

PEOPLE. CHANGE. SOCIETY.



New Times New Hope

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Goodness always wins

Sarajevo Assembly member Sabina Ćudić shocked Bosnian society when she revealed photos of brutalized disabled children at a public care home in Pazarić. 'This situation can be seen as modern slavery.'

"This is not a shock to the government. There is a long line of documented, systemic abuse of funds and the patients. In that sense it is hypocritical of the prime minister and the government to say that they are shocked.

This is not an issue of one institution. The evidence is actually the illustration of a systemic, widespread issue in Bosnia-Herzegovina that gathers various elements, One – being systemic corruption that did not start a year ago or two years ago or three years ago, but decades ago. This is nothing new.

The shock effect, of course, is because the pictures are involved. However, a series of reports have described in words the exact situation in the children's home."

– *ITV News, 22 November 2019*



Bosnia and Herzegovina national hero
Sabina Ćudić

People are the difference

Gjorgji Lazarevski and Zvonko Kostovski exposed illegal wiretapping in North Macedonia, chasing the Prime Minister from office. From imprisonment to freedom to redemption, here is Lazarevski's televised address at the Free Speech Award ceremony in Prishtina, 23 March 2018.

"Standing here in front of you, I have no doubt that all the hardship we and our families have endured – and still continue to suffer – wasn't in vain, compared to the worth of our achievements and the benefits for our society. We provided concrete evidence that corruption was the main source of power that nurtured autocracy. More corruption – more political power. This was the formula. This was the matrix..

Long ago Zvonko and I had to make a choice: to ignore it or fight it. We could have taken the sweet pill and kept our mouths shut, or the bitter pill that could have killed both of us, but that also could have cured our society.



Elton Misini

North Macedonia national hero
Gjorgji Lazarevski

I am happy that people are speaking out loud and responding to any attempt to be lied to or manipulated. I believe no authority can ignore or silence the citizens from now on. The whole region and the world heard the roar of the truth in Macedonia and the power of the voice of the public: "Without justice there is no peace!"

I want to address every person who has a similar dilemma as the one Zvonko and I had. Report it. Take the bitter pill. Staying silent might keep you safe, but in your heart you will know you actually were an accomplice. That burden is heavier than any consequence. Zvonko and I chose not to have that burden. We did what was right for our conscience and our country."



Gazela
Pudar
Draško

Balkan youth – Balkan future

A recent study on youth in the Western Balkans found only 22 percent of young men and women in Serbia do not think of leaving the country. In Slovenia about 65 percent of youth are considering emigrating. They perceive their countries as incapable of positive change and are driven away by an atmosphere of despair, corruption and violence.

Trust in state institutions is missing in the Western Balkans. The elites and political parties pursue illiberal governmental policies with the aim of remaining in power indefinitely. They manage to continue their rule through the exploitation of populist sentiment by utilizing numerous changing narratives suitable to the moment. Consequently, there is a high mistrust in the political elites and politicians in general.

Younger generations are playing a significant role in street mobilizations and new social movements, which have become a vital political factor in the region. These movements emphasize horizontality, leadership without leaders, and deliberation before decision-making – frequently searching for consensus within a core team of activists.

This is their strength, and they clearly see it as an opportunity to offer different inclusive politics, which prioritize the public good, rather than the interests of narrow, privileged groups.

Gazela Pudar Draško is a researcher at the University of Belgrade's Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory. (Reprinted with permission from Political Trends and Dynamics, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2019)

WHISTLEBLOWING FOR CHANGE

In the Balkans today, it would be difficult to find a more dedicated and effective whistleblower than Murat Mehmeti. For three years, Mehmeti dealt with harassment, workplace retaliation and death threats from organized crime thugs after he exposed one of the biggest tax scams in Kosovo's history.

Justice has arrived for all – for Mehmeti, for the people of Kosovo, for the country's still-developing democracy, and for the alleged perpetrators. In December 2019 prosecutors charged a high-ranking Tax Administration official with failing to investigate businesses that were evading taxes by generating suspicious invoices and fake transactions with shell companies.

Mehmeti, a soft-spoken former police officer with a firm handshake, has come full circle – from being the target of retribution to being hailed a national hero.

– Mark Worth



Kosovo national hero
Murat Mehmeti

BIRN

01

KNOW WHY YOU ARE BLOWING THE WHISTLE: WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES AND GOALS?

No project or challenge can fully achieve its goals without first identifying what these goals are. The same is true when a person reports crime or corruption. Research and our many years of experience working on individual cases show that having clear and attainable goals can greatly improve outcomes – for the whistleblower and for society.

02

KNOW HOW YOU CAN FIX THE PROBLEM: WHO CAN INTERVENE AND INVESTIGATE?

People often make the mistake of not identifying the best organization or person to contact. Whether it is the police, the media, an elected official, an anti-corruption agency or a labor union, finding the right recipient of evidence can be the most important decision a whistleblower can make. Usually, there is only one chance to decide wisely.

03

KNOW WHEN YOUR WORK IS FINISHED: HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOURSELF AND MOVE ON?

It is almost certain that people who report corruption – particularly misconduct by powerful political or business interests – will suffer some type of retaliation. Seeking professional assistance *before* making a report can help prevent reprisals and help whistleblowers maintain their financial and personal well-being when the case is over.

– Mark Worth

Courage over fear

The Western Balkans have become a battlefield where authoritarian governments and criminal groups dispense with reporters who they cannot muscle into silence. Dozens of journalists have been physically beaten, and most of the attackers remain unpunished. The oppression and abuse of free-minded journalists who expose the misuse of power has led to an erosion of freedoms, as well as censorship and self-censorship.

The fear is growing not only because of fines, physical violence and financial destruction of media that are not under the control of powerful structures. It is also because of unseemly verbal violence that can quickly ruin one's life, destroy families and make children the targets of abuse from peers, which in small authoritarian systems can be especially cruel.

For years now, Montenegrin civil society activists and independent journalists have been subjected to endless negative campaigns orchestrated by authorities, criminals and media under their control. As in the grim Soviet times, independent journalists are called traitors, enemies of the state and mercenaries of foreign countries. They are accused of crime and depicted as media mafia. These campaigns are encouraged by top officials. I myself have been the target of a brutal campaign carried out by pro-government media and operatives.

The state machinery does not cease squeezing independent journalists. The pressures and campaigns are only changing forms. And everything is designed to silence those who write about the shady dealings of Balkan political and criminal elites who are so tightly intertwined.

Milka Tadić-Mijović

Milka Tadić-Mijović is one of Montenegro's most prominent journalists and media figures. She is a co-founder of the weekly Monitor, and president of the Center for Investigative Reporting of Montenegro (CIN-CG).

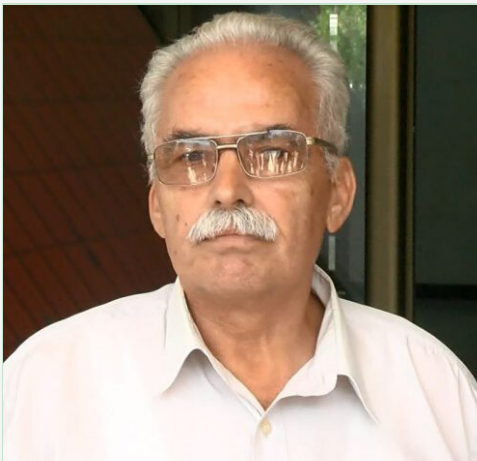
Meet three people who won't quit



ALEKSANDAR OBRADOVIĆ

Serbia national hero

He exposed that the state-owned weapons company Krušik was involved in exporting arms that were ultimately obtained by Islamic State fighters in Yemen. He was arrested but released thanks to a successful international campaign. We are providing support and assistance to him and his family.



GJORGJI ILIEVSKI

North Macedonia national hero

He exposed that three high-ranking government officials - including the Education Minister himself - illegally received academic titles at the State University of Tetovo. After seeking justice at the Constitutional Court, local media declared him an "overnight public hero and role model."



MISLAV KOTARAC

Croatia national hero

He alleged widespread corruption and misconduct within the Energy Efficiency and Environmental Protection Fund, a public agency that finances renewable energy and environmental projects. Despite being publicly slandered and threatened with decapitation, he remains on the job. "I will survive somehow."

– Mark Worth

Working with hope



Andrea Helm

Ask a person what they would like to have more of, and they will likely answer with what they believe they lack. A bald man will want more hair. A low-income mother may want more money. A person without friends would certainly ask for a dozen.

Few people think to ask for more hope.

Yet hope cements together the uncertain places in life, like the mortar between the bricks of a building. It lives in the space beyond faith, the hallelujah choir behind the sermon.

Science allowed astronauts to walk on the moon, but it was hope that brought them back home safely.

Hope lets you sleep at night, and gets you out of bed in the morning despite a creaky knee. Hope sends the farmer to the field year after year, fills a grumbling stomach, cools a fevered mind. It slakes one's thirst for justice, for peace, for equality. It is all things to all people the world over, an elemental: as essential as air and water to humanity's survival. It is the only possession that increases the more it is used, and there is no sustainable future without it.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the doorway to Hades is inscribed with the legend, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." To abandon hope is to surrender one's freedom to realize our own best destiny.

Andrea Helm is an award-winning investigative journalist and co-author of "Alternative Treatments for Fibromyalgia & Chronic Fatigue Syndrome." She lives in Jackson, Mississippi, US.

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