

POLICY BRIEF

# **ELECTION INTEGRITY AND THE ABUSE OF STATE RESOURCES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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## CONTENTS

<b>4</b>	Introduction
<b>5</b>	Definition and Emerging forms of Abuse of State Resources
<b>6</b>	International Standards
<b>10</b>	Manifestations of ASR in Western Balkan Countries
<b>13</b>	Conclusions and Recommendations
<b>13</b>	Recommendations

## INTRODUCTION

This policy brief examines the abuse of state resources and its deep implications for the democratic governance and electoral integrity. It provides data-driven insights to uncover the critical factors and causes behind the exploitation of state

resources during elections in the Western Balkans countries. Understanding the complex character of this phenomenon is imperative to grasp all nuances of the challenges which each Western Balkans country face in their struggle against the misuse of public resources and political corruption.

The policy brief is organized into five chapters. The first chapter offers a concise overview of what abuse of state resources entails, including its various forms. The second chapter introduces important international standards that serve as benchmarks for handling abuse of state resources. The third chapter focuses on the legal and institutional frameworks in Western Balkan countries governing the abuse of state resources. In the fourth chapter, we provide concrete examples demonstrating how these abuses manifest in each of the countries examined. The final policy brief chapter provides evidence-based recommendations on how to mitigate the misuse of state resources and improve electoral integrity across the Western Balkans.

## DEFINITION AND EMERGING FORMS OF ABUSE OF STATE RESOURCES

**There is no universally accepted definition of the Abuse of State Resources (ASR).** OSCE defines it as “the undue advantages obtained by certain parties or candidates, through use of their official positions or connections to governmental institutions, to influence the outcome of elections.”<sup>1</sup> It means the misappropriation or misuse of state assets, funds, facilities, personnel, and/or any other resources for personal, political, or unauthorized purposes. Magnus Ohman, from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) defines ASR as “any use of state resources to support or undermine any political actor (such as a political party or coalition or a candidate for public office)”.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Center for Anti-Corruption Research offers its own definition of ASR, describing it as a “form of political corruption where individuals, parties, or other groups controlling state and public sector resources (‘current political forces’) exploit these resources to bolster the election or reelection chances of their favored candidates or groups”.<sup>3</sup>

In general, **state resources** are defined as human, financial, material, *in natura* and other immaterial resources enjoyed by both incumbents and civil servants in elections, deriving from their control over public sector staff, finances and allocations, access to public facilities as well as resources enjoyed in the form of prestige or public presence that stem from their position as elected or public officials and which may change into political endorsements or other forms of support.<sup>4</sup>

**The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) model**<sup>5</sup> defines four core types of state resources:

- ▶ **Financial Resources** which are usually allocated through different tiers of government budgets or sourced from public institutions under public management.
- ▶ **Institutional Resources** covering a number of non-monetary resources, including materials, workforce, and other facilities available to the government, including publicly controlled media channels and other communication platforms.
- ▶ **Regulatory Resources** referring to the power the state wields in crafting and implementing rules, laws, and regulations that shape the political landscape. Topics within this can vary widely, from penal codes to specific details like the ordering of candidate names on election ballots.
- ▶ **Enforcement Resources** related to the resources of law enforcement bodies responsible for upholding laws. It aligns with the concept that the state has the sole authority for the lawful use of force.

It can be concluded that ASR is a form of political corruption dominantly present during the electoral campaigns, characterized by an increased degree of an unfair electoral advantage the ruling majority political parties drag out through unlawful use of state resources. ASR alters power balances amongst political actors, which may have a decisive impact on the overall integrity of the electoral process as well as on the trust of the citizens in fair and free elections, its legitimacy and outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

1 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), Handbook for the Observation of Campaign Finance 66 [2015]

2 Magnus Ohman, The Abuse of State Resources, Washington, D.C., IFES, 2011

3 Center for Anti-Corruption Research, Final Report on Monitoring the Misuse of State Resources during election campaign for the December 2003 Russian Federal State Duma Elections, Moscow, 2004, p. 13

4 Venice Commission Report, CDL-AD (2013)033 paragraph 12

5 Magnus Ohman, The Abuse of State Resources, Washington, D.C., IFES, 2011

6 Tools and approaches on investigating abuse of state resources, CeMI, available at: <https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/dMunxLbllg9Q0g90KstfqfkBIJQgdfLFRXJtaIU.pdf>

## INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

**As a form of misconduct, ASR undermines the transparency, accountability and good governance.** Although ASR is recognized and condemned in a number of international and national documents, there is no singular set of international legal standards dedicated to fully address the abuse of state resources. Instead, international framework and best practices related to elections, democracy, and transparency provide valuable guidance in countering corruption by addressing the misuse of state resources:

1. **The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC)** requires the criminalization of embezzlement and misappropriation by public officials.
2. **Venice Commission Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters** advocates for state neutrality in election campaigns, media coverage, and public funding to ensure equal opportunities for all parties and candidates.
3. **Venice Commission Code of Good Practice in the Field of Political Parties** prohibits parties from receiving public assistance, particularly from authorities directed by its members, and disallows secret or fraudulent financial aid.
4. **Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR Joint Guidelines** mandate a clear and enforceable prohibition against the misuse of administrative resources during electoral processes, along with proportional and dissuasive sanctions.
5. **Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR Guidelines on Media Analysis** - During Election Observation Missions stresses that state/public media should offer impartial election coverage and serve a pluralistic public interest.
6. **Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec (2003)** calls for fair criteria in the distribution of state support and bans donations to political parties from state-controlled entities.
7. **The “Copenhagen Document” (Document on the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the OSCE)** emphasizes the need for a clear separation between the state and political parties and insists on equal legal treatment for all parties.
8. **Convention on the Standards of Democratic Election, Electoral Rights and Freedoms in the Commonwealth of Independent States** notes that candidates do not have the right to take advantage of their official position or advantages of office with the aim of being elected.
9. **OSCE/ODIHR, Legal Framework, Observation Handbook (Fifth Edition)** according to which the legal framework should ensure state resources are not misused for campaign purposes but used only with strict adherence to the applicable legal provisions.
10. **African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption:** This convention addresses issues related to corruption and misuse of public resources in Africa, although it is not strictly limited to electoral processes.
11. **Inter-American Convention Against Corruption:** Organized by the Organization of American States (OAS), this convention also addresses the misuse of public resources, though it is more general in scope compared to the Venice Commission codes and OSCE/ODIHR guidelines.



## LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMBATting ASR IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The key legal framework in **Albania, BiH, Kosovo** and **North Macedonia** which is focused on ASR is part of the domestic electoral laws and legislation regulating the financing of political parties. On the other hand, the **national central/state election commission** is serving as a **key institutional actor** responsible for addressing ASR. Conversely, the legal framework in Montenegro and Serbia is different. The electoral laws play a **supplementary role** in combatting ASR, rather than being the main pillar. On the other hand, the **anti-corruption agency** is the institution which primary goal is to combat ASR.

In **Albania**, the *Electoral Code* serves as the foundational legal structure for democratic elections and campaign financing, with specific sections forbidding misuse of public resources for electoral gains.<sup>7</sup> Political parties must submit annual financial reports to the Central Election Commission (CEC),<sup>8</sup> which employs experts to scrutinize campaign activities and finances. The CEC also runs an online portal for reporting electoral law violations. The Complaints and Sanctions Commission adjudicates electoral complaints and can impose sanctions. Media oversight is handled by the Media Monitoring Board, which reports to the CEC, and the Audiovisual Media Authority, which regulates audio and visual broadcasts.

Similarly, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the framework for regulating election campaigns and preventing ASR is largely defined by the *Election Law*<sup>9</sup> and its supplementary regulations. The CEC takes on the primary role of oversight, especially

concerning financial aspects laid out in *Chapter 15* of the Election Law and in the *Law on the Financing of Political Parties*. These laws specifically ban political parties from accepting contributions from state-run entities or companies that have contracts with the government.

In July 2022, significant amendments were introduced to the Election Law by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. These changes aimed to tighten regulations on the illegal use of public funds by candidates and state officials. Despite these advancements, the current legal framework falls short of effectively preventing financial abuse in the political arena. The CEC's oversight capabilities are notably constrained due to legal limitations and insufficient resources. Moreover, the existing laws create ambiguity by not clearly distinguishing between campaign expenditures and operational expenses, which hampers effective financial oversight.

Provisions against behaviors that constitute ASR in **Kosovo** were defined mainly in the *Law on General Elections*<sup>10</sup> and the *Law on Financing Political Entities*.<sup>11</sup> The Law on General Elections, for instance, in *Article 36*<sup>12</sup> explicitly prohibits public employees, whether elected or appointed, from using their office or resources to obtain votes. However, despite these regulations, there are significant deficiencies in the current system that allow for abuse. ENEMO, an international election monitoring organization, has raised concerns about the inadequacy of the legislative framework to prevent the misuse of state

7 Article 91

8 Requirement imposed in the Law No. 8580. During election years, these must be accompanied by campaign financial reports.

9 Chapter 7 outlines the Code of Conduct for election campaigns

10 "Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo / No. 14 / 3 July 2023 / Pristina"

11 "Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo / Pristina: Year V / No. 82 / 21 October 2010"

12 In the previous law, which was in effect during the 2021 elections, this was regulated in Art. 35

resources.<sup>13</sup> They note that the existing laws lack sufficient mechanisms, such as a detailed list of potential violations and corresponding sanctions, which could help maintain transparency and uphold the integrity of the electoral process.

These gaps in the legislation are not just theoretical. They manifest in practical ways, contributing to a range of electoral misconducts. Interlocutors involved in election oversight have reported allegations of abuse of state resources, intimidation of voters, and even vote-buying. Moreover, these issues are not limited to a single party but occur across the political spectrum. For instance, the vague legislative provisions allow state employees to exploit ambiguities, thus applying pressure on subordinates and manipulating resources for electoral gains.

In **North Macedonia**, electoral governance has evolved significantly through amendments to the *Electoral Code* and the *Law on Financing Political Parties*. These revisions cover a broad spectrum of the electoral system, including campaign financing and media conduct. A key amendment made in July 2018<sup>14</sup> stipulated that political parties' annual financing would be based on a percentage of the national budget and also imposed limits on private donations. The Law on Financing of Political Parties has been amended in several provisions regarding the specification of property and the financing of political parties (movable and immovable property).<sup>15</sup>

Media outlets are mandated to provide impartial and balanced coverage during elections, with the State Election Commission (SEC) overseeing rules on advertising time and costs.

The SEC serves as the primary institution overseeing electoral processes, ensuring that campaign financing, as well as electoral laws are adhered to.<sup>16</sup> The SEC also has the mandate to investigate complaints and enforce penalties for campaign-related abuses. North Macedonia employs a dual-institutional approach. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) augments the SEC's efforts by focusing specifically on the legality of campaign financing and corruption prevention. The SCPC holds the authority to probe into allegations of ASR and works in conjunction with other electoral institutions to fortify transparency and accountability. Financial transparency is further reinforced through obligatory reporting requirements for political parties and electoral candidates. Detailed financial reports must be submitted to the SEC, SCPC, and other relevant oversight bodies. Additionally, banks are mandated to offer electronic access to any changes in campaign-related accounts to these institutions, ensuring a more comprehensive layer of scrutiny.

The legal and institutional framework regarding ASR in **Montenegro** is notably more robust, setting it apart from many European nations, and above other Western Balkan countries. The rather comprehensive approach to regulating ASR in Montenegro evolved mainly as a countermeasure to election-related controversies that surfaced between 2012 and 2014, a time rife with questions surrounding the validity of electoral outcomes.

13 ENEMO, Final Report – IEOM to Kosovo for the Local Elections 2021, p. 31

14 Law on Amending and Supplementing the Electoral Code, Official Gazette 99/2018

15 Law on Amending the Law on Financing of Political Parties, Official Gazette 140/2018

16 Law on Electoral Code, Chapter 8 (Official Gazette 40/2006)

In contrast to previously mentioned countries, Montenegro's key electoral law<sup>17</sup> is not the primary legislation for tackling ASR (although it contains several provisions against it). Rather, it is the *Law on the Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns (LFPEEC)*. Chapter V of the law, titled *Prohibitions and Restrictions*,<sup>18</sup> prohibits the use of state and local government facilities for campaign activities unless equal conditions are provided to all participants. Public officials are restricted from using state-owned resources like cars and are limited to temporary employment during election seasons. The law also forbids political entities from receiving material or financial aid from a wide range of sources, including foreign states and companies. Business relationships affecting campaign contributions are regulated and promises of political favors in exchange for financial support are prohibited. Various limits are set on budget spending and financial assistance by state and local bodies, including social and child protection. Write-offs of citizens' debts and taxes are restricted during election periods, and new subsidies for utilities are not allowed. The law aims to create a level playing field, barring any form of pressure on entities or individuals related to campaign financing.

Recognizing ASR as a form of political corruption, the institutional response to this phenomenon has been entrusted to the *Agency for Prevention of Corruption (APC)*. Another key piece of ancillary legislation in this regard is the APC's *Rulebook on the Oversight of Provisions of Articles 33 to 45 of the LFPEEC*,<sup>19</sup> serving as guidelines for effective enforcement regulations against ASR.<sup>20</sup>

In an approach similar to that of Montenegro, provisions against ASR in **Serbia** are regulated primarily in the *Law on Financing of Political Activities (LFPA)*.<sup>21</sup> The LFPA sets guidelines that indirectly counter ASR in elections. It requires political entities to maintain detailed financial records and report to the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, which serves as the primary institution for tackling ASR.

LFPA obliges political parties, coalitions and groups of citizens to keep records of campaign income and expenses, to finance the campaign from a separate account, to inform the Anti-Corruption Agency in detail about the sources of income and the structure of expenses. Additionally, Article 9<sup>22</sup> stipulates that a contribution is a sum of money, apart from the membership fee, that a natural or legal person voluntarily gives to a political entity, a gift, as well as services provided without compensation or under conditions that deviate from market conditions".<sup>23</sup> As for the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, as watchdog organization the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) highlighted in 2022, the Agency lacks transparency in its work. Crucial details about the agency's methodology, operational procedures, and the extent of its observation missions remain undisclosed.

17 The Law on Election of Councilors and MPs, ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Montenegro", No. 16/2000 - consolidated text, 9/2001, 41/2002, 46/2002, 45/2004 - CC decision, 48/2006, 56/2006 - CC decision and "Official Gazette of Montenegro", No. 46/2011, 14/2014, 47/2014 - CC decision, 12/2016 - CC decision, 60/2017 - CC decision, 10/2018 - CC decision, and 109/2020 - CC decision)

18 "Official Gazette of Montenegro" no. 3/20 and 38/20

19 Concrete ASR provisions are within articles 33-45 of the LFPEEC

20 Additional laws like the Law on Election of the President of Montenegro, Law on Public Administration and Law on Civil Servants and Employees, also contribute to the prevention of misusing state assets. Provisions regarding this issue even found a place in the country's Criminal Code and the Law on Army of Montenegro.

21 „Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, no. 14/2022

22 "Funkcionerska kampanja kao vid zloupotrebe javnih resursa: opis problema i moguća rešenja," *op.cit.*

23 In addition, the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Electronic Media, the Law on Public Media Services, the Law on Advertising, the Rulebook on Obligations of Media Service Providers during the Election Campaign and the Code of Journalists regulate the provisions on information and media during the election campaign.

## MANIFESTATIONS OF ASR IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

Despite the existing regulations in **Albania**, the misuse of state resources during elections is a persistent issue. OSCE/ODIHR observers have noted common violations such as **pressure on public employees, inappropriate use of state institutions for campaigning, and allegations of vote buying**.<sup>24</sup> Further, data shows that the public workforce often expands just before elections, while spending on public tenders also increases, suggesting impropriety.<sup>25</sup> Independent analysts argue that **vote-buying is prevalent, often financed through state resources**. Beneficiaries of such schemes appear to include businesses closely tied to the government and recipients of public tenders, as well as entities involved in organized crime, particularly narcotics cultivation.

When it comes to **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, during the 2022 local elections, the Coalition “Pod lupom” identified numerous instances of abuse of public resources, numbering 384 across 67 municipalities and cities. These abuses varied from **fast-tracked local infrastructure projects to one-time financial benefits targeted at specific groups, all timed close to the election date**. Additionally, the Coalition recorded 99 cases where public employees were actively involved in political campaigns, further skewing electoral fairness. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights also noted that public sector workers were pressured to participate in certain pre-election activities, raising questions about the freedom and fairness of the electoral environment.

While the ASR in **Kosovo** does not appear to be as widespread as it is in other Western Balkan countries, **the intertwining of administrative resource misuse with pressure exerted on public employees sets a worrying trend**, as noted by the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO). Such practices negatively impact the ability of voters to freely exercise their voting rights, as they often find themselves subject to subtle or overt coercion, often in the workplace, to vote in a certain way. This creates an environment where the voter feels compromised, undermining the democratic process. The legal framework appears to address the issue of resource misuse, but **its practical inefficacy highlights the need for more stringent rules and enforcement mechanisms**. Defining explicit violations and consequences can contribute to making the system more transparent and less susceptible to manipulative practices.

Despite having robust legal frameworks in place, **Montenegro** faces persistent issues with ASR during elections. The 2020 amendment to the Law on Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns added pandemics to the list of exceptions that permit the disbursement of social welfare payments during an election year, thereby creating a potential avenue for the exploitation of these resources for vote-buying purposes.<sup>26</sup> The persistence of an official pandemic status, despite WHO’s lifting of the global health emergency, enables this abuse even today.<sup>27</sup> Despite opposition criticism that

24 OSCE/ODIHR, Interim Report on the Local Elections in the Republic of Albania held on 14 May 2023, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/4/542508.pdf>

25 <https://openprocurement.al/en/index/index>

26 Abuse of State Resources in Montenegro, CeMI, Podgorica, 2021, p. 35-36, available at: <https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/Tyx0R9YRseUVPcJAvpdeWztlkrDxpHvh2B3cAyH.pdf>

27 Abuse of State Resources – Presidential Elections in Montenegro 2023, CeMI, Podgorica 2023, p. 33, available at: <https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/LVPeSDOHJHGLedqy2RswlGoVCuX7cTKVUhXCVnY6.pdf>

saw it as a mechanism for vote-buying and despite the proposals for a bipartisan oversight commission, the amendment was enacted without modifications, and it remains in effect even after the 2020 regime change, despite the fact that it could be easily amended by a simple majority.

Additionally, each election cycle consistently shows a pattern of politically motivated hirings that significantly increase during the campaign period. Notably, this uptick in employment sharply declines immediately after the elections are over, raising questions about the true intent behind these hiring practices.<sup>28</sup>

Institutional resource abuse is also an issue. During the presidential election campaign of 2023, the SEC's questionable blocking of Milojko Spajic's presidential candidacy was seen as an example of such an abuse.

Another widespread form of ASR in Montenegro is the public official campaign. While not present during the presidential elections of 2023, due to unique circumstances of those elections, this form of ASR typically sees a high-ranking public official visiting various infrastructure projects throughout the country, promising economic prosperity during the next term. This form of abuse was most notable during the previous parliamentary elections in 2020.<sup>29</sup> Due to vague language in the LFPEEC, public official campaign remains unaddressed.

During electoral cycles in **North Macedonia**, several forms of abuse of state resources have been observed. One prominent form is the **misdirection of public funds originally earmarked for public services or developmental projects to finance political campaigns**.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the **use of government-owned facilities and vehicles for political campaigning** has been noted.<sup>31</sup> This provides an unfair advantage in terms of visibility and resource access to certain parties or candidates by enabling them to hold rallies or meetings in public buildings or travel in government vehicles.

Furthermore, public officials in North Macedonia have been involved in partisan activities. While these officials are expected to remain politically neutral, there is evidence where they actively engage in campaign efforts, endorsements, or voter mobilization for specific parties or candidates. In addition, there have been concerns about media bias in North Macedonia, especially when it comes to **state-owned or public media platforms**.<sup>32</sup> These platforms have been observed to disproportionately favor particular political parties or candidates, thereby skewing the dissemination of information and potentially influencing public opinion.

The blurring of the line between state and party was most noticeable during the election campaigns in **Serbia**. This took various forms, including the **distribution of property legalization certificates, the timing of local**

28 Ibid, p. 34-41

29 Abuse of State Resources in Montenegro, *op.cit.*, p. 41-42

30 Посебен извештај за утврдените злоупотреби во финансирањето на изборната кампања: Предвремени избори за пратеници во Собранието на Република Северна Македонија - 2020; Истраживање на тема: проблемите во финансирањето на политичките партии

31 Заклучоци од одржана јавна дебата – „Локални избори 2021 – Интегритет на изборниот процес и интегритет на учесниците“ – Државна комисија за спречување на корупцијата (dsk.mk); Телевизија 24: ДКСК: Постои извештај што потврдува злоупотреба на службени возила во МНР за партиски цели

32 Медиумите мета на странски влијанија, политички пресметки и бизнис интереси | СКУП (scoop.mk)

**infrastructure projects to coincide with the pre-election period**,<sup>33</sup> and the **disproportionate allocation of public funds for campaign advertising**. Such practices blurred the lines between official governmental functions and campaign activities. Additionally, there were reports of coercive tactics targeting public sector employees, restrictions hindering opposition parties from campaigning freely, and a notable bias in state-owned media<sup>34</sup> favoring the ruling party.<sup>35</sup>

Multiple violations related to the misuse of public resources by the Serbian Progressive Party have been reported,<sup>36</sup> including 13 breaches of the LFPA and nine infringements of the Law on Prevention of Corruption. Furthermore, according to Istinomer, approximately three million citizens received a one-time financial support from the state by February 2022. Announcements were also made that post-election financial aid would be disbursed to young individuals and educators, contingent on the ruling party's electoral success, adding another layer of questionable practices in the electoral process. It was announced that the state would repeat aid to young people and all educators would receive 20,000 dinars after the elections if they "do not lose the elections on April 3".<sup>37</sup>

33 Despot Kovačević, "Funkcionerska kampanja na izborima u Srbiji", *Srpska politička misao*, Fakultet političkih nauka u Beogradu, 2022, pp. 267.

34 Ibid, pp. 265.

35 Council of Europe, "Zloupotreba administrativnih resursa tokom izbornih procesa: uloga lokalnih i regionalnih izabranih predstavnika i javnih funkcionera", Kongres lokalnih i regionalnih vlasti Saveta Evrope, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/misuse-of-administrative-resources-srp/1680a5a194>

36 CRTA, "Second Preliminary Long-Term Observation Report February 15 - March 25", 2022, available at: [https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CRTA\\_Second-Preliminary-Election-Report\\_February-15th\\_March-25th.pdf](https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CRTA_Second-Preliminary-Election-Report_February-15th_March-25th.pdf)

37 Mihaela Šljukić Bandović, "Znak pažnje ili kupovina glasova?", Istinomer, available at: [istinomer.rs/analize/pare-od-vucica-znak-paznje-ili-kupovina-glasova/](https://istinomer.rs/analize/pare-od-vucica-znak-paznje-ili-kupovina-glasova/)



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the **abuse of state resources continues to be a widespread and pressing issue across the Western Balkans**, posing a significant threat to the integrity of democratic processes in the region. While each country has managed to establish some form of a mechanism to curb ASR, these frameworks are often inadequate, poorly enforced, or riddled with loopholes that permit exploitation. The lack of robust institutions and transparent oversight enables various forms of ASR, from the misallocation of public funds for

partisan activities to the misuse of government resources, including facilities, vehicles, and institutions, to gain a political edge.

While there are shared forms of ASR common to many Western Balkan countries, each nation also contends with issues specific to its own governance and political culture. **This complexity necessitates a multifaceted approach to mitigation and underscores the need for both regional collaboration and country-specific strategies.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **Strengthen legal and institutional frameworks:** Countries in the Western Balkans should bolster their legal and institutional mechanisms to address the abuse of state resources effectively. This involves closing existing loopholes and rectifying deficiencies in current regulations. In countries where EMBs are tasked with combating ASR, it is crucial to consider the establishment of an independent oversight institution instead. Given that ASR is a form of corruption, this responsibility is better suited for an independent anti-corruption agency. In nations like Montenegro and Serbia, where such agencies already bear this mandate, there is a pressing need to bolster their independence and to furnish them with enhanced tools and resources for effective oversight, as well as establish effective regulatory and penal frameworks.
- ▶ **Develop targeted Anti-ASR strategies:** Considering the fact that ASR is a form of corruption, Western Balkan countries should formulate long-term anti-corruption strategies which should include a specific focus on preventing ASR.
- ▶ **Collaboration with CSOs:** Collaboration between institutions charged with tackling ASR with civil society organizations could prove invaluable in both identifying abuses, promoting good governance practices, and developing anti-ASR strategies.
- ▶ **Collaboration between CSOs:** Considering the widespread issue of ASR across Western Balkan countries, civil society organizations specializing in election observation and anti-corruption should collaborate more closely. These organizations should share insights and good practices, and jointly develop effective methodologies to combat ASR in their respective countries.
- ▶ **Advocacy efforts:** Special focus should be placed on effective, evidence-based advocacy with key stakeholders, both on a per-country basis as well as a regional advocacy effort.
- ▶ **Implement comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns across multiple sectors:** To effectively combat ASR, Western Balkan countries should conduct awareness-raising initiatives. A multi-targeted approach should engage the general public, civil servants, and journalists.

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