



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 24 2023



By Isak Missini, Dimitar Nikolovski  
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# Tackling the local beyond partisan politics. Can independent lists in North Macedonia boost local democracy?

## Policy Recommendations

1. Form strategic coalitions with established political parties based on policies, not loyalty.
2. Wider cooperation with different actors and on various topics is necessary. The "Green Humane City" and "Chance for Centar" movements should continue to deliver on their campaign promises, especially through increased collaboration with other political parties (not just those present in municipal councils).
3. "Chance for Centar" should follow "Green Humane City's" good practise of conducting public opinion research to gather information first-hand about the increased communication between the Ministry of Information Society and Administration and reluctant institutions in order to convince them of the benefits of being a part of the digital system and offer digital services.

## Abstract

At the local elections of 2021 in North Macedonia, eight independent groups with green politics ran for municipal councillors. The Policy Brief analyses the work of "Green Humane City" in the City of Skopje and "Chance for Centar" in the Skopje

municipality of Centar. The relative successes and failures of the two groups point to a public interest in solutions beyond partisan politics but also to certain shortcomings in terms of cooperation, transparency, and strategic communications.



# Tackling the local beyond partisan politics. Can independent lists in North Macedonia boost local democracy?

## Introduction

The local elections of 2021 in North Macedonia were marked by two highlights. First, the power at the local level shifted yet again from the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) to the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). In fact, the senior ruling party at the central level, SDSM, managed to win only three mayoral seats, with similar low success in the representation in the municipal councils. Second, these elections saw an upsurge of independent, local lists comprised of coalitions between activists not affiliated with political parties, people affiliated with civil society organisations, media workers, and experts, all concentrating on green politics, social justice, participatory democracy, and related priorities. At least eight such groups, in eighty-two municipalities could be identified, with unprecedented electoral success:

- "Green Humane City" in the City of Skopje, who won two seats;
- "Chance for Centar" in the Skopje municipality of Centar, who won three seats;
- "Independent for Karposh - For the Protection of Karposh" in the Skopje municipality of Karposh, who won two seats;
- "Greens of Gazi Baba" in the Skopje municipality of Gazi Baba, who didn't win any seats;
- "Better for Tetovo" from Tetovo, who didn't win any seats;
- "Ohrid above all" from Ohrid, who won one seat;
- "Differently - Bitola" from Bitola, who won three seats, one of whom was elected as Chairperson of the Council;
- "Enough is Enough", who ran in three municipalities - Strumica, Novo Selo, and Bosilovo - and won one seat in each of them.

In this Policy Brief we shall concentrate on the two most visible groups, "Green Humane City" (hereinafter GHC) and "Chance for Centar" (hereinafter CfC), with the purpose of evaluating their success and giving policy recommendations on their internal functioning, forming strategic coalitions, and communication with various stakeholders.

## Green Humane City

Under the slogan "Let's reclaim Skopje", the civic initiative GHC participated in the local elections in October 2021 with its candidate for mayor, Ana Petrovska, as well as a list of councillors led by Dragana Velkovska. This initiative aims to make Skopje "green and humane" for its residents (GHC Election Programme, 2021, p. 3). As an informal coalition of over twenty organisations and activist groups, GHC's mission is to achieve "essential institutional change by shifting power from the political and business elite to the citizens" through sustainable development, social justice, a just transition, ener-



gy independence, a clean environment, urban mobility, and animal protection (ibid., p. 4). Of primary importance, they emphasise the need for:

- Greening of Skopje;
- Halting uncontrolled urbanisation/construction;
- Establishing fast, safe, accessible, and environmentally friendly public transportation;
- Transforming waste into value (circular economy);
- Improving air quality in Skopje;
- Engaging youth;
- Caring for marginalised and vulnerable groups;
- Ensuring care for homeless animals;
- Civic participation (ibid., pp. 6-11).

It is important to note the constituent organisations of the GHC initiative, whose interests align with their stated priorities.<sup>1</sup> These include “Anima Mundi” (regarding care for homeless animals, as well as GHC’s proposal to nominate Radmila Pesheva as the director of the public enterprise “Lajka”), “Bidi Zelen – Be Green” (in relation to greening the city and halting urbanisation), “Romalitiko” (regarding care for marginalised and vulnerable groups), and others.<sup>2</sup> In the Skopje City Council, which consists of a total of forty-five (45) councillors, the GHC initiative has two councillors (Dragana Velkovska and Gorjan Jovanovski) (Skopje City Council, 2021-2025).

***It is important to note the constituent organisations of the “Green Humane City” initiative, whose interests align with their stated priorities.***

## Chance for Centar

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This civic initiative brings together activists and experts in the fields of architecture, urbanism, sports, culture, and the environment (Chance for Centar, 2021). From the very beginning, they were determined that their ultimate goal was to enter the Municipal Council. Therefore, they did not have their own candidate for mayor in the local elections of 2021, as can be seen in their response to the question of why they did not propose a candidate for mayor: “We believe that the power lies in the Council, which is elected by the residents and should act in their favour... The previous practise has shown that councillors mistakenly think they are elected by the parties and... their actions should be... in the party’s interest...” (ibid.). Their election programme (2021) lists a range of thematic objectives (some falling under the legal responsibilities of the City of Skopje, not individual municipalities within the city like Centar Municipality),

1 Regarding the GHC nominations, you can find more information at the following link: <https://mojgrad.mk/sovet/#nominacii>

2 For the list of all constituent organisations of the GHC initiative, please refer to the “Green Human City” (GHC) source. (2021). Election Programme for the Local Elections 2021. p. 4.



including urban planning, local economic development, environmental and nature protection, traffic and transportation, infrastructure, etc. In the section on urban planning, for example, they have identified the following priorities:

- Creating a vision for future spatial development, taking into account the values, significance, and physical structure of Centar Municipality;
- Increased involvement of relevant and proven experts and the academic community in the development of the new General Urban Plan (GUP);
- Transparency embedded in the publication of relevant information;
- Strengthened coordination among all stakeholders in the process of developing spatial plans and projects.

Many similarities can be drawn between this initiative and the GHC initiative, as emphasised in their promotional video (2021). CfC opposes urbanisation and polluted air while advocating for tree planting, safe traffic, accountable spending of the municipal budget, waste recycling, transparency, etc. In the Centar Municipality Council, composed of a total of twenty-three (23) councillors, the CfC initiative has three councillors (Jana Belcheva Andrejevska, Divna Penchik, and Jane Dimeski).

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## Activities and achievements

### Green Humane City

In a letter dated November 28, 2021, GHC Councillors Gorjan Jovanovski and Dragana Velkovska delivered a package of amendments to the President of the Council of the City of Skopje.<sup>3</sup> These amendments were proposed by certain civic organisations and activist groups that are constitutive parts of the GHC initiative. Specifically, out of the thirty-three (33) amendments submitted,<sup>4</sup> five (5) were accepted. The accepted amendments can be seen in the table (p. 5).

One of the first activities of GHC was their protest in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) in December 2021 due to the announcement of "construction of" high-rise buildings near the "Holiday Inn" hotel. The protest was initiated by GHC based on their suspicions of corruption and abuse of office. It is worth noting that the protest was organised in cooperation with CfC (Mkd.mk., 2021). However, the building plans continued, and the prosecution has not initiated any proceedings since.

In November 2021, a new section of the MojGrad platform called "Work of the Skopje City Council" was established. This section allows citizens to follow the daily agendas of the Council, watch live streaming of sessions, access materials, view voting records on each agenda item, and find contact information for all councillors from any council group. The MojGrad platform (launched in May 2021) serves as a digital extension of the GHC coalition of civil society organisations. Gorjan Jovanovski, a

3 The full letter can be seen at the following link: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1r\\_IGYH\\_RC01CoU76si0JlvXC5RK9kxUpoE5gdpjRyg/edit?usp=drive\\_link](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1r_IGYH_RC01CoU76si0JlvXC5RK9kxUpoE5gdpjRyg/edit?usp=drive_link)

4 All amendments can be seen at the following link: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1zhY0Z6mnMqXw2jvOoAM9b\\_kpiu38W8Hs](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1zhY0Z6mnMqXw2jvOoAM9b_kpiu38W8Hs)

councillor in the City of Skopje, is the founder of the platform (MojGrad, n.d.). Through this platform, citizens can submit project proposals and policies related to improving the overall well-being of Skopje and addressing local issues with a focus on a more humane, green, and beautiful city (ibid.).

***GHC initiated the process of developing a new General Urban Plan (GUP) for a green and humane Skopje in 2023.***

Number	Short Description	Sponsor of the bill
X	"The Strategic Document for Traffic Safety – Vision Zero – Vision for Skopje Without Casualties" aims to review the factors that influence safety, including the street environment, street design, legislation, speeds, police enforcement, etc. It intends to analyse unsafe locations in Skopje, make comparisons with other cities and the implemented measures that have yielded results, and provide guidelines for changes in various areas (legislation, street design modifications, implementation of 30 km/h zones, penalty policies, and digital registration of traffic accidents within the territory of Skopje).	NaTochak (OnBikes) – initiative of bicycle enthusiasts
XXIV	"Street Children" – In the city of Skopje, at many intersections and throughout the city centre, children of all ages can be observed begging, washing cars, or selling certain products near hospitality establishments. We propose that funds be allocated to establish a multidisciplinary and expert team to develop a strategy for the inclusion of street children in education in the City of Skopje.	First Children's Embassy "Meglashi"
XXVII	"Creating a City Network of Air Pollution Monitoring Stations" – Establishing a citywide network of air quality monitoring sensors that can provide real-time alerts for increased air pollution in specific areas of the city. The hyper-network enables more detailed monitoring of air pollution and immediate detection if it originates from residential areas or industrial facilities.	Gorjan Jovanovski – Creator of the AirCare app
XXI	"Composting Urban Biowaste: A Solution for Hunger and the Climate Crisis" – Food waste directly contributes to the climate crisis. When this waste is properly managed and composted, it not only prevents pollution and waste but also creates value in the form of high-nutrient fertilizer (compost), which can be used in agriculture and horticulture, as well as a raw material for urban gardens that help combat hunger. To address this environmental problem, which significantly affects the quality of life in Skopje, I propose the creation of urban mini-composting facilities in each municipal district and one central facility at the city level, involving the population in the process.	"Production of Organic Fertilizers and Substrates 'MAMA ORGANA' – Skopje"
/	For the Supervisory Board and Management Board of the Public Enterprise "Lajka", the GHC initiative has nominated the following individuals:  For the Management Board: Milka Dokuzeva, Elena Piponska, Magdalena Chaparovska, Aneta Darkovska, and Mica Kimovska Hristova.  For the Supervisory Board: Igor Raiden and Simona Delovska.	GHC



GHC has also submitted fifteen (15) nominations for the City Green Council (Eco-Council) to address urgent environmental issues. GHC initiated the process of developing a new General Urban Plan (GUP) for a green and humane Skopje in 2023. The process involved experts from Bulgaria who shared their experiences regarding the Sofia Vision. Notably, a representative of GHC in the Skopje City Council has emphasised the lack of transparency in the development process of the 2022-2032 GUP for Skopje, as the first phase of the planning programme was completed at the Faculty of Architecture but has not been publicly released.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, in January 2023, the first decision regarding interventions in green spaces was publicly announced following GHC's request to disclose all decisions (ibid.).<sup>6</sup>

***GHC's advantage in terms of public communication is their presence on the Discord platform, which primarily targets young people.***

Since March 2023, GHC has been conducting an analysis of public opinion through an electronic questionnaire titled "My Three Biggest Issues in Skopje". The aim is to contribute to the timely resolution of these issues. GHC has had several rejected initiatives, including proposals for pets in public transport and increasing the budget of the cultural centre of Skopje (Youth Cultural Center). GHC's advantage in terms of public communication is their presence on the Discord platform, which primarily targets young people.

In conclusion, GHC has presented a concrete plan (fifteen proposals) to reduce air pollution through the instruments of the Skopje City Council. These proposals include emergency measures (instructing the Hydrometeorological Service to initiate temperature inversion forecasts), establishing a public register of legal entities required to have an integrated B-permit, prohibition of wider traffic lanes on boulevards than prescribed by the Urban Planning Regulation (3 metres), banning the use of plastic utensils and packaging, creating new bicycle parking spaces and bicycle parks, amending and supplementing the [Short-Term Action Plan for Air Quality Protection in Skopje and Skopje Municipalities](#) (2017) based on the latest scientific knowledge, establishing a network of monitoring stations, comprehensive bicycle infrastructure, establishing biocomposting facilities in each municipality within the City of Skopje, organising workshops for plastic waste recycling, integrating photovoltaic systems into all facilities under the jurisdiction of the City of Skopje, subsidising individual household systems (inverters, etc.), subsidising energy-efficient facades for individual housing, implementing a bicycle-sharing system, and developing public transport (GHC, 2023). These measures are projected to be implemented by the end of the councillors' term (2025), but there is no information available at the time of this analysis regarding the implementation's progress.

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5 Taken from their Facebook profile: <https://www.facebook.com/ZelenHumanGrad/posts/341171137871043>

6 The full set of decisions can be accessed here: [https://resenija.mk/sektor-za-komunalni-raboti/?fbclid=IwAR1q7kCELDsmeCriKooqio\\_bJJHjCDQTUHLf67ISjHTy6xCr4r0wl-Ji3OY](https://resenija.mk/sektor-za-komunalni-raboti/?fbclid=IwAR1q7kCELDsmeCriKooqio_bJJHjCDQTUHLf67ISjHTy6xCr4r0wl-Ji3OY)



In terms of public perceptions, GHC receives the most criticism from opposition parties at the local level, with the claim that they are trading their votes for director positions and the employment of their activists.

One and a half years after the local elections, on social media, a group of citizens who voted for the GHC council list clearly expressed dissatisfaction. Specifically, with the election of Pesheva as the director of the Public Enterprise for Welfare of Stray Animals, "Lajka", the perception in the public is that this council group is trading their votes in the council for positions and power from the mayor of the City of Skopje, Daniela Arsovska, and that they are not loud enough on crucial matters.<sup>7</sup>

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## Chance for Centar

CfC organised a protest in cooperation with GHC against the construction of high-rise buildings near the "Holiday Inn" hotel, expressing their revolt due to suspicions of corruption and abuse of office. CfC's programme for implementation in 2022 includes several thematic objectives, and they have taken various activities, predominantly in the form of amendments, in the Center Municipality Council (where CfC has three councillors):

- They proposed the public release of an interactive map displaying building permits in all phases before approval, as well as objects in the legalisation phase. In September 2022, CfC presented a map showing ongoing construction in the Center Municipality and issued building permits in the area.<sup>8</sup>
- They proposed projects aimed at improving citizens' safety and addressing issues related to air pollution, waste, noise, light pollution, and animals. In December 2021, CfC informed that they had submitted an amendment (which was rejected) for the procurement and installation of noise sensors. They also submitted an amendment (which was rejected) to allocate a budget for environmental impact assessments during the development of spatial plans.
- They proposed the publication of a systematisation of job positions, organisation charts, contact information of employees, responsible persons in various areas, and other information on the official website of the municipality. They aimed to promote transparency and enable efficient two-way communication with citizens. In December 2021, CfC submitted an amendment (which was rejected) to add public information about the municipality's work and services on its website.

7 <https://www.facebook.com/joci.jocik/posts/pfbid0zbnk8JHZWHkGt4M43FGUTxrcA-zwf2nE48eofGA7WB2V82sVvBrDe2fB88uCUvw1Jl>

8 The map can be accessed at the following link: [https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1OvgmmWWi9rVQaiK5P1mF3FHPB\\_iVVOY&hl=en&fbclid=IwAR1RB58gi-WgA1B43Z2YmQDdlmeFAf0VkJHwywbMSkO8PJ\\_WmamiQmam-rlsEo&ll=41.99306187403487%2C21.426906250000002&z=13](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1OvgmmWWi9rVQaiK5P1mF3FHPB_iVVOY&hl=en&fbclid=IwAR1RB58gi-WgA1B43Z2YmQDdlmeFAf0VkJHwywbMSkO8PJ_WmamiQmam-rlsEo&ll=41.99306187403487%2C21.426906250000002&z=13)



***Overall, CfC's activities can be summarised as amendment interventions, although the majority of their proposed amendments have been rejected.***

The only accepted amendment submitted by CfC to the Center Municipality's 2022 work programmes is related to the Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi School. This amendment pertains to the development of a declaration programme for the architectural and cultural heritage of the school facility.

On [CfC's official Facebook page](#), numerous rejected amendments can be seen in the form of published images/infographics. They provide explanations for the rejections. Overall, CfC's activities can be summarised as amendment interventions, although the majority of their proposed amendments have been rejected.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the work of CfC councillors in the Municipality Council, their efforts have been overshadowed by public accusations and conflicts with the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which holds the majority of council seats. These disputes revolve around the budget approval process and the election of the Council President. According to SDSM, only CfC councillors did not provide their support during the budget adoption process. Additionally, Jane Dimeski from CfC was nominated as the Council President candidate (by SDSM), but he declined the nomination, stating that he was proposed without consultation by the SDSM council group. CfC concluded that they would not aim for that position (M.D., 2021).

## Conclusions and recommendations

***GHC is composed of non-governmental organisations, while CfC consists of individual activists and experts.***

In the local elections held in October 2021, two independent civic lists, GHC and CfC, ran as candidates. The first is composed of non-governmental organisations, while the second consists of individual activists and experts. Both movements declare themselves independent and aim to return power from the political and business elite to the citizens, as stated on their respective websites.<sup>10</sup> The GHC initiative holds two council mandates, while the CfC has three in the councils of their respective municipalities. Based on the conducted research, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. GHC and CfC have clearly defined and identical goals, such as countering negative perceptions of urbanisation (as evidenced by their joint protest against the construction of high-rise buildings near Holiday Inn) and their council candidates'

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<sup>9</sup> One example of the rejection of an amendment by CfC is the proposal for the development of a Strategy and Action Plan for Social Protection with social mapping for the period 2022-2027 as a basis for future planning, with the explanation that the results from the census are sufficient for future planning. All other rejections can be found on their FB profile: <https://www.facebook.com/ShansaZaCentar/>

<sup>10</sup> With such proclamations, their rhetoric goes in line with the notion of progressive populists, who self-proclaim as the "saviours" of ordinary citizens from the "deep state", the "corrupt 1%", "them", "the oligarchs", and so on, while addressing social inequality, promoting social justice, and challenging established power structures. They position themselves as intermediaries for returning power to the hands of ordinary citizens. See Kioupkiolis, 2019.





outspoken opposition to excessive construction. They emphasise greening initiatives, traffic safety, increased transparency and accountability in Council work, monitoring and improving air quality, strengthening citizen participation at the local level, and more.

2. GHC has had more successful actions and amendment interventions compared to CfC, which had only one. This difference could be attributed to the fact that GHC is backed by established organisations with their own human and financial resources. Four out of the five accepted amendments proposed by GHC were formulated and presented by the constituent organisations of the initiative itself, not the council members.
3. Both initiatives have a presence on social media platforms, especially Facebook, in terms of frequency of posts and two-way communication with citizens. However, CfC has room for improvement in terms of data availability and transparency.

*As can be seen from these two examples, it is much easier to successfully promote the interests of citizens who are not aligned with political parties at the local level rather than the central one.*

The limited success of these movements leads to the main finding that yes, independent lists can boost local democracy, and these two cases can be taken as examples of lessons learned. They give citizens more direct access to policy-making at the local level, with fewer “filters” that political parties have. In a clientelistic, overall partitioned society such as North Macedonia, outside “players” are difficult to influence politics since they do not have access to executive power (thus, no informal bargaining power) and must rely on values and adequate identification of popular interests. Furthermore, utilising the capacities of already-established entities, such as independent civil society organisations, can give additional strength to these lists. Nevertheless, as can be seen from these two examples, it is much easier to successfully promote the interests of citizens who are not aligned with political parties at the local level rather than the central one.

The successes of the movements GHC and CfC contribute to increasing citizens’ trust in independent candidate lists as a true “third voting option” and alleviating the so-called “wasted vote syndrome”. This phenomenon, when framed within the debates on open lists in elections that use a proportional electoral model (parliamentary and municipal council elections), represents progress towards greater democratisation of Macedonian society. However, at the same time, there is a possibility of democratic backsliding, which occurs when such independent movements act contrary to the demands and needs of the citizens. The GHC movement is clearly aware of this potential negative phenomenon, which is why, since March 2023, it has been conducting electronic public opinion analysis on the needs of citizens in the City of Skopje.

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Looking ahead to the 2025 local elections, considering the achievements of both movements at the local level (as mentioned above), which can be seen as a catalyst for their further involvement in the political scene, it is appropriate to provide a set of recommendations. These recommendations serve as a general theoretical



framework not only for advancing the movements mentioned in this analysis but also for future similar civic initiatives. They can be summarised as follows:

- 1. Wider cooperation with different actors and on various topics is necessary. The GHC and CfC movements should continue to deliver on their campaign promises, especially through increased collaboration with other political parties (not just those present in municipal councils).** In the current polarised and fragmented political scene, such collaboration is more challenging than ever but also more crucial than ever. Therefore, the proposal in this field is for the movements to rely on neofunctionalist theory, which has proven to gradually ensure high levels of cooperation through initial collaboration in smaller (less significant) areas, which then establishes the conditions (basis) for collaboration and compromises on a larger scale (Haas, 2008). For example, collaboration could begin in the field of culture. Increasing legislative support would also secure a larger voter base for the upcoming local elections.
- 2. CfC should follow the example of GHC in terms of transparency and accountability.** Following GHC's example, CfC should increase its transparency in a comprehensive and accessible manner regarding the work of its councillors in the municipal council, including:
  - Questions raised by their councillors;
  - Committees in which their councillors participate;
  - Nominations made by CfC for working groups, councils, and committees in all institutions under the municipality's jurisdiction;
  - Updated financial reports for the movement (the latest available on their website, as of the date of this analysis, is from November 3, 2021);
  - An updated list of activities (achievements and unsuccessful initiatives).
- 3. CfC should follow GHC's good practise of conducting public opinion research to gather information firsthand about the issues affecting the citizens of the municipality.** This way, the movement ensures that it seeks solutions to the real (legitimate) problems of its constituents.
- 4. Form strategic coalitions with established political parties based on policies, not loyalty.** This way, the accusations that they are merely hidden 'servants' of the major parties will have fewer effects.
- 5. CfC should form partnerships with civic organizations operating in the municipality's territory.** This will strengthen CfC's possibly limited professional, human, and financial resources.
- 6. Strengthening civic capacities through workshops, educational campaigns, and public forums to increase visibility and active citizenship.** Through continuous objective education of their constituents, GHC and CfC would contribute to strengthening democratic capacity, reducing the chance of manipulation, and encouraging local debate on the issues faced by citizens.
- 7. Regular and two-way communication.** Easily accessible communication channels need to be established between the movements and constituents through newsletters, social media, local meetings, etc., to gather feedback from citizens regarding the movements' work. GHC has good practises in this field.



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## About the authors

**Isak Missini** is Project Assistant at EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies – Skopje. He is a BA student of International Relations and Diplomacy at the University American College Skopje, and serves as a Young European Ambassador since 2022.

Contact: [isak.missini@eurothink.mk](mailto:isak.missini@eurothink.mk)

**Dimitar Nikolovski** is Executive Director of EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies – Skopje. He is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School for Social Research, Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and teaches at the University of Pannonia in Kőszeg, Hungary.

Contact: [dimitar.nikolovski@eurothink.mk](mailto:dimitar.nikolovski@eurothink.mk)

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

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