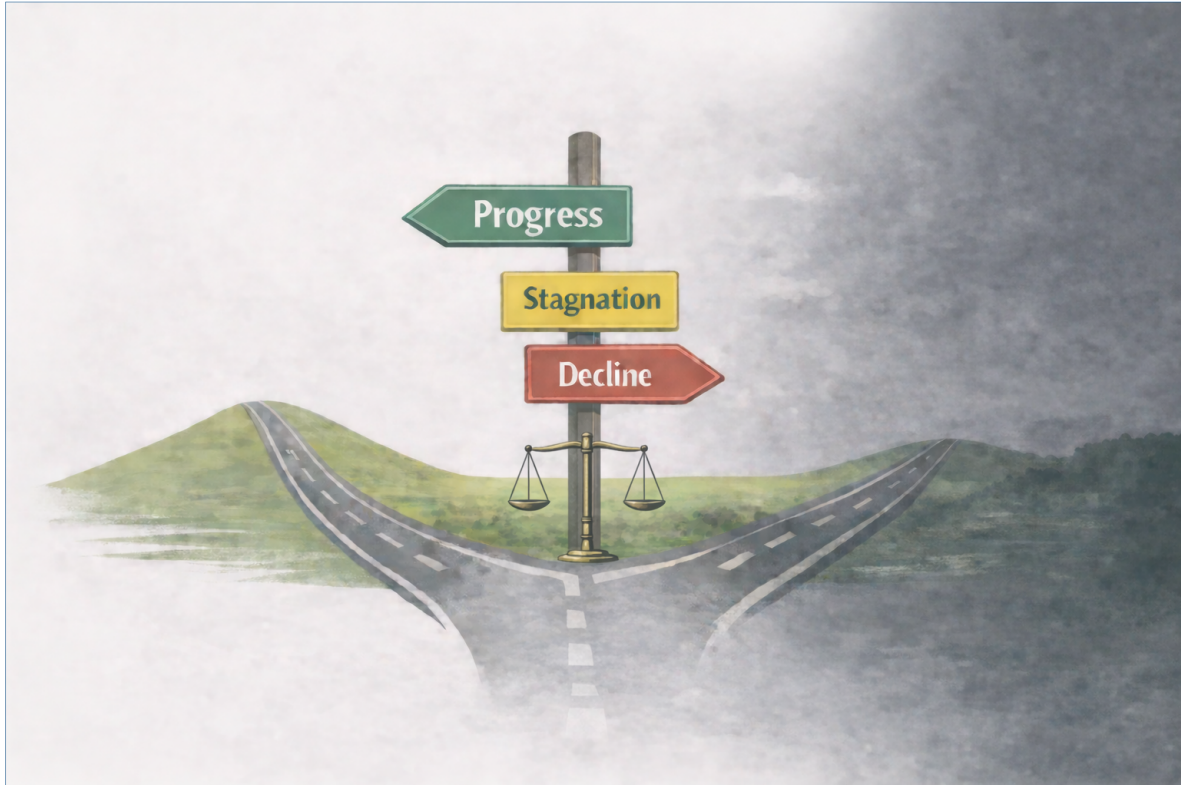


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# country report

Rule of Law Programme Southeast Europe

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## Rule of Law in Southeast Europe 2025

### A Region at the Crossroads: Progress, Stagnation, and Decline

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At the end of 2025, the World Justice Project (WJP) has published the newest index on the Rule of Law developments worldwide. The data helps to draw a picture of the situation in the countries under scrutiny and present a broad range of information. This regional report synthesizes data from the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2025, the European Commission country assessments, and our own examination to provide an overview of judicial independence, corruption, government constraints, and fundamental rights across ten Southeast European nations. The region presents a complex landscape of diverging rule of law trajectories in 2025. While Croatia and Romania are regional leaders in the WJP Rule of Law Index, Serbia has become one of the countries with the sharpest decline worldwide. Bulgaria and Moldova have shown weaknesses, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have undergone difficult developments. Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania are showing some improvements in their rule of law. Finally, corruption remains a universal challenge in the region.

## 1. Introduction

Southeast Europe stands at a critical juncture in 2025. The region, spanning from EU member states to aspiring candidates, presents a paradox of simultaneous progress and regression. While some nations have made remarkable strides in strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law, others have witnessed alarming deterioration in the very foundations that underpin a functioning democracy.

This report draws on two main sources: the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index 2025<sup>1</sup>, which provides quantitative measurements across 143 countries, and the European Union's 2025 country reports<sup>2</sup>, offering detailed qualitative assessments of institutional reforms and challenges. Together, these sources paint a complex picture of a region where geographic proximity masks profound differences in governance quality, judicial independence, and commitment to fighting corruption.

The countries under examination fall into two distinct groups. Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria are already EU members, formally bound by the union's standards and oversight mechanisms. Yet even among these three, performance varies dramatically. The second group consists of candidate and potential candidate countries:<sup>3</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. For these nations, EU accession serves as both carrot and stick, theoretically incentivizing reform while exposing the gap between aspiration and reality.

It is important to note that the expert surveys for the WJP Rule of Law Index and the information gathering for the EU Commission report were conducted in the first half of 2025 and therefore reflect developments only retrospectively. Subsequent developments are therefore not taken into account here either.

## 2. Overall Performance: Regional Landscape

When we examine the overall rule of law landscape, Croatia and Romania emerge as regional leaders, both scoring 0.61 on the World Justice Project's scale. This places them at global ranks 46 and 44 respectively, a respectable showing but hardly stellar when compared to the world's or EU top performers (for comparison: Germany scores 0.83 points and ranks 6, Denmark, the world leader, scores 0.90 points out of 1.0). What's particularly concerning is that both countries registered small declines in their scores, suggesting that EU membership alone is no guarantee of continued progress. Montenegro follows at 0.57, claiming the distinction of being the top performer among non-EU countries in the Southeastern Europe region. Kosovo, at 0.56, has shown encouraging improvement with a 0.4% annual increase. Montenegro demonstrates that EU candidacy, when paired with genuine political will, can drive meaningful reform.

Bulgaria presents a troubling case study. Despite being an EU member since 2007, it scores only 0.55, ranking as the lowest performer among EU states in the EU, EFTA, and North America

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<sup>1</sup> The WJP Rule of Law Index measures rule of law adherence across eight factors and 44 sub-factors, with scores ranging from 0 (weakest) to 1 (strongest). The index covers 143 countries and jurisdictions worldwide. See all data in: [https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/CountryProfiles\\_2025\\_WJP\\_RuleofLawIndex.pdf](https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/CountryProfiles_2025_WJP_RuleofLawIndex.pdf). On methodology see <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/Index-Methodology-2025.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> EU Country Reports provide detailed assessments of candidate and potential candidate countries' progress in meeting accession criteria, with particular focus on Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security). All reports are available at: [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en).

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this report, the group is not further subdivided into subgroups with regard to the progress and status of countries in the negotiation process.

regional grouping. The country's position below Montenegro, a candidate nation, raises uncomfortable questions about the effectiveness of EU monitoring mechanisms for existing members.

On the positive side of the ledger, North Macedonia (0,54) and Albania (0,49) have emerged as slight improvers. Despite starting from relatively low bases, these countries demonstrate that change is possible even in challenging political environments.

Serbia brings up the rear. It recorded its fifth consecutive decline and ranked 96th globally with an overall score of 0.47. This is not just lack of progress; it is an active regression in a country that aspires to EU membership.

Country	Overall Score	Global Rank	Annual Change	Status
Romania	0.61	44	-0.01	Declined
Croatia	0.61	46	0.00	Unchanged
Montenegro	0.57	55	0.00	Unchanged; top non-EU performer
Kosovo	0.56	59	0.00	Unchanged
Bulgaria	0.55	61	-0.01	Declined; lowest-scoring EU member
North Macedonia	0.54	64	+0.01	Improved
Moldova	0.53	68	-0.01	Declined
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.52	70	0.00	Unchanged
Albania	0.49	87	+0.01	Improved
Serbia	0.47	96	-0.01	Declined

3. The Corruption Challenge

If there is one area where Southeast Europe uniformly struggles, it's corruption. Not a single country in the region achieves what could be considered a strong score (above 0.60) in the Absence of Corruption factor. This universal weakness transcends EU membership, candidate status, and even recent reform trajectories. Corruption remains the region's most persistent structural challenge.

Country	Absence of Corruption Score	Global Rank	Annual Change	Status
Denmark (benchmark)	0.95	1	0.00	Unchanged

<b>Croatia</b>	0.56	52	-0.01	Declined
<b>Romania</b>	0.53	57	-0.01	Declined
<b>Kosovo</b>	0.49	62	+0.01	Improved
<b>Montenegro</b>	0.49	63	0.00	Unchanged
<b>North Macedonia</b>	0.47	69	+0.01	Improved
<b>Bulgaria</b>	0.45	73	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	0.43	82	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Serbia</b>	0.39	101	-0.02	Declined
<b>Albania</b>	0.38	105	+0.01	Improved
<b>Moldova</b>	0.37	108	-0.02	Declined

Moldova ranks last at 0.37, followed closely by Albania at 0.38 and Serbia at 0.39. These scores normally reflect deeply entrenched systems where public officials routinely abuse their positions for private gain. The EU reports provide texture to these numbers: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, the state-level law on preventing conflicts of interest remains effectively unimplemented, with the commission established having failed to pronounce any sanction.<sup>4</sup>

Even the better performers struggle. Croatia, the regional leader in corruption control with a score of 0.56, still shows significant vulnerabilities in the executive branch, where corruption scores just 0.50. Romania, despite having a strong asset declaration system, saw many high-level corruption cases closed due to statute of limitations rulings resulting in the discontinuation of proceedings and impunity in several high-level corruption cases.<sup>5</sup> The country's Constitutional Court also struck down requirements for officials to declare their spouses' and children's assets<sup>6</sup>, a decision that substantially weakens transparency mechanisms. In December 2025, a media report about corruption in the judiciary sparked lasting nationwide public protests.

### 3.1 Track Record and Sentencing

North Macedonia illustrates how legal changes can undermine anti-corruption efforts. The 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code have hindered the development of a meaningful track record

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2025, November 4, 2025, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025_en), p.6 and p.20.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, 2025 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the Rule of Law Situation in Romania, SWD(2025) 923 final (Brussels: European Commission, July 8, 2025), [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/fcab6924-01cf-4514-9f68-3989759718e9\\_en?filename=2025%20Rule%20of%20Law%20Report%20-%20Country%20Chapter%20Romania.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/fcab6924-01cf-4514-9f68-3989759718e9_en?filename=2025%20Rule%20of%20Law%20Report%20-%20Country%20Chapter%20Romania.pdf), p.7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.9.

in anti-corruption cases.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, only 18% of the national anti-corruption strategy activities were fully implemented in 2024 (reporting period)<sup>8</sup>, a failure rate that raises serious concerns.

. It remains to be seen whether the fight against corruption has become more effective since the government changed in June 2024. In Kosovo, a new national anti-corruption strategy for 2025–2028 was not even adopted.<sup>9</sup>

Albania and Montenegro show that progress is possible even in difficult contexts. Albania has made good progress in increasing the capacity of its Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) in financial investigations and asset seizure.<sup>10</sup> Montenegro has developed a rising track record of final convictions in organized crime cases, with plea bargain agreements contributing to more effective prosecutions.<sup>11</sup>

3.2 Institutional Integrity Challenges

In Serbia, the wide use of exemptions from the Law on public procurement, particularly through intergovernmental agreements with third countries, continues to pose risks of corruption and non-compliance with European standards.<sup>12</sup> The Anti-Corruption Agency's initiative to amend the law on political activity financing remains pending.

Romania's strict asset declaration system faces challenges following a Constitutional Court ruling that deemed unconstitutional the obligation for civil servants to declare the assets of their spouses and children.<sup>13</sup> In Moldova, despite some progress in improving the track record, the capacity of anti-corruption institutions needs strengthening, though disciplinary bodies are now fully functional with vetted members.<sup>14</sup>

Country	Freedom from Gov. Influence Score	Global Rank	Annual Change	Status
Denmark (benchmark)	0.99	1	+0.01	Improved
Romania	0.49	61	-0.04	Declined
Bulgaria	0.46	64	-0.01	Declined
Kosovo	0.44	65	-0.01	Declined

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, North Macedonia Report 2025, SWD(2025) 21212 (Brussels: European Commission, November 4, 2025), [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/267b368e-6b55-4a42-bb72-6395593de4da\\_en?filename=north-macedonia-report-2025.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/267b368e-6b55-4a42-bb72-6395593de4da_en?filename=north-macedonia-report-2025.pdf), p.31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, Kosovo\* 2025 Report, SWD(2025) 752 final (Brussels: European Commission, November 4, 2025), [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/127563ea-4c03-44a4-b56c-2d569afd86a5\\_en?filename=kosovo-report-2025.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/127563ea-4c03-44a4-b56c-2d569afd86a5_en?filename=kosovo-report-2025.pdf), p.31.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, Albania Report 2025, SWD(2025) 750 final (Brussels: European Commission, November 4, 2025), [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fe9138b7-90fe-4277-a12c-3a03f6d1957f\\_en?filename=albania-report-2025.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fe9138b7-90fe-4277-a12c-3a03f6d1957f_en?filename=albania-report-2025.pdf), p.42.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, Montenegro Report 2025, SWD(2025) 754 final/2 (Brussels: European Commission, November 4, 2025), [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ae69ea7-81d6-4d6a-a204-bd32a379d51d\\_en?filename=montenegro-report-2025.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ae69ea7-81d6-4d6a-a204-bd32a379d51d_en?filename=montenegro-report-2025.pdf), p.35.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, Serbia 2025 Report, SWD(2025) 755 final (Brussels: European Commission, November 4, 2025), [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00\\_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf), p.35.

<sup>13</sup> See fn.5, p.9.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, Moldova Report 2025, November 4, 2025, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/mol-dova-report-2025\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/mol-dova-report-2025_en), pp.5-6.

Croatia	0.44	66	-0.02	Declined
Montenegro	0.41	72	0.00	Unchanged
Moldova	0.40	74	+0.03	Improved
North Macedonia	0.35	85	+0.03	Improved
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.34	89	+0.01	Improved
Albania	0.29	96	+0.03	Improved
Serbia	0.15	129	-0.03	Declined

4. Judicial Independence and Democracy

Perhaps no indicator is more revealing of a country's democratic health than the independence of its judiciary. Courts serve as the ultimate check on executive power, the guarantor of fundamental rights, and the arbiter of disputes. When judges cannot decide cases free from political pressure, the entire edifice of rule of law crumbles.

The numbers are sobering. Serbia records the worst score in the entire region for freedom from improper government influence in the criminal justice system: a mere 0.15 out of 1. The EU report documents how personal data of judges who ruled in favor of repeating local elections were disclosed in tabloid press campaigns<sup>15</sup> without any appropriate official reaction.

Albania fares only slightly better at 0.29, reflecting persistent concerns about political interference. The EU report notes that increased attempts by public officials and politicians to exert undue pressure on the judicial system remained an issue of serious concern throughout 2025<sup>16</sup>, despite Albania's judicial vetting process. Even institutional reforms, when implemented in a politically charged environment, struggle to insulate courts from pressure.

Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a particularly dysfunctional picture. Judicial appointments often prioritize ethnic balance over merit<sup>17</sup>, a formula guaranteed to produce mediocrity. Undue internal and external pressure continued throughout 2025<sup>18</sup>, while urgent reforms to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council and court system laws remain deadlocked. The Constitutional Court has vacant positions that political actors refuse to fill, paralyzing this crucial institution.<sup>19</sup>

4.1 Political Pressure on Judges

In North Macedonia, the president of the Judicial Council resigned in December 2024, citing political pressure, while parliament also called on other council members to resign.<sup>20</sup> Individual parliamentarians intensified their rhetoric against judges and called on the Council to take action against judges suspected of corruption. Even though it cannot be ruled out that the allegations

<sup>15</sup> Fn.12, p.40.  
<sup>16</sup> Fn.10, p.5  
<sup>17</sup> Fn.4, p.28.  
<sup>18</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.5.  
<sup>20</sup> Fn.7, p.5.



may be justified, it is the competent authorities and not the legislature that are responsible for criminal prosecution.

Kosovo's judicial councils continue to operate with incomplete membership due to political grid-lock.<sup>21</sup> More alarmingly, the recruitment process for chief prosecutors did not meet merit-based standards.<sup>22</sup> Manual registration of cases has been reinstated at all court levels, raising concerns about randomized case allocation and opening the door to case manipulation.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.2 EU Member States' Challenges

Even EU members struggle. Bulgaria's Constitutional Court declared most of the comprehensive constitutional amendments intended to reform the Supreme Judicial Council and limit the Prosecutor General's power as unconstitutional.<sup>24</sup> This decision effectively blocked what could have been transformative judicial reform. Croatia saw its perceived judicial independence increase slightly, yet interference and pressure from the political sphere and economic interests continue to be cited as reasons for a lack of independence.<sup>25</sup>

Romania offers a mixed picture. While steps were taken to incorporate Venice Commission recommendations on justice laws<sup>26</sup>, perceived judicial independence among the general public has significantly decreased since 2024.<sup>27</sup> Some magistrates continue to express concerns about undue pressure from within the judiciary itself, suggesting that external political interference isn't the only threat to judicial independence.<sup>28</sup> In December 2025, the investigative documentary "Captured Justice" sparked widespread protests across Romania after it reported in detail on alleged systematic corruption in the judiciary and obstruction of justice.<sup>29</sup>

### 5. Constraints on Government Power: Checks and Balances

Democracy requires that government power be constrained by independent institutions: legislatures that scrutinize, judiciaries that adjudicate, audit bodies that investigate, and civil society that monitors. When these checks weaken, democracy itself becomes vulnerable to authoritarian drift.

Globally, constraints on government power declined in 68% of countries during 2025<sup>30</sup>, driven primarily by deteriorations in limits imposed by legislatures and judiciaries. Southeast Europe mirrors this troubling global trend:

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<sup>21</sup> Fn.9, p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Also noted by the European Commission, 2025 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the Rule of Law Situation in Bulgaria, SWD(2025) 902 final (Brussels: European Commission, July 8, 2025), [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/bf8ab464-f2c9-4ddc-a3bd-cda819467b8b\\_en?filename=6\\_1\\_63937\\_coun\\_chap\\_bulgaria\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/bf8ab464-f2c9-4ddc-a3bd-cda819467b8b_en?filename=6_1_63937_coun_chap_bulgaria_en.pdf), p.7. The main reason cited by the judges is that these changes are fundamental and cannot be made by an ordinary National Assembly (Parliament), but only by a Grand National Assembly.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, 2025 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the Rule of Law Situation in Croatia, SWD(2025) 911 final (Brussels: European Commission, July 8, 2025), [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/920cc4c5-ceef-4072-9d5c-95ef1bba1f78\\_en?filename=15\\_1\\_63948\\_coun\\_chap\\_croatia\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/920cc4c5-ceef-4072-9d5c-95ef1bba1f78_en?filename=15_1_63948_coun_chap_croatia_en.pdf), p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Fn.5, p.1

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>29</sup> *Marian Chiriac*, Romanian Magistrates Sound Alarm Over 'Captured' Justice System, in: BalkanInsight, 12.12.2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/12/12/romanian-magistrates-sound-alarm-over-captured-justice-system/>.

<sup>30</sup> See more in: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/WJPIIndex2025.pdf>.

Country	Overall Constraints Score	Limits by Judiciary Score	Global Rank	Annual Change	Status
<b>Denmark</b> (benchmark)	0.94	0.96	1	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Romania</b>	0.58	0.54	53	-0.02	Declined
<b>Croatia</b>	0.57	0.46	58	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Kosovo</b>	0.56	0.48	59	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Montenegro</b>	0.54	0.43	64	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Moldova</b>	0.52	0.41	75	-0.01	Declined
<b>Bulgaria</b>	0.50	0.45	79	-0.02	Declined
<b>North Macedonia</b>	0.50	0.33	80	+0.02	Improved
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	0.47	0.40	98	+0.01	Improved
<b>Albania</b>	0.43	0.32	105	0.00	Unchanged
<b>Serbia</b>	0.32	0.31	130	-0.02	Declined

Serbia scores a dismal 0.32 on constraints on government powers, ranking 130th globally out of 143 countries. The EU report provides concrete examples: in November 2024, Parliament adopted 68 acts, including the state budget, without any debate by amalgamating unrelated agenda items.<sup>31</sup> The country's judiciary imposes almost no effective limits on executive power, scoring just 0.31.

Albania follows close behind Serbia at 0.43, with judicial limits on executive power scoring just 0.31.

### 5.1 Institutional Fragmentation

Bosnia and Herzegovina scores only 0.47 points in the category of government or power control and just 0.40 in the category of judicial control, which is attributable to significant political tensions and institutional fragmentation. The Republika Srpska entity adopted several laws undermining the constitutional order in 2024 and 2025, though these were later repealed by the Constitutional Court.<sup>32</sup> However, the mere fact that an entity government openly violates the constitutional order of the state as a whole, underscores the weakness of institutional checks and balances.

<sup>31</sup> Fn.12, p.23.

<sup>32</sup> Fn.4., p.3.



North Macedonia and Bulgaria fare somewhat better. They both score 0.50 points, placing them in the middle of the region. However, North Macedonia's score masks worrying developments: in addition to the parliament's attempt to force members of the Judicial Council to resign, it also symbolically rejected the Council's 2023 annual report.<sup>33</sup> In Bulgaria, the failure of constitutional amendments means that fundamental reforms to judicial oversight remain unrealized.

## 5.2 Regulatory Quality Concerns

Even the countries with the best regional results in the index still have considerable room for improvement. Croatia scored 0.57 and Romania 0.58 points, but both countries face challenges. In Romania, 2024 again saw a massive use of emergency ordinances by the government to replace legislation, with 156 such legal acts being issued. This undermined the role of the legislature and weakened the rule of law by circumventing traditional parliamentary deliberation.<sup>34</sup> Public consultation and parliamentary debate often remains a mere formality, a box-ticking exercise rather than genuine engagement.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. Regional Patterns and Explanations

Several patterns emerge from the assessment of the state of the rule of law in the Southeast European Region. Firstly, although the legal framework resulting from EU membership does play a role, it is not as significant as one might hope. Croatia and Romania have the highest index scores in the region, but their advantage over top-performing EU candidates like Montenegro is modest. Bulgaria's and recent Romania's poor performance demonstrate that accession alone does not guarantee sustained progress.

Second, recent trajectory matters as much as current position. Albania and North Macedonia, despite relatively low absolute scores, have shown consistent improvement. This suggests that political will and reform commitment can overcome historical disadvantages. Conversely, Serbia's decline from an already weak position indicates active deterioration of democratic institutions.

Third, corruption remains the major common denominator shared by all countries, regardless of their EU status or reform efforts. The inability of states in the region to develop effective anti-corruption mechanisms points to deeper problems: a stagnant economy, weak civil society, hijacked media, a political culture that tolerates clientelism, and insufficient pressure from Brussels.

Fourth, judicial independence emerges as the critical vulnerability. Every country in the region has to contend with political interference in the courts, albeit to varying degrees. This is not accidental. Judiciaries represent the ultimate constraint on political power, and politicians across the region have learned that controlling courts enables them to govern with impunity.

Fifth, there is a worrying disconnect between formal institutional reforms and real-world outcomes. Countries can establish anti-corruption agencies, adopt new laws, and create oversight bodies, yet still see little improvement in actual corruption levels or judicial independence. Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplifies this problem: institutions exist on paper but remain ineffective in practice.

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<sup>33</sup> Fn.7, p.5.

<sup>34</sup> Fn.5, p.16.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

## 7. Necessary prerequisites for moving forward

The findings from the rule of law reports and index from 2025 reveal several prerequisites that must be met in order for South-Eastern Europe to achieve a genuine transformation towards the rule of law. The list refers to aspects of the rule of law and is therefore not exhaustive, as important prerequisites such as dynamic economic development do not fall into this category.

First, political elites must accept real constraints on their power. This is asking political decision makers to voluntarily limit their own authority, which explains why it happens so rarely. External pressure from the EU can help, but ultimately, domestic constituencies must demand accountability. This requires vibrant civil society, independent media, and engaged citizens, none of which can be decreed from outside.

Second, judicial independence requires more than constitutional provisions. It demands robust institutional protections: transparent appointment processes based on merit, adequate salaries to reduce corruption temptation, security of tenure, and most critically, willingness and ability by judges themselves to stand firm against pressure.

Third, anti-corruption efforts must move beyond prosecutions to prevention. Transparent public procurement, strong asset declaration systems, whistleblower protection, and media freedom all matter more than occasional high-profile arrests. Countries need to make corruption harder and riskier, not just punish it after the fact.

Fourth, the EU must maintain credible conditionality. When Montenegro could grant visa exemptions contradicting EU policy without serious consequences,<sup>36</sup> or when Bulgaria languishes for years without effective oversight, the Union's leverage weakens. Progress requires both carrots (the promise of accession) and sticks (willingness to delay or roll back integration for backsliding).

Finally, regional peer pressure could play a greater role. When North Macedonia and Montenegro demonstrate that improvement is possible, they create benchmarks for others. If Serbia takes steps backwards and this does not provoke criticism or backlash in the region, the message is that regression comes at no cost.

## 8. The Outlook

The rule of law landscape in Southeast Europe in 2025 defies simple narratives. This is neither a region of uniform progress nor uniform decline. It is a patchwork of countries at different stages of democratic development, moving at different speeds and sometimes in different directions.

What unites them is fragility. Even the best performers in the region remain vulnerable to backsliding. Croatia and Romania's slight declines in the WJP Rule of Law Index and critical remarks in EU commission reports remind us that democracy requires constant tending; it is never finally achieved. Bulgaria's and Romania's experience shows that EU membership alone cannot guarantee good governance when domestic political will is lacking.

For candidate countries, the picture is similarly mixed. Montenegro and Kosovo demonstrate that meaningful progress is achievable even outside the EU. North Macedonia and Albania show that improvement, however a very slow one, is possible even from weak starting points regarding the rule of law positions. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia remind us that reforms are worthless without genuine implementation, while active regression remains a real possibility.

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<sup>36</sup> The regulations have since been adapted to comply with EU law.

The fundamental challenge facing Southeast Europe is not primarily technical. These countries know what reforms are needed; the Venice Commission, EU monitors, and domestic experts have provided exhaustive guidance. The challenge is political: building and sustaining coalitions that prioritize long-term institutional strength over short-term political advantage.

This requires leadership willing to constrain its own power, judiciaries willing to rule against political pressure, prosecutors willing to investigate the powerful, journalists willing to expose wrongdoing, and citizens willing to demand accountability. In 2025, some Southeast European countries are moving in this direction. Others are moving away from it. And some are standing still, caught between the competing pulls of European integration and domestic political expedience.

The next few years will determine whether Southeast Europe converges toward European rule of law standards or whether the region remains a gray zone of partial democracies, neither fully authoritarian nor genuinely liberal. The data from 2025 suggests the outcome remains very much in doubt.

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