

United for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law

Vienna declaration on dealing with
authoritarianism

8 April 2022

We, the undersigned researchers, activists and civil society representatives:

Reaffirm our commitment to defend European values and build a robust framework for a more resilient democratic societies based on rule of law in the Western Balkans, the EU, and the wider Europe.

Reaffirm our commitment to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union and the EU enlargement policy that opens full EU membership to all European states which respect the EU values and are committed to promoting them.

Recall and support the [Open Letter](#) issued by several of the involved institutions on Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the implications for the Western Balkans from 16 March 2022.

Conclude that a growing trend of electoral authoritarianism poses a common threat to Europe. The impact of subversion of democracy and encroachment up on rule of law is not limited to national or regional level but it is a common threat for the future of Europe. Thus, Europe must prepare to deal with the formidable challenge and work together united.

Warn that the recent election victory for Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić was a clear sign that the European democracy as we know it continues to be under attack. Both leaders have undermined democracy in their respective states by capturing state institutions, shrinking independent media, muzzling the opposition voices and repress rule of law and fundamental rights.

Remind about similar alarming trends that may be observed in Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and – albeit to a lesser extent – in other European countries. Russia and Belarus must already be regarded as oppressive dictatorships.

Warn that with partly strong pro-Russian sentiments and prominent pro-Russian political forces in some of the prospective EU member states the danger for Western Balkans and EU neighbors in the East of being exposed to further malign Russian influence grows.

Note with concern that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina mark the 30th anniversary since the start of the war by following the Russian invasion of Ukraine with great sense of fear. The Bosnian Serb separatist Milorad Dodik has been deepening ethnic rifts, threatening secession, and risking a new conflict in the country, thereby making Bosnia and Herzegovina a threat to peace and security for the whole of the Western Balkan region and beyond. Exemplifying the fact that though it stopped the war in 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement had failed to bring about a stable, functioning, liberal, rule of law based and prosperous multi-ethnic state that ensures equal representation for all the citizens.

Remind that the European Union was founded, primarily, to overcome xenophobia, nationalism, and authoritarianism. Economic integration was envisioned as one of the means to enhance cooperation among democratic states. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights reaffirmed the European support for the universal rights, such as human dignity, freedom, security, and solidarity.

Recommit ourselves to defending democracy and rule of law from the autocratic threats looming over Europe for far too long, among other by understanding that the strengthening of autocrats has been partly the consequence of widespread underestimation of the power of alliance among them.

Commit ourselves to seek and build alliances with like-minded activists, organisations, and institutions and provide support to other civil society organisations committed to high democratic and rule of law standards based on the EU values as defined in the Article 2 of EU Treaties.

Commit ourselves to redouble our efforts in defending European values, among other by closely monitoring and exposing governments and leaders who pose threats to democracy.

Commend the European Commission and the European Parliament for taking the initiative and showing its commitment to find ways for safeguarding the non-violation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights by member states. The overwhelming support in the Council and the jurisprudence of the European Court give reasons to be hopeful.

Call for EU institutions and its member states to act decisively in enforcing the fundamental rights in its own member countries as well as in candidate countries. Early warning mechanisms need to be put in place so that concerned stakeholders would react at early stage and with appropriate policies as soon as subversive regimes start to consolidate power in a systematic manner.

Reaffirm that free and independent media is a core element of a functioning democracy and one of the pillars of the EU Charter on Fundamental rights.

Warn that in the case of Russia a path to totalitarian system and war of invasion went through full control of media and messages. Therefore, in fighting authoritarian regimes, efforts to dismantle their total control of the media landscape play a crucial role.

Call on EU to take competition in the media sector more seriously even if much of the latter is out of reach for the EU due to legal restrictions and the fact that media operations are very much organized at national or regional levels. For example, the EU should consider competition in the media sector as an important sign of a functioning free market economy and develop mechanisms whereby violation of freedom of media is duly recognized and responded to. Furthermore, an awareness-rising campaign about the importance of these freedoms in fighting authoritarianism is quintessential.

Call on the EU to devise a dual strategy to fight authoritarian regimes in Western Balkans. Such strategy should involve an offer of concrete, tangible, and achievable steps in integration of the region with the EU while at the same time making it contingent upon an unequivocal commitment by the candidate countries to EU values, including rule of law and democracy. Particular attention should be given to fair and free elections, political pluralism, rule of law, separation of powers, independent and free media and a vibrant civil society.

Call on the EU member states to consider seriously the ideas and proposal for EU integration steps for the region, which are discussed in the expert community and among politicians in the region. These proposals in combination with fulfillment of strict conditions related to EU values, would lead to rewarding countries in the region with politicians and governments that in the region have shown clear commitment to EU values.

Demand that EU member states immediately start negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania and allow a visa free travel opportunity for citizens of Kosovo. With such dual strategy and long overdue immediate steps regarding North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo, EU would be able to regain

credibility, end the current ambivalence in some of the countries where commitment to EU values is not present and move the region forward.

Underline that with the economic and social challenges for the entire continent coming as a consequence of the global pandemic and invasion of Ukraine, democracies and rule of law-based societies will be under an even stronger pressure to show that they can offer their societies better living standards, economic possibilities and functioning services. Already now, the populist leaders are aggressively disseminating a propaganda that Europe is based on hypocrisy, and nobody cares for the people except the strong leaders. This makes EU approach to the Western Balkans and its own members who violate EU values ever more urgent.

Underline the importance of close cooperation between EU and the Council of Europe to protect human rights, democracy, and rule of law in Europe. Kosovo should become full member of the Council of Europe, and thus enable its citizens, including minorities, access to the European Court of Human Rights, as well as all the human rights mechanisms that are part of the Council of Europe system.

Commit ourselves to advocate and defend multilateralism and multilateral institutions, as well as regional cooperation. The liberal world order and by extension, European values, has endured because of its entrenchment in multilateral system and global cooperation. As it has been observed time and again, authoritarian leaders do not demolish the democratic institutions but use them to their advantage by through pervasive control and crippling alternatives. Therefore, the liberal democracy can be preserved by strengthening existing multilateral institutions and revamping cooperation.

Remind that in dealing with the threat of authoritarianism and engaging in conflict resolution in divided societies based on factors such as rural-urban, east-west, nationalities, and religion, it is important to work with local actors and support forces of change on the ground by applying a bottom-up approach and establishing formal and informal networks. In that sense, priority is to support human rights defenders and activists fighting for their rights and facilitate a path for those in immediate need of protection.

Calls on the EU to enhance the value-based foreign and enlargement policy. As such, blatant breach of international law and norms should be always condemned, and European values should be defended from being infringed by authoritarian regimes. The EU, as a normative power, ought to lead by the power of example by supporting democracy, promotion of human rights and civil society in building a robust and resilient system.

Welcome the workshop on “How to deal with the threat of authoritarianism? Europe after the elections in Serbia and Hungary – and beyond” which was held in Vienna from 6 to 8 April 2022 and commit to follow-up with more and intensified activities within the EU and the Western Balkans.

Open this Declaration to signatories coming from the civil society in the Western Balkans, the EU and the wider Europe.

In Vienna, on 8 April 2022

Supplement:

Shortly after finalizing the *Vienna Declaration on Dealing with Authoritarianism:*

United for Democracy, Human Rights and Rule of Law, parliamentary elections in Slovenia on 24th of April brought a political change against right-wing populism and with a focus on liberal, pro-democratic, pro-European and ecological values.

On the 10th and 24th of April, Emmanuel Macron was re-elected in the presidential elections and defeated far-right leader Marine Le Pen. Macron won with 58.5% of the vote.

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