SOCRATES PROGRAM
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ASPEN INSTITUTE ROMANIA

Aspen Institute Germany

# Socrates Seminar: Democratic Backsliding – Rule of Law or Rule by Law?

Engage with like-minded leaders on the challenges of democratic backsliding, the importance of rule of law, and the essence of values-based leadership.

**November 17-19, 2025**
Podgorica, Montenegro

# Socrates Seminar: Democratic Backsliding — Rule of Law or Rule by Law?

The Aspen Socrates Seminar, a space for stimulating dialogue, values-based introspection, and dynamic debate, is coming to the Western Balkans. The expert-led dialogue will delve into threats to democracy and ponder how they impact political, economic and civil-society commitment to a fully functioning democracy, both now and in the future. The seminar provides a forum for leaders from various professions to convene and explore contemporary issues.

For the past 30 years, Socrates Seminars have gathered leaders worldwide. In Socrates Seminars, participants contribute and react to texts curated by the subject-matter expert moderator.

Participants develop an understanding of the reading material and formulate responses to the topics that they cover at the roundtable meetings. The seminar provides stimulating dialogue, values-based introspection, and dynamic debate that serves to enhance participants' leadership capabilities.

"Democratic Backsliding – Rule of Law or Rule by Law?" will allow participants to reflect on the goals and ideals of democracy and the threats to democratic governments and cultivate an internal compass on the rule of law and the tools to be stronger decision makers for a more democratic future.

## You will leave our Socrates Seminar with...

- a clearer sense of your own values;
- an ability to think outside the box;
- a broader and more diverse professional network;
- a foundation for tackling threats to democracy.

# Democratic Backsliding and the Rule of Law

In recent years, many leaders around the world have faced insurgencies of actors attacking the rule of law and democratic institutions, posing a threat to democracy itself. In particular for regions such as the Western Balkans and its pathway toward EU membership, these challenges have slowed the process.

A strong commitment to values-based leadership can support leaders in their opposition to challenges and attacks, supplying tools to enforce the rule of law and contest anti-democratic policies. At the same time, geopolitical factors, especially in the Western Balkans, have the potential to push decision makers in the region and beyond away from policies that would strengthen their pathway towards stronger democracy.

In this context and united in their commitment to values-based leadership and democratic resilience across the region, Aspen Germany and Aspen Romania believe that now is the time to bring the Aspen philosophy through the Socrates Program to the Western Balkans.

Through its text-based method of moderation, a Socrates Seminar can help provide a wide range of leaders across the Western Balkans with the opportunity to foster a reflection on the crucial matter of democracy, evaluating the notion of the rule of law and its necessity to build an open, fair and just society.

With a focus on the rule of law, participants will analyze the philosophical origins of democracy and justice, the role that principled governments and civil society should play, and how a just and values-based democracy can operate and function for its citizens and residents.

## HALLMARKS OF THE ASPEN SOCRATES SEMINAR

- **In-depth reflection on timeless human values, cultivating a richer understanding of the human condition**
- **Focus on the essence of questions of our future**
- **Diversity of participants and views**
- **Expert moderator from the United States**
- **Confidential setting and respectful atmosphere away from daily routine**

**"Aspen's Socrates seminars combine expert guidance, broad participant engagement, and the Institute's signature focus on values-driven leadership to address today's most pressing challenges."**

Dr. Leigh G. Hafrey
Moderator

Aspen Institute Germany

# Why the Aspen Socrates Seminar?

Aspen Germany's and Aspen Romania's seminars enable participants to reflect deeply on the foundations of their own decisions in light of developments in the past, present, and future. As non-partisan, non-profit convening platforms, Aspen Germany and Romania are part of the global Aspen network and remain committed to building bridges among diverse stakeholders.

The first Socrates Seminar gathered participants in 1996 to discuss "Dilemmas of the Digital Age." The seminars continue to gather participants to explore current, pressing global challenges. Discussions are built around contemporary texts and are led by expert moderators who encourage participants to share their views with a diverse group of peers.

The Aspen Institute Romania has become since its foundation in 2006 the prime Romanian organization for leadership education, strategic reflection and a major convening platform for non-partisan policy debates. Similarly, Aspen Germany's Leadership Program is dedicated to values-based leadership across politics, business, and civil society. It provides a space to discuss contemporary challenges of leadership against the backdrop of an ever-changing world.

This seminar complements Aspen Germany and Aspen Romania's existing methods of dialogue by offering a new format of philosophical thought and self-reflection through close, text-based analysis and discussion. Moreover, it is an important aspect of these two Aspen Institutes at the heart of Europe to work toward strengthening values-based leadership and the good society, bringing this seminar to regions crucial for the future of Europe.

## TARGET GROUP

**The seminar is designed for a diverse range of participants, including leaders from business, civil society, and politics.**

## REGISTRATION

**To learn more, please contact us at leadership@aspeninstitute.de or socrates@aspeninstitute.org.**

## READINGS

**The readings consist of select classical and contemporary texts. The seminar will be conducted in English.**

## DURATION

**The seminar will take place over 3 days, with participants arriving on Monday evening and departing on Wednesday lunchtime. Our participants are expected to take part for the duration of the seminar.**


**YOUR CONTACT**

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