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**VARIATION IN DEMOCRATIC BELIEF  
SYSTEM (DBS) ACROSS WESTERN  
BALKANS: YOUTH AGENCY AND THE  
FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE**

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# **Variation in Democratic Belief System (DBS) Across Western Balkans: Youth Agency and the Future of Democratic Resistance**

## **Summary**

This policy essay explores democratic belief systems (DBSs) in the Western Balkans to provide evidence-based insights for policy practitioners. Moving beyond traditional analysis of survey data that focuses on nominal support for democratic values, the study uses a network science approach to identify critical structural differences in how citizens across the region construct their DBSs and envision democracy. The findings reveal that each country maintains a unique configuration of democratic values, rendering a one-size-fits-all policy approach ineffective.

The analysis highlights three primary findings regarding the nature of the democratic belief system in the region: (1) the only "common denominator" across the Western Balkans is adherence to direct, electoral democracy, rather than a broader set of liberal democratic values; (2) contrary to common assumptions, youth are not more democratically oriented than older generations.

Their democratic belief system is less "crystallized," showing no distinct core values to separate them from their elders; (3) based on a lack of a shared vision of democracy, we can argue that democracy in the Western Balkans is currently failing to fulfill its fundamental functions, which include understanding of the future, deciding fairly, and solving problems.

The primary recommendation emphasizes the need to restructure civic education. Because the public suffers from fragmented and "poorly connected" democratic beliefs, there is a significant opportunity for policymakers to intervene. Adjusting educational frameworks to the realities of the general public's sparse DBSs is presented as a potentially beneficial path toward building a robust civil society, advancing democratic beliefs, and ensuring the long-term stability of democratic systems in the region.

## 1 Introduction

The process of autocratization, defined as a regime transformation in which countries become significantly less democratic, has accelerated in recent decades. From 1900 to 2023, there were 99 instances of autocratization originating in democracies. Two-thirds of all recorded autocratization affecting democracies occurred in the last 30 years, from 1994 to 2023 (Nord & Lindberg, 2025). Yet the ongoing processes in contemporary democracies are not entirely one-directional. While defending democracy is becoming harder, consolidating authoritarian rule is also becoming more challenging than in the past. The Western Balkans is one region where we have witnessed historic levels of democratic resistance and unprecedented opposition to anti-democratic incumbents.

The literature on democratic backsliding suggests that the main drivers of this process are democratically elected leaders who deliberately erode democratic norms and institutions (Bermeo, 2016), typically beginning with attacks on media freedom and civil society spaces. Since attacks on institutions and civil society often come from leaders who were democratically supported (at least initially), we should ask whether the same public

has enough potential for democratic resilience. Or, put differently, what kind of democratic public is capable of reversing the effects of creeping autocratization?

## 2 Belief Systems and Democratic Resilience

The success of democracy depends heavily on public support and citizens' engagement in the democratic process. From the perspective of democratization theory, mass beliefs are crucial because they determine the likelihood that a country will become and remain democratic, and that the political system will be accepted as legitimate (Almond & Verba, 1965). Democratic regimes, therefore, become stable only when patterns of authority are consistent with people's beliefs about authority. On this view, the prevalence of democracy over autocracy depends on how deeply civic orientations are rooted (Welzel & Inglehart, 2009). Yet, instead of existing in isolation, democratic beliefs form embedded networks of interrelated attitudes known as a belief system (Converse, 1964). For this reason, understanding the structure of the *democratic belief system* (DBS) is a vital step towards evaluating the trajectory of a country's democratic development. Mapping the coherence and density of DBS networks across different population subsets is imperative for understanding how resilient a society is to democratic backsliding practices.

All major theories of democratization point out the critical role of popular mobilization in establishing and consolidating democracy (Teorell, 2010). The likelihood of successful democratization is enhanced by the ability of democratic forces to "allow the maximum degree of active participation in the struggle by the higher proportion of the population" (Schock, 2005). Democratization is also supported by the effective diffusion of democratic ideas and demands through a network of actors with shared belief systems, as evidenced by the spread of "electoral revolutions" in the early 2000s (Biesinger, 2007; Tucker, 2007). Today, the importance of popular mobilization in resisting authoritarian state capture is nowhere clearer than in the WB region. Following the tragic death of 16 people at the train station in Novi Sad in November 2024, a student-led protest emerged and showed

impressive mobilization capabilities against the regime of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party. With the political outcome of student-led protests in Serbia still uncertain, images of packed streets of Serbian cities encouraged student-led protests in Montenegro and Bosnia that transpired as a result of tragic events in those countries. While these movements differed in terms of longevity, sheer numbers, and effectiveness, they all pointed to the same conclusion: in order to succeed, these youth-led movements need to convince the general population of their capacity to generate new democratic visions. For this reason, it is vital to understand the following: (1) to what extent is the DBS of young people in WB, compared to the belief system of a generation socialized in the complete absence of political plurality, better suited for the defense of democracy; and (2) what value-based obstacles youth face in their attempt to mobilize wider society against increasing authoritarian tendencies in the region.

This essay tackles one possible answer to these questions – (in)compatibility in the structure of the democratic beliefs system. The main theoretical assumption underlying this focus on the structure of the belief system is that for democracy to be established or maintained (democratic resilience), a significant level of attitudinal cohesion, consistency, and generational similarity is required. With this in mind, the essay focuses on the following unexplored research questions: What are the basic characteristics and core components of democratic belief systems (DBSs) in each individual Western Balkan country? How does the structure of DBSs vary across the WB countries? How does the structure of DBSs vary between younger and older generations in WB countries?

### **3 Network Science Approach to Democratic Beliefs**

Existing research analyzes democratic attitudes in the Western Balkans either separately or as a part of latent belief structure (Lavrič & Bieber, 2021). Such approaches fail to address the problem of the *structure*: the relationship between beliefs and the shape of the belief network. Instead, they analyze them mostly as isolated phenomena. In contrast, I conceptualize be-

liefs as a network in which democratic beliefs (values) represent nodes, and correlations among them form edges (Boutyline & Vaisey, 2017). Treating DBS as a network of related beliefs shifts the focus from *what* people think about democracy to *how* people think about democracy. In this essay, I analyze three structural dimensions of DBSs: **density**, **inconsistency**, and **centrality**. Network *density* refers to the strength of connections among democratic beliefs within the same value system (the stability of the belief system). *Inconsistency* indicates the degree of conflict among beliefs within the same system. Finally, belief *centrality* is used to inspect the structural importance of a particular belief for the overall network. The centrality of a particular belief can be used to evaluate which democratic belief most influences the overall understanding of democracy.

All three indicators of DBS structure have important implications for democratic resilience. High-density DBSs are far less susceptible to external influence, whereas low-density belief systems are more vulnerable to disruption by the authoritarian regimes (Lee et al. 2025). *Inconsistencies* within the DBS constrain societies' ability to defend against democratic backsliding because beliefs within the same system must reinforce one another. Otherwise, contradictory messaging weakens the possibility for collective action. The *centrality* of different nodes (values), if accompanied by conflicting messaging, can seriously undermine collective action and lead to divergent methods for achieving goals.

### 3 Data & Measurements

To comparatively assess differences in DBSs, the same survey items must be available for each country. For this reason, I used the European Social Survey (ESS) Rounds 6 and 10, which include batteries of questions dedicated to evaluating democracy. Two rounds of ESS include data collected in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia.<sup>1</sup> Survey items

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<sup>1</sup>I could not identify any international surveys conducted on the general population dealing with democratic beliefs that collect data on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

measuring democratic beliefs asked respondents how important a particular value is to democracy in general, rated on a scale from 0 to 10. **Table 1** lists democratic beliefs to be used. Selected questions capture beliefs about democracy in general, not about how democracy functions in a particular country.

**Table 1.** Overview of survey items measuring democratic beliefs

| Value                     | How important is it for democracy that:                                   |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Free media/speech         | The media are free to criticize the government?                           |
| Human rights              | The rights of minority groups are protected?                              |
| Fair elections            | National elections are free and fair?                                     |
| Legal equality            | Courts treat everyone the same?                                           |
| Government accountability | Government parties are punished when they have done a bad job?            |
| Government responsiveness | Government changes policies in response to what most people think?        |
| Economic equality         | Government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?         |
| Direct democracy          | Citizens have the final say on political issues by voting in referendums? |

As pointed out earlier, I expected the structure of DBSs to vary across WB countries and between groups within each society. I based this expectation on evidence that the structure of belief systems is strongly influenced by psychological and situational factors (Lee et al., 2025). This essay primarily focuses on age as an individual predictor. Specifically, the project investigates how the DBS structure differs between the young generation and

the rest of the population. For the purpose of this study, I define “youth” as individuals aged 18 to 35. The other age categories include 36 to 66 and 67 plus.<sup>2</sup> The strength of the connection between democratic beliefs is estimated using partial correlation between node pairs. This allows us to estimate the nature of the relationship between two beliefs while controlling for others. The *density* of the DBS network was measured by dividing the sum of the absolute partial correlations by the total number of possible connections. A fully connected network of democratic beliefs would, thus, have density equal to 1. *Inconsistency* was measured by dividing the sum of the absolute values of the negative partial correlations by the total possible connections in the belief system. With respect to *centrality*, the most popular measures were used – strength, closeness, and betweenness – all dependent on the concept of the shortest path length. This allows researchers to identify major “hubs” in the network of the democratic belief system, which hold the network of DBS connected (Dalege et al. 2017).

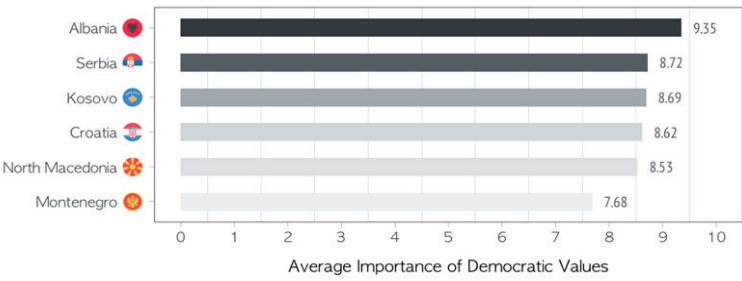
## 4 Analysis & Results

I begin the analysis with descriptive statistics regarding the importance of democratic values. **Figure 1** shows the average importance of democratic values by country. Citizens of WB countries appear to have a high level of agreement that chosen democratic values are important. The lowest mean value is recorded in Montenegro (7.68), and the highest is in Albania (9.35). Since averages may be disproportionately influenced by individual values, Figure 2 displays the importance of each value separately across all WB cases.

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<sup>2</sup> Full research project also includes an analysis of differences regarding participation patterns (voters vs. protesters).

**Figure 1.** Importance of Democratic Values (Averaged)



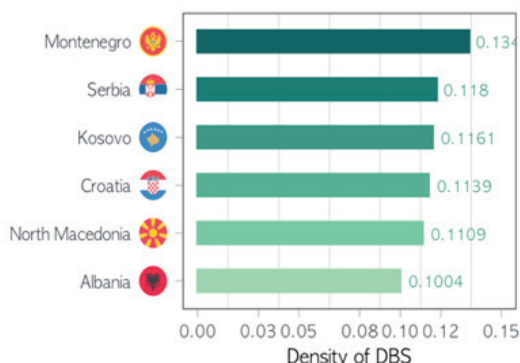
**Figure 2.** Importance of Democratic Values (Separate)



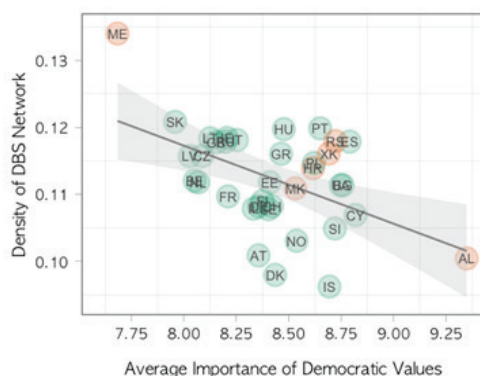
The most important conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that countries differ in quantity (the size of the “spider web”), while the *shape* appears to be very similar. This means that citizens of WB countries generally place similar importance on the same democratic values. In conclusion, if we were to follow the traditional approach, we would conclude that citizens of all WB have strong democratic beliefs, and that their belief system is generally well-balanced among the eight democratic values. Yet, a less optimistic interpretation would find these results suspiciously high, or at least significantly inflated, because people often express formal support for democracy while simultaneously maintaining many authoritarian tendencies (Milačić, 2026). Network analysis, which identifies dense and consistent relationships between democratic values across WB countries, would confirm the validity of the optimistic interpretation. A pessimistic view of the data, however, would be vindicated if network analysis produces a rather sparse network structure of the DBS.

#### 4.1 Structure of DBSs in Western Balkans

Dense networks reflect a stable democratic belief system because different democratic values mutually reinforce one another. A ranking of DBS network **density** across WB countries is shown in **Figures 3** and **4**. Two conclusions can be drawn from this finding: (1) networks of democratic beliefs in WB are sparse, with an average correlation between nodes being 0.115 (weak connection); (2) the more citizens find these values important for democracy, the less dense their democratic belief system is (compare Figures 1 and 3). Therefore, as support for democratic values in WB increases, the stability of the belief system decreases. This “scaling problem” – an increase in the importance of certain values does not lead to the strengthening of other democratic values – is not specific to WB but is also observed across Europe as a whole, as shown in **Figure 4**.



**Figure 3.** Density of DBS Network in WB



**Figure 4.** Relationship Between Importance and Density of DBS

With respect to *inconsistency*, there seem to be more reasons for optimism. Analysis shows that, although sparse, DBSs in WB are not marked by major inconsistencies. Specifically, there are 28 edges (connections) between democratic values per country. With a single exception, the data show a single negative correlation between pairs of democratic values. The only case where an increase in the perceived importance of one democratic value (economic equality) corresponds to a decrease in the perceived importance of another democratic value (free media) was identified in Serbia.

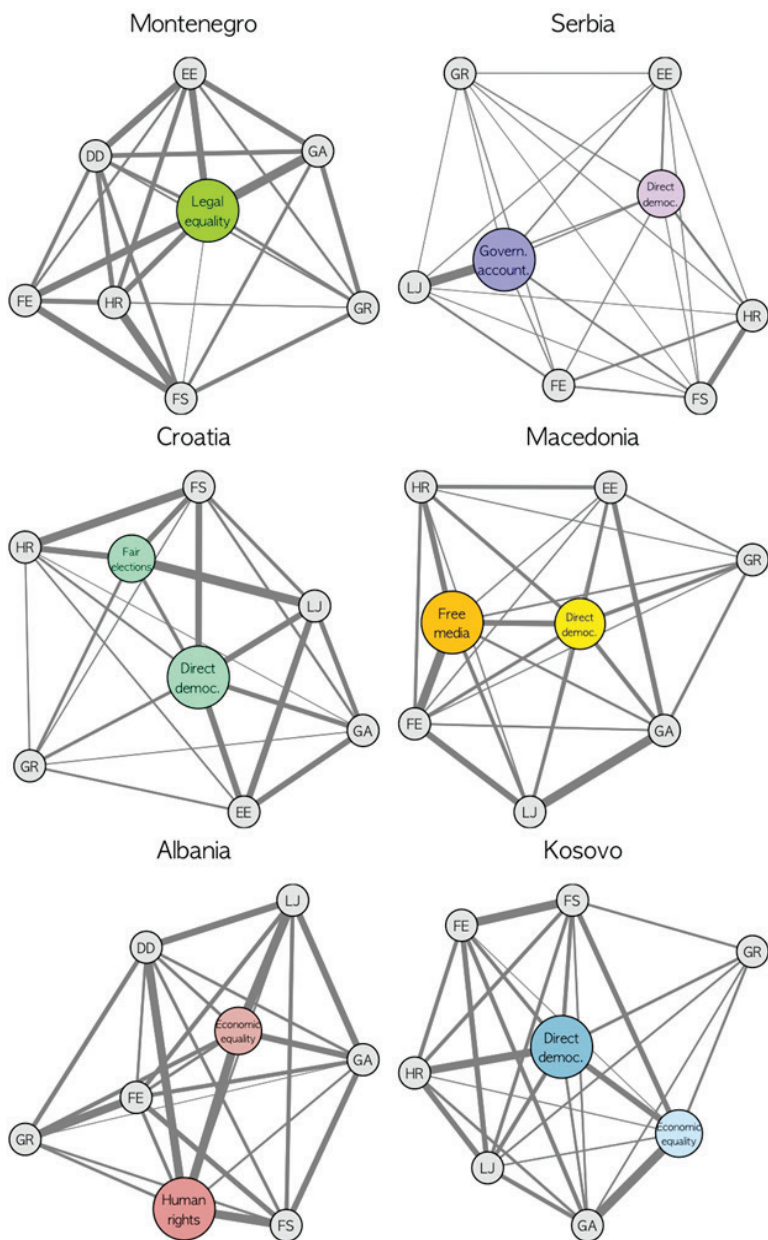
Unlike for the first two measures, there is dramatic variation in how people in WB countries envision democracy. **Table 2** displays three major *centrality* measures for each country. To

summarize: (1) the *strength* of a node in a DBS effectively refers to the extent to which particular democratic values are connected to others. The change in the strongest node in a network will most directly affect all other nodes in the network; (2) *betweenness* indicates how often a value is found on the shortest path between other two nodes. In other words, it measures the extent to which value canA be considered a “hub” (or bridge) on which the stability of the democratic belief system depends. Finally, (3) *closeness* measures the average distance from other nodes, and the value that is most efficient in spreading change.

**Table 2. Centrality Measures Across Western Balkans**

| Dominant nodes (values) |                     |                     |                   |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Country                 | Strength            | Betweenness         | Closeness         |
| Albania                 | Human rights        | Human rights        | Economic equality |
| Croatia                 | Direct democracy    | Fair elections      | Direct democracy  |
| Montenegro              | Legal justice       | Legal justice       | Legal justice     |
| North Macedonia         | Free speech         | Free speech         | Direct democracy  |
| Serbia                  | Gov. accountability | Gov. accountability | Direct democracy  |
| Kosovo                  | Direct democracy    | Economic equality   | Direct democracy  |

It is clear from **Table 2** and **Figure 5** that citizens' democratic belief systems differ across WB countries. Broadly speaking, in Croatia and Kosovo, the electoral dimension of democracy is central. However, the strength and stability of DBS in Albania centers around human rights, in Montenegro around legal justice (equal treatment by courts), in North Macedonia on free media (speech), and in Serbia on government accountability. The only “common denominator” that is important in at least some manner in four out of six WB countries is direct democracy (citizens’ final say through referendums).



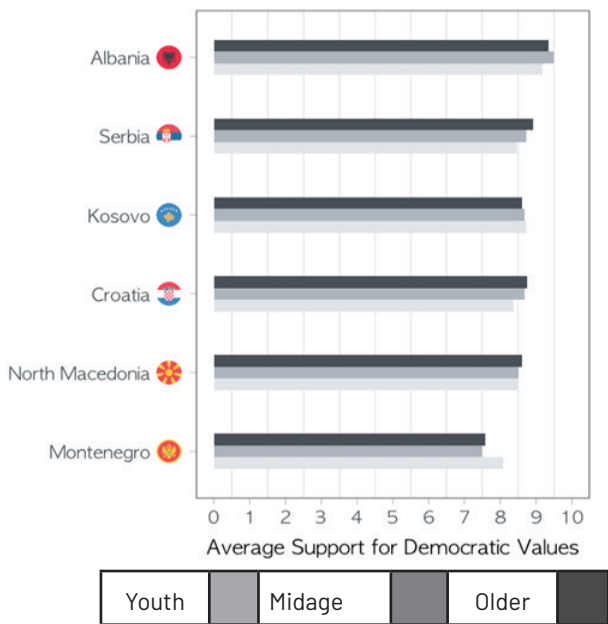
Notes: FS = "Free speech/media" | HR = "Human rights" | FE = "Free election" | LJ = "Legal equality" | EE = "Economic equality" | DD = "Direct democracy" | GA = "Government accountability" | GR = "Government responsiveness"

How is this related to democratic resilience? To use a metaphor, the larger the button, the greater its effect on the overall network. For instance, if an authoritarian government “presses” on core values, the signal does not remain isolated but instead spreads across the network, resulting in a compounding effect likely producing a stronger reaction and mobilization of opposition. In contrast, the effect of an authoritarian pursuing a non-central value would remain isolated and would not trigger a wider reaction from neighboring nodes. Similarly, pro-democratic forces attempt to mobilize, and messaging centers around the largest nodes is most likely to be effective in producing collective action, because the “signal” reaches all other democratic values and people who find them important.

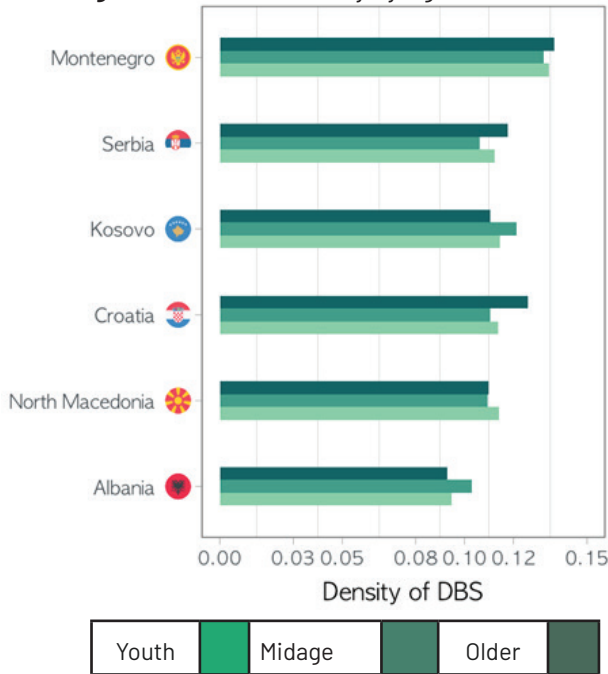
## 4.2 Differences Between Age Cohorts

After exploring between-country differences, the analysis turned to a within-country comparison of three age cohorts. **Figures 6** and **7** show the average adherence to democratic values and the DBS density for each age cohort. Contrary to public perception, data show that young people in WB are no more democratically inclined and do not have denser DBS than older generations. In terms of *consistency*, almost all connections are positive, with few minor exceptions. Since no inconsistencies were identified in the youngest cohort, this suggests that older generations exhibit slightly more inconsistent DBSs than younger people. For instance, in Serbia, the relationship between *economic equality* and *free speech* is positive among youth and negative among the older generation. The oldest generation, hence, is potentially willing to “sacrifice” the media’s right to criticize government, as long as it produces economically.

**Figure 6.** Support for Democratic Values by Age Cohorts



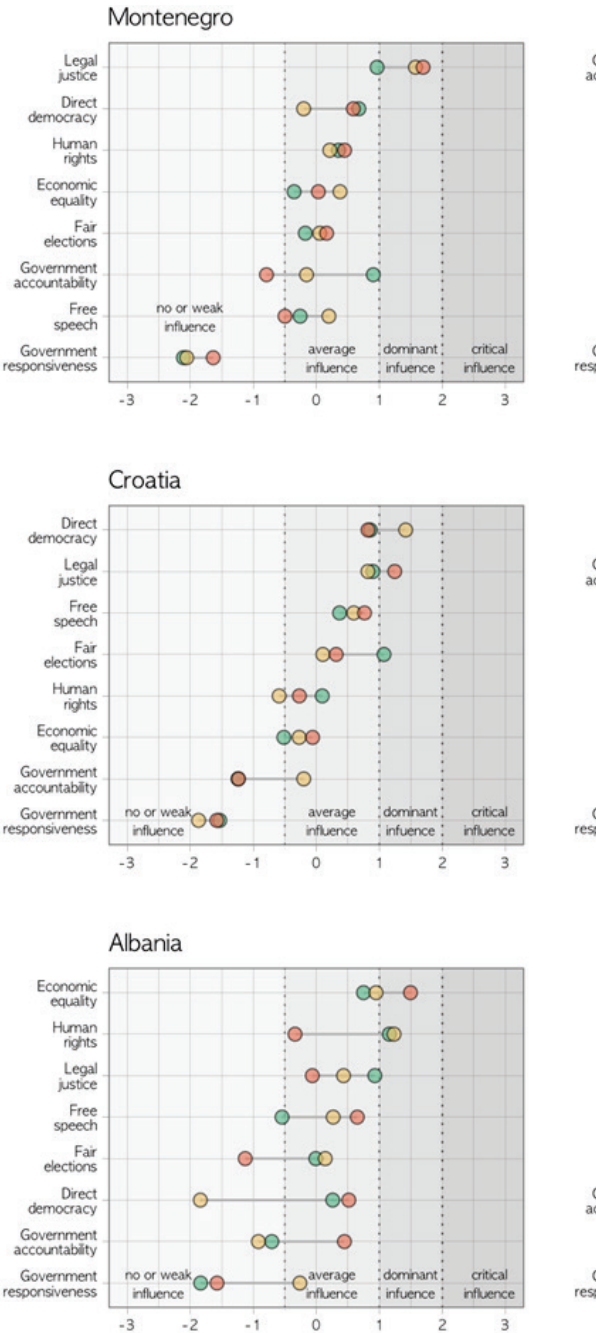
**Figure 7.** Network Density by Age Cohorts



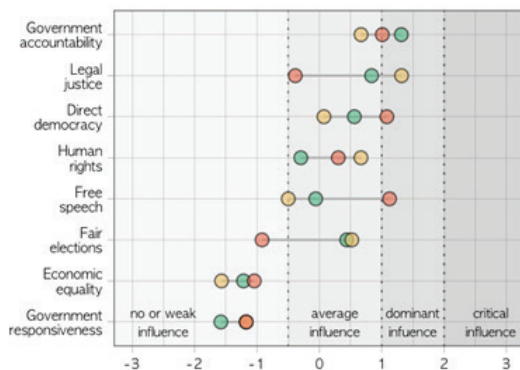
Again, the most revealing part of the analysis concerns the differences between age cohorts in terms of the relative importance of specific democratic values. **Figure 8** displays how central each of the eight democratic values is within each age cohort. The underlying theoretical assumption is that democratic resilience and successful democratic mobilization occur when DBSs are coherent, consistent, and similar across population segments. For this reason, we should be particularly interested in identifying values that are: (1) central to the democratic belief system (located further to the right); (2) shared among different age cohorts (points are closely positioned); and (3) significantly more important to WB youth compared to the older generation. Activating these should be beneficial for youth-led democratic actions against authoritarian tendencies.

**Figure 8** shows several revealing patterns. First, on average, there is only one democratic value per country that young people find significantly more important compared to the older generation. Belief systems are, therefore, significantly less “crystallized” among young people (a smaller number of green points is further right). While this is expected from the perspective of life experience, it runs counter to theories of political socialization, which hold that youth should be more accustomed to democracy and its core principles. Furthermore, the largest differences between age cohorts are found in Albania and Serbia, and the lowest in Croatia and North Macedonia. For this reason, the DBS network seems to be more coherently developed in the latter. Based on data from Serbia and Albania, for instance, there seems to be little agreement between generations on the importance of most democratic values.

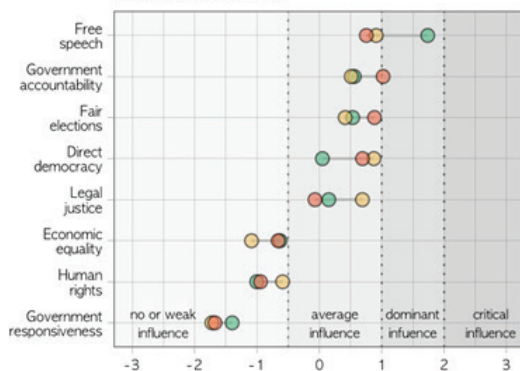
**Figure 8.** Centrality of Democratic Values Across Age Cohorts



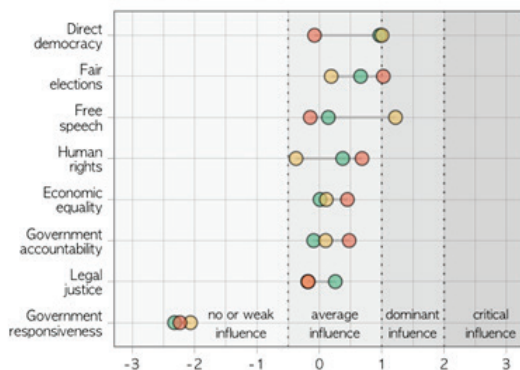
## Serbia



## North Macedonia



## Kosovo



|       |        |       |
|-------|--------|-------|
| Youth | Midage | Older |
|-------|--------|-------|

## 5 Public Policy Considerations

This section summarizes the evidence presented and attempts a "big picture" approach to help policymakers create/revise evidence-based policy. The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The traditional approach to the analysis of survey data measuring democratic values has serious limitations. When it comes to identifying the structure of democratic belief systems, analyzing them in isolation tends to "hide" important structural differences between countries.
- 2) There is significant variation between Western Balkan countries in how citizens envision democracy. Despite a high level of similarity and shared historical experience, almost all countries have a unique combination of democratic values that sit at the core of their citizens' DBS.
- 3) If there is a value that can serve as a "common denominator," it is adherence to the value of direct democracy (the electoral dimension of democratic belief systems).
- 4) Contrary to popular opinion, Western Balkan youth are not more democratically oriented compared to older generations. Their democratic belief system is less "crystallized," which is why we cannot clearly identify core democratic values that separate young people from older generations.

As pointed out by Merkel (2023), if a democratic system wants to secure its existence, it must fulfill fundamental political functions, such as understanding the future, solving problems, and making fair decisions. Based on these findings, we can conclude that democracy in the Western Balkans is lacking in almost all functions. Naturally, the absence of a shared conception of democracy (values) and widespread concern for electoral democracy seem to be related most closely to the area of civic education. While some of the findings may raise concerns, they also offer policymakers an opportunity to build a robust and democratically motivated civil society.

## Policy consideration 1: Civic education

The fact that the public in the WB clearly suffers from only sparsely connected DBS suggests there is vast room for improvement in education. Specifically, effective education for democracy is the bedrock of meaningful civic participation. However, it appears that general political or civic literacy may not be enough. These results reveal clear limits of political cognition, with citizens across generations showing a finite set of democratic values they can hold coherently at any given time. With this in mind, the current approach to both formal and informal education programs could be revised in the following ways:

- 1) Civic/political education needs to be significantly more focused on democratic values, and not only on the procedural and institutional dimensions of democracy. The focus should not be on democratic values separately, but on their relationships.
- 2) While there is significant room for improvement among young people, education should not focus solely on them. Instead, citizens of all ages should be exposed to learning about the values of democracy.
- 3) While all values are important, data shows some are more central to the DBS than others. Hence, a focus on the relationship between democratic values in educational programs does not mean these programs should dismiss a potential hierarchical order between them.
- 4) Ideally, efforts in the educational sphere would be prioritized by all democratic actors and be free from partisan influence, since the protection of elections (at least in the long term) serves both the incumbent and the opposition.
- 5) Public policy actors should “monitor” to what extent a shared conception of a democratic future is emerging among the general population, and across different age and ideological groups. Survey data, when analyzed in this fashion, provide valuable insights into how democratic cores change over time and between subgroups.

## Policy consideration 2: New forms of (deliberative) participation

As previously mentioned, if we are to infer a commonality across different groups and countries, that would be adherence to direct democracy. This is revealing for a number of reasons. First, it shows that people care about how decisions are made and are likely dissatisfied with how representative democracy functions in the Western Balkans. Second, this confirms a pattern of democratic backsliding in which input legitimacy (participation) is becoming less influential in favor of output legitimacy, understood as the government's ability to deliver "good results" (Merkel, 2023). Third, given that every political and social community needs to develop a shared narrative around which resilience can be built, this seems to be (based on data) the only reasonable starting point to which other democratic values can be attached.

Together, these considerations point to a simultaneous dissatisfaction with representative democracy and a desire to politically participate. This can potentially be seen as a reservoir for democratic resilience that can be opened with different bottom-up deliberative strategies, some of which include:

- 1) Adoption of a deliberative approach to policymaking that could mitigate the effect of disillusionment with representative institutions. The data seem to provide sufficient evidence to support alternative forms of participation designed to keep people involved in the political process beyond mere representation and voting.
- 2) Decentralization of power towards local initiatives, which could be achieved by utilizing tools such as mandatory participatory budgeting, in which focus moves from output legitimacy to input legitimacy. Such incentives, in which citizens make executive decisions about part of their budgets, can help address the lack of coordination among different segments of the population.
- 3) Given the fact that it is typically highly interested individuals who participate in such activities, policymakers could consider strategies that would help recruit disengaged parts of



the population either through finding people "where there are" (locally or in digital spaces) or by potentially gamifying interaction and deliberative process. Since analysis has shown that young people are not more democratically inclined, this could potentially be a particularly effective strategy for involving the younger generation.

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