



## 'Fight Against Corruption: The Western Balkans in focus'

### Regional policy forum

April 7, 2022, Skopje, North Macedonia, Holiday Inn and online (hybrid event)

The European Union has invested in improving governance and rule of law in the Western Balkans and has committed up to 30 billion in its new economic and investment plan. The EU and member states have significant potential leverage through conditionality and assistance mechanisms given the ambition of Western Balkan states to join the European Union. The EU must ensure that candidate countries have resilient good governance if they are to be constructive members of the Union. At the same time, through its Democracy Action Plan and the Rule of Law report the EU has strengthened the case for better governance within the EU, signaling stronger commitment to candidate countries. The EU and the United States have cooperated on advancing a good governance and democratic development agenda in the Trans-Atlantic space, further enabling positive changes in Southeast Europe. The impact of any current and future assistance depends on improving governance.

At the same time, on December 7, the U.S. announced its Strategy on Countering Corruption as a whole-of-government approach to elevate the fight against corruption. In June 2021, President Biden identified the fight against corruption as a core national security interest of the United States. The White House launched its "Summit for Democracy" for a select group of invited governments in December 2021, with anticorruption as a core pillar of the effort. The Summit encourages partner nations to take specific, concrete steps achievable within a year.

On their road to broader European integration, the Western Balkan countries have an opportunity to improve regional cooperation between critical anticorruption authorities, mostly in law enforcement and prevention institutions. This would signal an organic commitment to rule of law and provides an environment where national actors contribute to regional development.

At the same time, rising geopolitical tensions have the potential to pull resources and attention away from domestic reform, thus potentially making anti-corruption efforts more difficult to achieve. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a strong example and is a game-changer for EU's enlargement: will the Western Balkans stay firmly aligned with EU and transatlantic values? It is both a threat and an opportunity. It is up to the EU and local governments, and civil society and other democratic stakeholders, to carry progress through these difficult times.

What do recent U.S. anticorruption efforts mean for the Western Balkans? What are the expected effects of an enhanced focus on anticorruption? Can we expect that focus to move anti-corruption higher on the agendas of local governments? What can the EU and the U.S. do together to prevent democratic backsliding and promote good governance to fend off authoritarian influence and corrosive capital in the region.