if we are trying to debunk whatever disinformation is out there and try to counter it, we cannot do it because

we do not own the narrative. And I think our narrative should prevail.

And the last one, many mentioned here the political opposition. And I would agree that political opposition has an important role to play to defend democracy, to defend human rights.

But there is one thing, and this is specific to our context and to this geographical space, and this is connected to our recent history. Political opposition would want to gain power, but when it comes to disputes, to tensions, to conflicts with other nations, they do not have a completely different view on how the issues may be resolvedWe had some leaders who were different, and I think we lost that momentum. We did not capitalize on that. That is not the same in Serbia. That is not the same in Bosnia. I think we should recognize that it's good for the democracy of those countries. The more democracy there is, hopefully the less conflict there is, but that they do not hold a completely different view to what those nationalists have in mind.

And when it comes to Western Balkans, I think if we are talking about war, if we are talking about violent conflict, I will say it is possible. I have lived long enough in this country to say that it is possible. If we are seeing terrorist acts happening and people being killed by armed groups, it is possible. The only thing that nobody can say for sure is the scale, but that violence can happen, war can happen once again in Western Balkans.

And you know, for about over 30 years, I have been working with colleagues across the region to build bridges between different ethnic groups. And I had so much hope, believing

that that is holding, until 2022 when I failed. And it was people, it was colleagues that I knew for over 25 years. They were not just colleagues anymore, but friends.

But I realized that from the ones who were consuming this information propaganda, we turned into sources of that. And that was the only time that I was angry with myself. I was so disappointed with myself. I didn't give up, but I failed in that.

And I recognized it 30 years later. I still have some energy to go on with it, but I think we should recognize even that fact that projects may be supported by different donors. What remains at the source, at the DNA of conflicting parties, cannot go away with projects that are superficial, that deal with some of the issues of common concern, but do not go deeper into the roots of the problem. And I think we have neglected that for 25, 30 years. And that is haunting us.

But just to end with this, I think there are two, if I can say, recommendations, that resonate with me, and that is that we should not stop building alliances across the border, across the ethnic groups, across the Atlantic, to fight for democracy, to fight for human rights, to fight for freedom.

And second is, I think we have to be smarter into building our own narratives in what we, all of us human beings, believe that democracy fundamentally is.

Xhabir Deralla, President, CIVIL – Center for Freedom, North Macedonia

Heather Roberson Gaston: I think we'll move on to Xhabir Darala. This is our last guest, and our host. As we know, Xhabir is the founder and president of CIVIL, our host organization for this event. In addition to being a human rights leader, he is a journalist and an editor. I've known Xhabir for 20 years now, since 2003, and I want to say all sorts of positive things about his use of art and his encouragement of local democratic culture, and the story of really searching him out. Really, I did search him out in 2003, because I saw the work that CIVIL was doing.

I saw, you know, posters and pins that people were wearing on their clothes, and stickers in restaurant doors, all encouraging people to give up their weapons, because Macedonia was then recovering from a short-lived but very painful civil war, and Xhabir and CIVIL were encouraging people to disarm. And I thought it was beautiful, and I had to look for this person who was creating this art, and so, you know, the rest is history. We did meet, and I've known him ever since.

We've been discussing Ukraine quite a lot, and so what I want to mention is that Xhabir received the Order of merit from Ukrainian President Zelensky last year. It is a recognition for his work, for keeping Ukraine in the news, making sure that people don't forget, and that people aren't confused about what is right and wrong, which is, of course, so difficult to do right now.

So, now I have arrived at you, Xhabir, and I want to ask, What is next for CIVIL? We were going to discuss the

history of CIVIL, the present of CIVIL, and what's next for CIVIL and so I'll just let you take over.

Xhabir Deralla: Thank you. First, I am not, and I have never been alone. The people who are here, the team of CIVIL and CivilMedia deserve the greatest applause. It's them who make me go on. It's the people like this panel and the other panels. Those people over there who also supported our ideas and our struggle for the truth.

Now, let me just make a couple of points about the truth. There is only one truth. There is one truth based on facts. There are 100 million truths about one fact, but only if people's minds have been distorted, manipulated, oppressed, intimidated, blurred, or threatened. But the truth is there. Objective, one truth. Russia is the aggressor. Ukraine is defending itself. That’s the truth.

Or in our everyday life, the police could be beating peaceful demonstrators. Then, a certain Prime Minister could come out and say, the police has been defending themselves from the violent demonstrators who actually have fallen victim of foreign agents like Santa Claus, for instance. I've heard last night while hanging out with our friends from Germany, Italy, UK – Europe – that there was this Duma member who proposed that Santa Claus needs to be banned in Russia because he's a symbol of foreign agents.

These are facts – this happened. You can't escape it, no matter what you do. I've heard here many facts today. And they *cannot* be moved. They *can* be manipulated. They *can* be distorted. They *can* be shut down. Bat they remain facts of reality – the truth.

Our media platform is under cyberattack every day and night. Now it's even cheap to do it. At the time, we costed those who were attacking us 7,000 euros per day. Now we cost them 200 euros, because of the advancement and the availability of technology. So, invest a little, gain a lot.

That's the main line of business of the propagandists. They invest very little.

It's very easy to stir nationalism and hatred. It's very easy to turn youngsters into cannon fodder of hate and violence, to draw them even in places like sports fan clubs. And it starts there. It can start anywhere and then arrive to what I heard here is called their victory because we retreated. We were blindfolded by fear, by commercial interests, economic interests, or just because of some prejudices.

And we cannot do that. We cannot allow ourselves anymore, because we have no time anymore. We ran out of time.

I just want to say that the frontline is in Ukraine. People are being killed there, being kidnapped. There is a systemic use of torture, rape, and looting civilian targets. But, the frontline is not finishing there. If we break, help is not going to come. If we break, politicians will say, well, the polls say that I should stop supplying Ukraine with weapons, I should stop supplying North Macedonia with civil society institutional building grants, or I should stop sending humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. Because the polls say so. And the polls depend on what people believe in what they see or how much it is blurred by those that have interest to win, to the enemies of democracy and human rights.

Therefore, thanks to the great advice of quite a few people, amongst them many are in this room, CIVIL, to answer your question, will intensify its work across the borders in the region, not only in the region of the Western Balkans, but beyond the borders of Western Balkans, which is in trouble.

CIVIL plans to enter the *war against war* in Ukraine, or at least that's the working title of our efforts, because after the war there is another war. We've seen it in Bosnia, we've seen it in Kosovo, that the war after the war lasts even longer than any war. We had a six-month-long skirmish in comparison to what was in Bosnia and in Kosovo and in Croatia. However, we still live through it every day and night. So that's what we want to do, to go there, offer our knowledge, offer our hearts and our minds, and we'll be available at any spot in the world that our knowledge and experience and our commitment will be needed.

At the end, I'm certain that Putin will lose eventually. What we need to do is not to let Putinism win, and that's the greatest risk. Putin will fall. Putinism must fall too.

Thank you.

Closing Reflections & Final Remarks

Astrit Istrefi: Just one thing. I don't know why it happens, but I think we forget that wars that we experienced 25, 30 years ago here in this space, were not only in Croatia and Bosnia and Kosovo. There was a conflict in North Macedonia. There was a conflict in South Serbia.

So, I think it's just going with that in mind, that when we talk about democracy and when we talk about disinformation and what can or cannot happen, we have to keep that in mind. We have the recent history, but we have legacy, which is as old as centuries, which is exploiting people who do not have that history and poisoning them with hatred may be a bit more challenging, but not in this space. It's not. Our kids were raised with lullabies about either defending their own country or fighting against some enemy, and enemy is always – a neighbor.

Petrit Saracini: The effects of this propaganda and disinformation – a couple of studies present the perception of citizens on disinformation showed that people believe that NATO and EU are spreading equally or even more disinformation than Russia. That's the belief of our citizens.

Whether North Macedonia should provide military aid to Ukraine, more people are against that. There is also the almost equal belief that who is to be blamed about the war in Ukraine, that Russia and NATO are more or less equally to blame about the war in Ukraine.

Another study, some years ago, showed that 49 percent of the people believe that democracy is not the right system. Only 51 percent believe that it is very functional, or more or less functional, but 49 percent would ask for another

system. And this was before all this research, was before all these events that happened recently in the recent history of Macedonia, and I believe that that number of anti-democratic forces has grown. These are serious threats to democracy in North Macedonia. People are discouraged, intimidated.

The consequences from attacks on journalism, and human rights activists are tremendous. Many of us have stopped talking, writing, participating in the public discourse, because of being attacked by organized groups who are obviously the same people that are supporting this right-wing extremist political options.

You see no defense on their behalf, and even see some politicians using civil society and activists as an umbrella to shield themselves from attacks against themselves. They think, ah, these are activists, they are spitting on them now, so we are more okay with our position. This has resulted in a great portion of our progressive thinkers, intellectuals, journalists, to just, you know, become more and more detached from the public discourse and from writing, from explaining things to the audience. This opens space for those that are against democracy and human rights in our country. I think that it's going to become worse and worse.

We've had the misfortune of history repeating itself in the Balkans. Look what happened to Serbia after Milošević, and look what happened to North Macedonia after Gruevski. Those forces that were for integration in the European Union and in NATO, and against nationalism, simply lost the elections. What has won the elections in North Macedonia is ethnic polarization, ethno-nationalism, divisive discourse, divisions in the society on ethnic,

gender, and other bases, and this is something that people should take into account. I'm discouraged that it's going to be better in the near future, but for the future I have optimism that we will gather our strengths and prevail.

Xhabir Deralla: Well, elections are also won by Russian operations of influence, by Russian subversive operations of changing people's minds, attitudes, and behavior, and we have to admit that sooner than later.

We should have acknowledged this reality decades ago – or at least more than a decade ago – when we first saw the "little green men" appearing in Crimea. They are still there today. And, of course, these operations are not funded solely by the Kremlin.

These operations go through media, and even civil society organizations that are funded by Western taxpayers, and through the avenue of influence that comes from Belgrade, also directly from the church in Russia via the church in North Macedonia or in Serbia, Greece, etc. It also comes through the Muslim community, through the Islamic religious community, through the great friends of Russia in the Middle East, through Tehran. We need to acknowledge that sooner than later. Otherwise, it will become even darker – so dark that we wouldn't be able to find the switch and put on the light.

Of course, I agree with my colleagues here. It's going to be even darker, yes, and what? The night is the darkest before dawn, before the sunrise. Unfortunately, there will be many more grim hours. When I only think of how many children in Kiev will tonight stop being children, who will hear the

horrendous sounds of missiles. It doesn't give me a lot of peace.

What I think we should do is – we need to recommit, and the ways are easy. We need to recommit through dialogue, through calling people, through writing letters, through making, if necessary, long conversations about some basic values, at least.

And I have to say that these last words I'm pronouncing are actually thanks to the conversations I had yesterday with our friends from Germany, Italy, Europe, UK, from Ukraine, from Belarus, Poland, and Kosovo, and my friends and compatriots.

I'm getting out of this room more optimistic, more energized than when I got in, and I can assure you I will recommit to human rights and to democracy even more than ever before.

I think this recommitment is needed more than ever before.

We at CIVIL have one, well, more than one slogan, but one of them that comes to my mind right now – after 25 years – is that we never surrender.

One more thing. I would like to quote my dear colleague Dehran who came to me and said, “Xhabir, let CIVIL be congratulated for these 25 years. And we will count another 25 years. After that, let history count.” I was so emotional when I heard that. I keep repeating it and I think that these words of Dehran should be the closure of this conference. Thank you very much Dehran. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, CIVILians and thank you all. Thank you Wolfgang for making this happen. Thank you all.

ACTIVITY REPORT

International conference "Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism"

December 11-12, 2024

Introduction

The international conference “Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism” brought together experts, policymakers, civil society leaders, and journalists from across Europe and beyond to address the most pressing challenges facing democracy today. Held on December 11-12, 2024 in Skopje, North Macedonia, the event provided a platform for in-depth discussions on the threats posed by war, the rise of nationalism, and the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies.

Over the course of the two-day event, more than 80 participants took part in panel discussions, workshops, and networking opportunities, exchanging insights and laying the foundation for developing concrete recommendations to strengthen democratic resilience and media freedom. Partner organizations committed to collaborating on a strategic policy document outlining sustainable actions for key actors and decision-making structures at regional and global levels.

The Government of the German Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) supports this important international conference. The event was part of the NRW Human Rights Week, which features various formats on this critical topic. North Macedonia and North Rhine-Westphalia have been partner regions since 2021.

The international conference in Skopje was organized by CIVIL – Center for Freedom along with MEDIA DIALOGUE / Y4M (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany), in partnership with New European People’s Forum, based in Brussels.

Day 1: Workshop, press conference, networking

Workshop: Discussion in groups, setting basis for recommendations

On the first day of the conference, a workshop was held to foster open dialogue, networking, and cooperation in a more informal setting. Nearly 30 participants from across Europe took part in the workshop, which was conducted behind closed doors to ensure a safe space for open and constructive discussions.

Divided into four thematic groups, participants identified urgent challenges and explored perspectives on defending democracy and human rights. They examined the growing threats posed by disinformation, authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding. They focused on the impact of hybrid warfare and propaganda, and the role of civil society and media in countering these threats.

Throughout the discussions, participants shared insights from their countries, highlighting common patterns and unique challenges. They worked together to formulate actionable policy recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic resilience, enhancing media literacy, and fostering cross border collaboration. These recommendations were later presented to both domestic and international audiences at the conclusion of the conference and are now part of its official outcomes.

At the workshop, experts, activists, and policymakers, set the basis for creation of a platform not only for analyzing current threats, but also for developing actionable solutions for defending democratic values in Europe and beyond.

Press conference: Presentation of the Defending Democracy Initiative, launching the website, announcing the conference agenda and the exhibition

At the press conference, Xhabir Deralla, Biljana Jordanovska and Diana Tahiri from CIVIL, Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann of MEDIA DIALOGUE, and Mika Beuster of the German Union of Journalists, presented the basic postulates on the importance and significance of this conference, and have announced the launch of the special website Defending Democracy:

https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/

Several journalists, including national TV stations and news agencies, attended the event.

PRESS CONFERENCE VIDEO LINK:

https://youtu.be/19GAn7azNvY

At the press conference, CIVIL presented the public statement on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day in which the organization called for justice and decisive action.

PUBLIC STATEMENT LINK:

https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/international-human-rights-day-civil-calls-for-justice-and-decisive-action/

CIVIL's new internet platform is in English, while it is also linked to newly formed sections on existing internet media outlets in Macedonian, Albanian and English. The new sections are:

ДЕМОКРАТИЈА in Macedonian
https://civilmedia.mk/category/forum/demokratija/
DEMOKRACI in Albanian
https://civilalb.info/category/demokraci/
DEMOCRACY in Englsih
https://civil.today/category/society/democracy/

They are dedicated to the Conference, as well as to other outputs and related content that derive from this important international event.

At the press conference Xhabir Deralla and Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann highlighted that democracy in the world is facing major challengeS, especially in the face of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which reveals frightening consequences of uncontrolled tyranny. According to them, a big challenge for the world is also that violence and military action continue in the Middle East. War crimes, such as deliberate attack on civilians, systematic torture and use of hunger as a weapon, are increasingly normalized. These tragedies are part of a global attack on human rights, fueled by fear, divisions and systematic suppression of resistance.

Mika Beuster, President of the German Journalists' Association, noted that education, media literacy and civic participation remain key tools for combatting propaganda, hatred and extremism.

Biljana Jordanovska announced the photo exhibition "Defending Democracy: 25 years of CIVIL". She pointed out that it includes a very short selection of photos of the entire archive of CIVIL over the past 25 years. Even though part of CIVIL's archive has irreversibly disappeared following the raid and robbery in the premises of the organization in 2017, a large part of the archive is still online, on the robust multilingual media platform of the organization.

Networking Session: Strengthening Connections and Fostering Collaboration

The first day of the international conference concluded with a dedicated networking session, providing an open space for participants to connect and explore opportunities for collaboration. This session brought together a diverse group of individuals, including speakers, civil society representatives, members of the academic community, policymakers, and media professionals, fostering meaningful discussions beyond the formal conference panels.

The setting encouraged deeper conversations on pressing global challenges, including the fight against disinformation, the erosion of democratic values, and the role of cross-border cooperation in defending human rights. Journalists took the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with experts and activists, while other participants engaged in discussions that laid the groundwork for future partnerships and joint initiatives.

Beyond professional exchanges, the session also served as a moment of solidarity, reinforcing shared commitments to democratic resilience and media freedom. Participants reflected on the key themes of the conference and explored ways to maintain collaboration beyond the event itself. The atmosphere of mutual support highlighted the importance of building alliances in an era of growing polarization and disinformation.

By facilitating direct engagement among individuals and organizations with a shared mission, this networking session strengthened connections that will continue to shape efforts in the fight for democracy and human rights in the months and years to come.

Day 2: International Conference "Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism and Authoritarianism"

The conference program was composed of and introductory speeches and four panel discussions, the working language was English, and simultaneous translation was provided in Macedonian, Albanian and English. The conference could be followed live in all three languages on CIVIL's Facebook and YouTube pages.

The panel discussions were thematically divided and included panelists – prominent leaders of civil society, media professionals and experts, university professors and diplomats from many countries in Europe and the United Stated.

MEDIA LINKS:

Panel 1: Democracy under siege: How wars and conflicts undermine democratic institutions and spread disinformation

https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/democracy-under-siege-the-media-are-a-key-infrastructure-a-barometer-of-democratic-values-and-respect-for-human-rights/

Panel 2: The rise of the far-right nationalism: Analysis of the influence of the far-right on social cohesion and the role of the media in countering its spreading

https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/new-vision-for-europe-a-safe-space-for-democracy-and-human-rights-against-the-rise-of-far-right-nationalism/

Panel 3: Countering authoritarianism: Effective strategies for resisting authoritarian tactics and protecting democratic freedoms

https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/countering-authoritarianism-solutions-are-only-possible-from-free-persons-with-free-media-and-democrats-on-the-streets/

Panel 4: History and future of uncompromising commitment to democracy, human rights and media freedoms

https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk/uncompromising-commitment-to-democracy-putin-will-fall-but-putinism-must-fall-too/

CONFERENCE OPENING

The conference, via video address, was opened by **Nathanael Liminski**, Minister for Federal, European, International Affairs and Media of North Rhine-Westphalia, followed by speeches from **H. E. Petra Drexler**, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany, and **H. E. Vilma Dambrauskienė**, Ambassador of Lithuania.

Panel 1: Democracy under siege – How wars undermine democratic institutions and spread disinformation

The panel discussion that was led by the President of CIVIL, Xhabir Deralla, included the participation of Christiane Eilders, University Professor, Heinrich Heine University Dusseldorf, Germany, Sasho Ordanoski, Journalist, North Macedonia, Wolfgang Ressmann, President of Media Dialogue/Y4M, Germany and Heather Roberson Gaston, Human Rights Expert, USA, who discussed about how wars and conflicts undermine democratic institutions and human rights, instill fear, and spread disinformation and nationalist propaganda through the media.

Panel 2: The rise of the far-right nationalism – the impact on democracy and social cohesion

The panel discussion that was moderated by Wolfgang Ressmann, President of Media Dialogue/Y4M, Germany, included the participation of Roger Casale, Secretary General, New European People's Forum, Italy, Kseniya Halubovich, Journalist, German-French Journalist Award 2021, Belarus (in exile), Mika Beuster, President, German Journalists' Association, Germany, Aleksandar Spasov, University Professor, North Macedonia, Admir Lisica, Researcher, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bojan Maricic, Civil

Society Activist, Former Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs and Former Minister of Justice, North Macedonia.

At the panel discussion, the speakers spoke about the surge of far-right movements and their impact on democracy and social cohesion: what the media and civil society can do and setting the basis for further cooperation in regards to an actionable plan and strategy.

Panel 3: Countering authoritarianism – challenges and solutions

The panel discussion that was led by Ana Chupeska, University Professor, included the participation of Gudrun Steinacker, Vice-President of the Association of Southeast Europe, Germany, Erwan Fouere, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Policy Studies, Belgium, Kateryna Pavlova, Expert on Disinformation and Propaganda, Ukraine/Germany, Konstantinas Andrijauskas, University Professor, Lithuania and Srdjan Cvijic, President of the Advisory Committee of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Serbia.

At the panel discussion, speakers discussed various strategies and best practices for resisting authoritarian tendencies and strengthening democratic governance. A special focus within this panel was placed on media literacy as one of the ways to counter malignant operations of influence and anti-democratic trends in our societies.

Panel 4: History and future of uncompromising commitment to democracy, human rights, and media freedoms

The panel discussion that was led by Heather Roberson Gaston, Human Rights Expert, USA, included the participation of Edward Joseph, University Professor, John Hopkins University, USA, Petrit Saracini, Media Expert, IMA, North Macedonia, Olha Danyliuk, Journalist, Ukraine, Astrit Istrefi, Political and Security Analyst, Kosovo and Xhabir Deralla, CIVIL, North Macedonia.

At the panel discussion, the speakers examined the past and future of civil society's commitment to democracy, human rights, and media freedoms. The speakers explored activities and strategies for strengthening media and civil society in combating disinformation and promoting democratic values. In addition, the panel introduced partner organizations and celebrated the 25th anniversary of CIVIL – Center for Freedom, reflecting on its history, impact and vision for the future.

Exhibition: Defending Democracy: 25 years of CIVIL

On November 25, 2024, CIVIL celebrated 25 years since its founding and its commitment to defending human rights, protecting democracy, and fighting lies, hate and propaganda.

Over a hundred successful projects, countless events and a media platform that has grown into an important public space for political dialogue and one of the foundations of social discourse, are just a part of what CIVL has offered to civil society. CIVIL's efforts have touched thousands of lives across all communities – transcending ethnic, religious, political and social boundaries. CIVIL has tirelessly fought and continues to fight for the rights and freedoms of all, without exception, without differences.

From fighting discriminations and violence to advocating for rights, freedoms and justice – in times of peace and in times of war, CIVIL has remained resolute in its commitment to the values of a free, open and democratic society.

The exhibition "Defending Democracy: 25 Years of CIVIL", was a segment of the conference that visually, but also thematically structured, displayed CIVIL's vision and mission through activities and civic engagement on the side of democracy, human rights and freedoms.

The exhibition:

No-fly zone over Ukraine - #StandWithUkraine, Macedonia Square, Skopje, March 6, 2022–A protest in support of Ukraine in its fight against the Russian occupier, on the 12-th day after the sky over Ukraine continued to rumble from the Russian missile attacks. With photos from the devastating consequences of the attacks, the message was aimed at protecting the civilian population that is going through the horror of the bombing of residential buildings, schools, hospitals and other civilian targets.

#BeFree – A multimedia event, Caravan of Freedom, Stip, September 24, 2016 – The program of the Caravan of Freedom included also debates, an outdoor exhibition, art and activist workshops, but what united all was “Music of Freedom”. The goal of the Caravan of Freedom was through the influence of art to awaken civic awareness in decision-making at the local and national level. The Caravan of Freedom covered over 30 municipalities, with 9 large multimedia events, with participation of over 250 musicians, poets, visual artists, participants at debates and many other artists, intellectuals, famous figures and activists.

European values – Skopje, 2021 – European values, next level, a project for the promotion of European values, in the fight against information disruption and hybrid threats, by monitoring and analysis of critical processes and promotion of European values in the country, whose contribution is reflected in greater transparency, democracy and legitimacy of critical socio-political processes in the Republic of Macedonia.

Equality, justice, freedom – Skopje, April 19, 2016 – Protests are intensifying in the Freedom March, increasingly more citizens take to the streets to express in a pro-democratic way their revolt not only against the shameful abolition of then President Gjorgje Ivanov, but also against Nikola

Gruevski's regime. That day three journalists from Kosovo were arrested by the police, were held for three hours and treated as serious criminals.

Flags – Protest, Colorful Revolution, Skopje, April 2016 – Multiculturalism was expressed and the primary driving force of all citizens who took to the streets every day: together we are stronger, we are all affected by the same injustice, our aspirations are the same. The colorfulness represents the flags of all ethnic communities, but also of the strategic partners, with a message that the pro-European spirit is here and present and there is no giving up – The fight continues!

Silence kills freedom – Flash mob #Restoring Freedom, Macedonia Square, September 22, 2022 – The street performance, part of the three-day event "Speak!", a global campaign, created as a response to the increasing attacks on human rights and freedoms, and the culture of division that causes people to turn - against each other. The performance was also an opportunity to promote the universal message of the "CITIZENS CHARTER A global framework for citizen participation – right to freedom.

Revenge of the Tree – author Miroslav Stojanovic – Shuki, "Freedom" camp (#GoodbyeNikola) in front of the Government of the RNM, May 26, 2015 - "Colors of Freedom", a series of art workshops that CIVIL initiated, as part of the activities

organized by the Citizens for Macedonia coalition. More than 20 artists took part in the workshop, whose expressions of liberation from Gruevski's regime were exhibited on the police fence in front of the government building. "Revenge of the Tree" is a multi-layered depiction of liberation form the essential urge to live free from the toxic political narrative of Gruevski's regime.

No justice – no peace - Assembly of RNM, April 6, 2016 – A slogan that united citizens in Macedonia, symbolizing the need to be vocal in the demands for a change of government and restoring democracy. One of the conditions was holding free elections. CIVIL sent a message that this implies that the elections should be organized by institutions that are non-partisan, that are supra-partisan, institutions free from the party dictate of the parties in power – conditions that still apply today for free, fair and democratic elections.

Police brutality – Arrests in front of the Ministry of Justice, #MacedoniaProtests, Skopje, April 13, 2016 – Several thousands of revolted citizens took to the streets following the address of then President Gjorgje Ivanov, in which he announced that he had signed a general act to terminate all criminal proceedings against persons from the government and the opposition, which resulted from the wiretapped conversations (SDSM bombs). Ivanov claimed that it was way out of the political crisis. Ivanov's "abolition" was assessed by the citizens as an act that had no credibility

and should not be recognized. That was the start of the Colorful Revolution.

Russia is a terrorist state – Independence Day of Ukraine, Skopje, August 24, 2024– Independence Day of Ukraine was marked in front of the Monument of Taras Shevchenko, founder of the revolutionary democratic trend in the history of Ukrainian socialism, third year in a row since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. North Macedonia showed that it is a strong supporter of the Ukrainian fight to defend its sovereignty and integrity and freedom and democratic values.

All weather conditions are suitable for activism – A public event of CIVIL, Stip, January 16, 2016 – Under the slogan “All for free elections” despite the minus temperatures and the sleet that had turned into snowfall, CIVIL’s team talked with the people of Stip for ninety minutes about everything that troubles them in regards to human rights, especially in the electoral context and called on the citizens to join the efforts for ensuring free elections, but also for urgently depoliticizing the institutions.

All people are born free and equal – A multimedia event, Caravan of Freedom, Kumanovo, September 2, 2016 – Performance by the group Bla, bla, bla... The messages of freedom that they sent through their music united the audience of all generations, who from the beginning to the end of the

event supported all the participants with applauses and raised hands. The Caravan of Freedom was a confirmation of the aspiration for freedom, of the beauty of art and of its power to unite all differences into one whole with one single goal – freedom.

Free elections yes, electoral fraud no – Assembly of the RNM, April 6, 2016 – CIVIL at a meeting with citizens expressed its position about the failure of the then government to implement the Agreement for overcoming the political crisis signed in Przino (June 2 /July 15, 2015), thus disabling the creation of conditions for holding free parliamentary elections. CIVIL demanded a resignation of the then government.

Triumph of freedom – Triumph Gate, Skopje, May 9, 2016 – The Colorful Revolution celebrated Victory over Fascism Day and Europe Day, under the slogan “Fascism Never Again”. Protestors painted the Triumph Gate (Macedonia Gate), part of the “Skopje 2014” project, which depicts the historical “triumphalism” of the state, part of Nikola Gruevski’s regime. The main message that rang out that May 9-th was that the “regime will not overcome us – the fight continues”.

Colorful policeman – A protest in front of the State Election Commission, Skopje, May 4, 2016 – Protestors also painted the building of the SEC. Unintentionally, the paint ended up also

over the policemen who were securing the area, hence they also became part of the message, painted in the colors of freedom against the blackness of the regime they were protecting. Less than a month from the start of the Colorful Revolution, CIVIL's online survey showed that 83.40% of respondents fully supported the protests.

Online Program (related content)

During the course of the *Defending Democracy: 25 Years of CIVIL* exhibition, at noon, on December 12, the online audience's attention was grabbed by video contents, including interviews with **Prof. Dr. Vytis Jurkonis**, Director of the Freedom House Vilnius Office, and an interview with former President of North Macedonia, **Stevo Pendarovski**, briefly presented in this report.

Interview with Stevo Pendarovski, Professor at the American College in Skopje and former President of North Macedonia

CivilMedia conducted an exclusive interview with the former president of North Macedonia, Prof. Dr. Stevo Pendarovski as part of CIVIL's activities ahead of the *Defending Democracy and Human Rights* conference. He spoke about the crisis of democracy, the influence from the East, especially from the Kremlin and Beijing, and about the role of the European Union. A special focus in the interview was placed on the vulnerability of democratic institutions to hybrid threats and how authoritarian tendencies find fertile ground even in formal democracies. Prof. Pendarovski offered a unique perspective on the need for educational reforms and strengthening critical thinking as a basis for protecting democratic values.

Interview with Vytis Jurkonis, Director of the Freedom House Office in Vilnius, Lithuania

Prof. Dr. Vytis Jurkonis is the Director of the Freedom House Vilnius Office, where he leads projects focused on democracy, human rights and civil society in the Eastern Partnership region and beyond. He was part of CIVIL's activities ahead of the major International Conference "Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism and Authoritarianism" (Skopje, 11-12 December 2024). In the interview for CivilMedia, Jurkonis spoke about Lithuania's continued support for Ukraine, the solution to defeating the growing threat from authoritarian regimes and the Kremlin's dictatorial militant regime.

Defending Democracy: German TV documentary captures key moments from the International Conference in Skopje

The German organization Media Dialogue is the producer of the short TV documentary that in a unique way tells the story about the International Conference "Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Face of War, Nationalism and Authoritarianism". The six-and-a-half-minute documentary, directed by award-winning German director Samuel Debus, offers a dynamic overview of the key messages of the conference through short statements from some of the participants.

"This event has the goal to support North Macedonia in its fight against Russian propaganda and to connect people, organizations and democrats", said **Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann**, President of **Media Dialogue.**

The documentary captures the key moments, including the workshop with more than 30 participants from across Europe and the United States, a press conference and networking sessions from the first day.

Roger Casale, leader of **New European People's Forum** and former British MP and diplomat, emphasized the importance of dialogue in the multicultural society of North Macedonia.

"Here we are in North Macedonia where you have Macedonians, Albanians, Bulgarians, Turks – a multicultural community. I think we can help in trying to bring people together to talk to each other across those divides, but in a non-polarizing way", he said in the documentary.

The second day of the conference began with a welcome address by **Xhabir Deralla**, President of **CIVIL**.

"It is a great honor to welcome you to this international conference on defending democracy and human rights in times of war, nationalism and authoritarianism", he said.

Nathanael Liminski, Minister for Federal, European and International Affairs and Media of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and Head of the State Chancellery, stressed in a video address the urgency of addressing issues related to democracy, media and human rights.

"It has never before been so urgent as it is today to work on the topics of democracy, media and human rights", Liminski said.

German Ambassador to North Macedonia**, Petra Drexler**, confirmed this sentiment, emphasizing that defending

democracy and human rights is a moral and legal obligation for all European governments.

Lithuanian Ambassador **Vilma Dambrauskienė** also delivered a speech, in which she encouraged resistance against militant and authoritarian regimes.

The documentary includes **Gudrun Steinacker**, Vice-President of the Association of Southeast Europe and former German Ambassador to North Macedonia, who participated in the panel discussion **"Resisting Authoritarianism"**.

Ukrainian disinformation expert **Kateryna Pavlova** warned that the loss of trust in information is one of the biggest threats. Prominent Macedonian journalist and political analyst **Dr. Sasho Ordanoski** stressed that journalism is not about absolute truths, but about uncovering facts and relevant contexts.

Xhabir Deralla, concluded his address with a powerful statement: "At the end I am certain that Putin will lose! What we need to do is not to let Putinism win".

The first day of the conference also included working groups focused on identifying challenges and developing actionable recommendations for the future of democracy and human rights. The President of the German Journalists' Association, **Mika Beuster**, stressed the importance of uncovering the truth in an era of widespread disinformation.

The documentary of **Media Dialogue** is a powerful visual summary of the conference, highlighting the importance of collective action in defending democracy and human rights at a time of rising global challenges.

LINK to the TV documentary

GERMAN SUBTITLES: https://youtu.be/LsAKBBYEamg

ENGLISH SUBTITLES: https://youtu.be/MUVYwTLpMug

MACEDONIAN SUBTITLES: https://youtu.be/wiQUBMkq9cE

ALBANIAN SUBTITLES: https://youtu.be/mGtMpmTTDxA

MEDIA LINKS

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY (ENGLISH):
https://defendingdemocracy.civilmedia.mk

CIVIL TODAY (ENGLISH):
https://civil.today/category/society/democracy/

CIVIL MEDIA (MACEDONIAN):
https://civilmedia.mk/category/forum/demokratija/

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