



CIVIC CHALLENGERS

Citizens Up Against Illiberalism in the Western Balkans

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1. Civil Society in Illiberal Democracies of the Western Balkans

Illiberal governance is legitimized through securitization, while critics are marginalized

Despite the varying degrees of authoritarianism of political parties and leaders in power across the Western Balkans, none of the regional countries is likely to soon become a consolidated democracy.¹ The reason for this is the entrenched system of party patronage of institutions, clientelistic networks and informal practices that perseveres even after actors with democratic style and rhetoric occasionally win elections. This system enables political and economic elites to abuse power and extract public resources for private gain, to the detriment of the rule of law, while its preservation requires that opposition is kept at bay. For this purpose, illiberal practices are employed: elections are tilted, contenders weakened, rights violated. At the same time – faced with the broad internal consensus on post-socialist westernization, mostly in terms of living standard and opening of societies, and with external pressures to abide by rules of consolidated democracies, mostly originating from conditionality of the EU accession process and from an interest to contain the Chinese influence – the Western Balkan incumbents have had to make sure that their governance has a democratic semblance. In result, the acts of curbing dissent are intertwined with democratic practices, which puts the countries of the region in the category of illiberal democracies². Feeding on the rooted institutional capture, slow economic progress and fragile stability, the illiberal governance in the region has lately been fueled from outside, too. The increased presence of China, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf countries diffuses values and norms that create a context favorable for violation of civil rights³. The influx of corrosive capital from these and other countries and from organized crime reinforces state capture, while the EU's plummeting interest in the region lifts the pressure to deliver on reforms. However, the incentives to democratize still stand, preventing a full swing of extraction and repression. They compel the governments to keep democratic façades, while at the same time using a strategy less democratic to build domestic consent.

The strategy to legitimize the illiberal rule domestically is to securitize daily political agendas – continuously frame actors, events and circumstances as threats to national, economic, health or any other security⁴. Whether the danger is actual or not is less important. The portrayal of reality as threatening implies a call to fend off the danger at any cost. This imperative to protect the society is then used to justify the breaches of law and human rights, to normalize the lack of reforms, to explain the rapprochement to undemocratic foreign actors and the influx of corrosive capital, while it also allows the top-tier officials to emerge as saviors. Real or made up, threats are most often located in the realm of national security. The unsolved bilateral issues and the legacy of inter-ethnic conflict provide plenty of opportunities to interpret daily events building on the myths of national glory, victimhood and historical rights, and on national stereotypes. Using the motives of traitors, plots and foreign agents, the stability of governments is at times interpreted as critical. Building on racist and anti-Muslim views, migrants and refugees are depicted as risks to citizens' lives and properties. Often used to justify rule-bending linked to the inflow of corrosive capital is the promise to end local unemploy-

- ement – an economic security trope, covert threat hinting at hopeless poverty in case of non-compliance. Lately, restrictions on human rights and circumvention of rules have been justified by COVID-19, the global health security concern.

To facilitate the securitization, challengers are marginalized. Parts of administration, legislative, judiciary and independent bodies committed to good governance as well as opposition parties are sidelined through influence-wielding, co-optation, corruption, party employments, threats and other schemes. Media are largely reduced to amplifiers of messages of political and economic elites that benefit from the extractive system. Civil society is kept at gates through irrelevant or staged inclusion, while the loudest critics from its ranks are defamed, attacked and exposed to strategic litigation⁵.

Some parts of civil society abet illiberal governance...

Certain civil society organizations help the legitimization strategy, sometimes as grassroots, but more often as astroturfs – organizations established or backed by domestic or undemocratic foreign governments and political parties (GONGOs/PONGOs). Their uneven regional prominence seems to be related to several factors: primarily to varying degrees of power concentration, but also to different stages of individual countries' EU accession process, as pressure for civic participation mounts along the way, and to the sway of religious diplomacy of undemocratic external powers in particular countries. Astroturfs today generally lack capacities and reputation to seriously undermine democratic action, but may grow to be more damaging in the long run, as they foment illiberal governance in several ways. One is by defending government acts that constitute or enable extractive practices⁶, sometimes doing so while mimicking the identities of genuine, critical organizations⁷. They help the muffling of democratic civil society through defamation⁸ and by providing semblance of civic participation in policy processes⁹. As extensions of the clientelistic systems, domestically supported astroturfs consume large part of government funding, hampering democratic actors' access to financial means¹⁰. They also add to securitization of daily political agendas by promoting nationalism and other exclusionary, discriminatory principles¹¹, or by endorsing ties to autocracies directly, through government-sponsored rallies in support to autocratic leaders¹² or through engagement in online activism¹³, or indirectly, in the form pious groups¹⁴. Finally, in the countries where democratic-minded governments come to power, former critics of extractive practices tend to soften their approach towards the same practices of the new incumbents¹⁵.

... while some challenge it

A number of civic actors challenge illiberal governance by undermining its legitimacy. These 'civic challengers' do so by countering the securitization of daily political agendas, while also striving to resist the marginalization. The *de-securitization of daily political agendas* proceeds through two types of action: (1) disclosure of and protests against particular cases of extractive

practices and repression and (2) advocacy for policy change towards the rule of law, good governance, human rights, socio-economic justice, sustainable development and regional reconciliation, which also diminishes the persuasive power of the populist claims used in the legitimization strategy. To counter marginalization, civic challengers work to *build leverage* and impact social changes through: (1) constituency-building and networking, (2) outreach to broad audience, (3) acquiring political support from democratic international actors, (4) concentration of expertise and professionalization and (5) cooperation with parts of administration, legislative, judiciary and regulatory bodies committed to good governance. As the leverage of the civic challengers is increased, so is the governments' cost of marginalization.

To illustrate, several examples of the civic challengers' actions countering illiberal equilibrium¹⁶ are laid out in the next section¹⁷.

2. How do Civic Challengers Counter the Illiberal Governance?

Civic challengers de-securitize daily political agendas through two types of action

- **Disclosures of and protest against individual cases of extraction and repression**

These actions bring to public eye individual acts and schemes breaching the law and human rights and the ties of power-holders with autocratic regimes, corrosive capital and organized crime, and sometimes, demand that particular cases of foul play be reversed. The civic challengers that take these actions include investigative teams, watchdog groups and fact-checkers, but also local civic initiatives.

The most obvious threats to patron-client networks come from investigative reporters, watchdogs and fact-checkers. Investigative teams like the North Macedonian *IRL*, Serbian *KRIK* and *CINS*, Bosnian *CIN*, *BIRN Kosovo* and others expose murky cases of privatization, point at the ties of government officials with criminal circles and probe their wealth, question large urban and local development projects and other malversations. These organizations and their staff are often threatened, assaulted and exposed to smear campaigns in government-controlled media. Watchdogs follow public procurements and red-flag particular cases, as on the Bosnian *Pratimotendere* portal, or engage citizens in election monitoring, like the Montenegrin Center for Democratic Transition. Fact-checkers fight disinformation campaigns as they investigate politicians' claims and debunk conspiracy theories and rumors, as on the Albanian *Faktoje*, or Serbian *Istinomer* portal. The low rankings of media freedoms in the region warn of how instrumental these actors are for democratization.¹⁸

Extractive systems require apolitical and passive citizens. Much to their benefit, the weakened parliamentarism, corporatization of political parties and disappointment with the results of past democratic cabinets have left the citizens in the region estranged from political life. However, they have come up with alternative ways of handling grievances – in mid-twenty-tens small civic initiatives protesting against harmful local practices started to mushroom, as the -

- ones throughout Bosnia in 2014, known as the *plenum movement*.¹⁹ Civic initiatives are usually single-issue or one-off movements, as the actions protesting evictions, urban developments, particular hydropower plants or cases of privatization²⁰. Regardless of individual outcomes, their key contribution to challenging illiberalism is the political activation of citizens outside capitals, most often through protests against abuses of power by local strongmen.²¹

- **Advocacy for policy change**

In quest for legitimacy, illiberal governments exploit or produce security threats and crises using discriminatory and authoritarian narratives. Civic challengers oppose this strategy in two ways. They put forward the alternatives to the authoritarian claims – the norms and values of consolidated democracies, such as the rule of law, good governance, human rights, reconciliation, socio-economic justice and sustainable development, and advocate for policies that advance these principles. Also, they oppose nationalism-driven, confrontational views regarding the regional security issues and propose alternatives based on democratic principles and regional approach. These civic challengers include ‘do-thanks’ – organizations doing research and policy advocacy (as think tanks) as well as awareness-raising campaigns.

A typical do-thank is the *Humanitarian Law Center* in Serbia, under incessant attacks of right-wing groups and political parties, advocating for prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity that took place during the conflicts after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The *HLC* is a part of the regional *RECOM Reconciliation Network*, which promotes memory politics based on respect for victims, and not on nationalistic myths. Also addressing human rights, but from the perspective of due process, is the coalition of the North Macedonian organizations *All for Fair Trials*, providing expert inputs related to judiciary reform and open data. Among many others, their *Trial Dossier* project promotes transparency as it presents key information about high-profile court cases. The Montenegrin *Institute Alternativa* also advocates for the rule of law, based on research and on monitoring of public administration, as they tackle the sensitive issue of public procurements, alongside many others. Dealing with similar topics, and also with the vetting process and with corruption in security forces, is the Albanian *Institute for Democracy and Mediation*. In a recent study that the *IDM* prepared with the North Macedonian *European Policy Institute* and Kosovo’s *Balkans Policy Research Group*, the idea of ‘great states’ in the Western Balkans was unpacked as a regional security threat and proposals were made on how to instrumentalize the Albanian political factor in the three countries to further regional stability. Another approach to security promoting regional cooperation is through the work of the *Kosovar Center for Security Studies*, which contributes to public debate with expertise on security sector reform and with research bringing clarity to Kosovo–Serbia dialogue. Similarly, the Bosnian *Foreign Policy Initiative* looks at the foreign policy problems through regional lenses and the Serbian *ISAC Fund* analyzes security and foreign policy from the perspective of the region’s Euro-Atlantic integration. These examples showcase how public discourse can be de-securitized as civic actors address actual security issues departing from democratic principles. Another way is to put forward other -

- priorities: environmental issues, as the Bosnian *Center for Ecology and Energy* does, issues of equitable socio-economic development, youth and gender, as the Serbian *Đurđević Foundation* and the Bosnian *Mozaike* do, the rights of the LGBTI population as does the North Macedonian *Woman's Alliance*, or to promote regional approach to economic issues, as does the Albanian-*Cooperation and Development Institute*. Lastly, organizations promoting media literacy, journalistic ethics and standards, such as *Montenegro Media Institute*, contribute to de-securitization by opposing the mechanism behind the narrative manipulation. Aside from these and tens of similar examples, other types of actors protest injustice and advocate for change: independent trade unions, service-providing organizations, scientific institutions, etc. However, it is the types of actors exemplified above – watchdog groups, investigative teams, fact-checkers, civic initiatives and do-thanks – that directly and most frequently challenge the legitimacy of illiberal democracies in the Western Balkans²².

Civic challengers build leverage to counter marginalization

- **Constituency-building and networking**

Massive involvement of protesters in civic initiatives lowers the risks of individual participation and increases the cost of repression²³. To mobilize citizens, these actors rely on social and community networks and sometimes connect regionally to gain traction, as in the case of *Our Rivers – No DAMage!* series of local protests against hydropower plants in July 2019.²⁴ The other types of civic challengers – watchdog groups, investigative teams, fact-checkers and do-thanks – base their leverage not on constituency in terms of massive participation, but on outreach to target groups, on expertise and professionalization, and on the routine of access to political processes. Their way of amassing participation is via networks of similar organizations: nationally, as is Serbia's *Association of Online Media*, regionally, as do *Youth Initiative for Human Rights* organizations and globally, as in *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*.

- **Outreach to broad audience**

To create popular demand for changes, civic challengers strive to reach out to broad audiences via the traditional and social media, though the scope of social media campaigns remains limited without the traditional media coverage. Due to clientelistic networks' control of the media and their commodification, the messages of the civic challengers almost never get through. When not kept at gates, they are banalized to fit the commercial editorial concepts.²⁵ The news outlets that the civic challengers can access, and which promote democratic values – such as BIRN-related news portals, Buka or European Western Balkans – all have limited resources and can only target narrow population segments. Strong 'civil society media' – non-commercial, non-governmental outlets that would produce non-partisan, professional news and other content and broadcast it nationally – remain direly missed.²⁶

- **Acquiring political support from democratic international actors**

Civic challengers can increase leverage through soliciting political support for their initiatives from the EU institutions, international organizations and democratic governments. The political support raises the organizations' profiles at the domestic level. It is most often materialized through participation of delegates at their events, through inclusion of civil sector's positions in official reports, like the annual reports of the European Commission and also through statements demanding that freedom of civic action is protected.²⁷

- **Concentration of expertise and professionalization**

To build leverage, do-thanks round up expert researchers and key staff. Across the region, the do-thanks' expertise is strong in the fields of EU issues, regional cooperation, foreign policy, rule of law and security. On the other hand, do-thanks are fewer in the fields of economy, energy, social protection, health, education etc.²⁸ Such are, for instance, the *GAP Institute*, Kosovo's economic think-tank, *RESET*, a Bosnian group of green energy experts, or *United Against Covid*, a Serbian association of medical workers. However, without institutional financing, the professionalization of staff and building of expert teams in particular fields will remain the issues the sector will continue to grapple with.

- **Cooperation with parts of administration, legislative, judiciary and regulatory bodies committed to good governance**

With this approach civic challengers walk the thin line between sustaining and countering illiberal governance. Irrelevant participation should be avoided, though opportunities to participate can create impact and in time build a routine, considering that illiberal regimes do retain certain democratic practices. Generally, the possibilities to influence decision-making remain marginal and the mechanisms to provide feedback on initiatives are generally missing, which has been additionally highlighted by the pandemic.²⁹ An example of a success story is the *Albanian Center for Legal Civic Initiatives* which drafted the Law on the Legislative Initiative of Voters, adopted later on in 2019.³⁰ Other ways of cooperation with democratic-minded departments and individuals may give leverage to civic action too, i.e. doors can be opened to outside monitoring, like for the regional *WêBER* project. Independent bodies are also likely allies, as was the case of Ombudsperson supporting *Kosovo's trade unions'* request for review of Law on Salaries.³¹ Still, a major obstacle to meaningful participation in policy-processes region-wide is the dominance of the traditional political culture, dismissive of civil society.³² To move if forward, upon electoral win, democratic incumbents' public endorsement of civic actors can affect media reporting and the sector's reputation.³³

The outcomes of particular civic actions countering illiberal governance will hinge on opportunity structures, but also on the capacities and leverage of the civic challengers. The current -

- donor policies seem to not be helping them develop either. Namely, several features of these policies are objected to by the civic challengers: focus on project-based funding, mandating cooperation with governments and sub-granting schemes, lack of coordination that would enable large-scale projects, shy support to civil society media and to networks of independent media, as well as the inconsistency of priorities of particular donors, randomly switching from one type of programs to another. What is more, in spite of the frequent consulting exercises, civic challengers often feel that their assessments and priorities are not reflected in the funding policies and that the donors tend to have a 'patronizing' approach towards the region.³⁴

3. Takeaways

The extractive systems will not be dismantled without civic action

Even when political parties and leaders with democratic outlook take office, sufficient incentives to dismantle the extractive system are still not there.³⁵ The opportunity to fortify their position through the deep-seated system of party patronage is too tempting to miss out on. So far, the political parties in the Western Balkans have opposed the system only until they get a chance to become its part. Therefore, it is down to civil sector to create the public demand that the incumbents deliver on their campaign promises.

Many civic actors are democratic, yet only some challenge illiberal governance

Many organizations implicitly promote liberal values and social justice through their work. However, only the ones that undermine the legitimacy of illiberal governance are its challengers. The challenges are posed through actions that disclose and protest the abuse of power and advocate for policy change. Yet, to create a powerful popular call for change, the watchdogs, investigative teams, fact-checkers, local civic initiatives, do-thanks and other actors need to have leverage.

Civic challengers lack leverage

For civic initiatives, the primary source of leverage will be constituencies – the number of people they manage to mobilize for protest actions. On the other hand, the leverage of investigative groups, fact-checkers and do-thanks will lie in their expertise and professionalism, support of peer-networks and political support from international democratic actors; additionally, as policy advocates, the do-thanks should be able to secure routine access to policy processes and to relevant political fora in the country and internationally. Several issues remain critical to the leverage of both types of civic challengers. Related to donor policies is the lack of resources to professionalize and continuously engage in communications via traditional and social media. A resolute political support to civic action from the EU and other democratic international actors in their daily cooperation with the Western Balkan governments is missing, too. Domestically, the democratic actors within the governments are not proactive in including civic challengers in policy processes. But what hampers the leverage of all civic challengers the most is the inability to access broad audiences.

Without media attention civic challengers cannot create the demand for change

Due to the limited access to mainstream media, the best part of actions that disclose and protest the abuses of power across the region the calls to reverse authoritarian and discriminatory practices and the demands for more equitable society remain next to invisible to the best part of the Western Balkan citizens. Far from the media outlets that the majority of women and men can relate to, the work of civic challengers does not translate to popular demand for change. To overcome this situation, civic challengers should be able to rely on civil society media, whose content would be disseminated through national networks of local media.

The current donor support to independent, civil society media – the non-commercial and non-governmental outlets promoting democratic values – is by and large project-based and uncoordinated. In result, even the most professional civil society media outlets lack resources to both produce the content and secure that it is broadcast nationally, via networks of local media. Further capacity-building of civil society media and the development of regionally-linked national networks of local media are two preconditions to reaching out to citizens and inspiring them to demand democratic changes.

A word of warning comes from the past, too. The donors' decision in the early noughties that independent media in the region, previously living off donor funding, should transform to self-sustainable, quickly proved to be a mistake. The case in point is the Serbian radio and TV station *B-92*, which had an important role in overthrowing the Milošević regime in Serbia, to later be privatized and sold, completely losing its clout and democratic credibility.³⁶ The trick to its influence was high sensitivity to popular concerns, professionalism and enthusiasm, a communication style that played to the spirit of the time and – the reliance on an agile network of local media.

4. How to Support Civic Challengers?

The democratic-minded individuals and departments in central and local governments in the Western Balkans may:

- **Publicly endorse civic challengers**

In societies with authoritarian traditions, especially at the local level, civil society actors are generally dismissed. Central and local government officials may publicly endorse the work of the challengers and help increase their profile through participation in events, in projects or in other occasions. In countries where democratic-minded parties come to power, the incumbents should encourage civic challengers to retain their critical perspective.

- **Reach out to civic challengers**

In the course of policy cycles, instead of using only the official channels, central and local legislators can reach out to civil society organizations individually and encourage even the -

- strongest challengers to become involved. Also, aside from the occasional participation in civil society projects, national parliaments, government ministries, other institutions, as well as the judiciary, can establish formats to ensure regular communication with civil sector and dialogue with the challengers on regular basis.

- **Foster engagement of civic challengers in all the phases of policy process**

Participation should not be limited to phases preceding legislation – consultations, participation in working groups etc. Civic challengers should also be invited to monitor the implementation of policies and take part in setting the priorities for the next policy cycle.

The EU, international democratic governments, regional and global organizations may:

- **Incessantly encourage the Western Balkan leaders and governments to seek dialogue with civic challengers**

High officials and other representatives of the democratic international actors should use as many formal encounters and informal exchanges as possible to encourage the Western Balkan governments and leaders to engage in meaningful dialogue with those civic actors that challenge their ways of governance and promote democratic reforms, and should persistently enquire about the progress in that matter.

- **Include civic challengers in regional summits and meetings**

The representatives of the civic actors that challenge the ways of governance should be included in the work of the regional intergovernmental conferences organized under auspices of the democratic international actors – as observers with the right to take part in the discussions. This pertains to such occasions as ministerial and other intergovernmental meetings at the Regional Cooperation Council and within other regional organizations, or the prime ministers' summits and ministerial meetings within the Berlin Process. The organizers of the meetings and the chairpersons need to make sure that the participation of the civic actors is not only symbolical.

- **Resolutely stand in protection of freedom of civic action**

In the cases when the civil society actors are exposed to intimidation, violent attacks and defamation campaigns, the democratic international actors should strongly and without delay insist that the regional governments respect the freedom of civic action, avoiding vague, diplomatic formulations.

The donors may:

- **Know democratic civil society actors from GONGOs and PONGOs**

Based on their track record – whether their past activities furthered the democratization processes or not, the donors should make sure to not support government- or party-affiliated organizations that serve to crowd out the critical, democratic civil society, nor the ones that promote discrimination and the ties to autocracies.

- **Prioritize support to civic challengers**

Based on two criteria – (1) whether an action aims to disclose and protest abuse of power and repression and/or advocate for policies forwarding democratic values, and (2) whether an organization has relative leverage (the lack of access to mainstream media notwithstanding) – the donors can recognize the challengers of illiberal practices and give them priority in distribution of funds.

- **Revisit policies that curb the effectiveness of civic challengers**

Assessments and proposals of the civic challengers should be clearly reflected in donor policies. Donors' priorities should be adhered to, and not abandoned without prior consultations with the civil society actors. Engagement with local and central administrations should not be mandated; that would allow the organizations more critical towards the governments to also engage in promotion of democratic reforms through other means, such as expert roundtables, public debates, rallies, social media campaigns and others. Sub-granting, as a way to support local civic initiatives, should not be an obligation of do-thanks, while it is often stipulated in calls for proposals; it can hardly be assumed that do-thanks are skillful at developing local activism; their capacity to challenge illiberal governance is usually within a different field.

- **Provide institutional funding and develop incubators for civic challengers**

Project-based funding does not help smaller organizations grow. With committed institutional funding, the investigative groups, watchdogs, fact-checkers and do-thanks, especially at the local level, would be able to retain professional staff, maintain communication campaigns with their target groups and continue to advocate for change in between projects, as well. A network of incubators of civic initiatives should be created in each country, as part of a larger, Western Balkan network. Incubators would support the mobilization efforts and actions of local civic initiatives, through small grants and joint administrative services, while advocacy and communications consultancy can be provided by national and regional do-thanks.

- **Help civic challengers build public demand for change:**
 - In each country, develop one highly professional news portal immune to pressure from the elites
 - In each country, develop one dense national network of local media that will disseminate the content that can create public demand for change

In the world of today, civic actors and other challengers of the Western Balkan illiberal systems would ideally have access to the Guardian-like outlets, one in each country, which would routinely disseminate its content via a dense network of local media.

With coordination of donors' efforts, one civil society media outlet in each of the Western Balkan countries could be selected and developed into a high-profile professional news portal, producing content that promotes the democratic values and norms. For broad outreach, the content should be disseminated via thick, national networks of local media, developed in each of the countries. Expensive as they are, the high-profile civil society media outlets supported by the operative networks of local media might be the only hope for building citizens' demand for change, before the region has slipped further towards authoritarianism.

In the course of preparation of this text the author held interviews with key staff of prominent civil society organizations from across the Western Balkans and employees of regional development organizations with expertise in civil sector and donor policies. The author is grateful for their help in understanding the constraints of the civic challengers and in seeing the opportunities, regardless.

Endnotes

¹ See Freedom House Nations in Transit Report (2020).

² In terms of the notion of illiberal democracy as described in Zakaria (1997).

³ For more on the concept of norm diffusion see i.e. Gilardi (2012).

⁴ The concept of securitization is borrowed from security studies. See for instance Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998).

⁵ The use of the term civil society in this text pertains to all non-for-profit, non-governmental initiatives, formal or informal, such as civic initiatives, organizations of activists, think-tanks and do-thanks, watchdog groups, investigative teams and fact-checkers, professional associations, trade unions and others.

⁶ For example, in North Macedonia several organizations rallied to support Gruevski's Skopje 2014 project. See European Western Balkans (2019).

⁷ As has been the case with mirroring the name of Transparency Serbia since 2018. See Gradjanske inicijative (2019).

⁸ Such as the actions of Stop Operation Soros in North Macedonia. See META.mk (2017), or of Nacionalna avangarda in Serbia. See Nacionalna avangarda (2019).

⁹ As during the public debate on Serbian Constitution in 2017. See Peščanik (2018).

¹⁰ As in Montenegro and Bosnia. See Danas (2019). Also, according to an interviewee, in Serbia, the organizations promoting social development have almost no access to public funds, as they are being distributed to newly-formed organizations close to the party in power.

¹¹ Such were the protests of the right-wing groups in Serbia against the festival of contemporary Kosovo culture "Mirëdita, dobar dan!" or the protests of religious groups endorsing "traditional values" and opposing pride march in Sarajevo in 2019. See Deutsche Welle (2020) and Euronews (2019).

¹² Massive civic rallies took place to welcome Putin to Belgrade in 2019 or to support Erdogan's election campaign in Sarajevo in 2018. See BBC News (2019) and Deutsche Welle (2018).

¹³ In Kosovo, citizens put up a Facebook page named Support to Erdogan from Kosovo Albanians that has over 90,000 followers (see <https://www.facebook.com/SupportforErdoganfromKosovo>) and in Serbia the extremely right-wing Srbska čast has over 50,000 followers (see <https://www.facebook.com/srbskacastcom/>).

¹⁴ As are e.g. the prayer communities in the rural regions of Bosnia, outside the official Islamic structures. See Euronews (2018).

¹⁵ Assessment of an interviewee, who also pointed to the phenomenon that the former critics of partocratic employments forego the meritocracy principle and join the new, 'democratic' administrations.

¹⁶ For more on the phenomenon of illiberal equilibrium see Maliqi (2020).

¹⁷ Web addresses of all the organizations and projects mentioned in this text are included in the References section.

¹⁸ Reporters Without Borders (2020).

¹⁹ Peace Direct (2015).

²⁰ Several interviewees were concerned that the donor community set their hopes on local civic initiatives, while many of these initiatives lack competencies in the matters they address, and their agency is often inconsistent and without an articulated agenda.

²¹ According to a recent European Fund for the Balkans/Ipsos Strategic Marketing regional survey (2020), the participation in local protests varies from 16.1% in Kosovo and 37.6% in Montenegro, while almost twice as many citizens believe that public protest can contribute to socio-economic and political changes – from 38.5% in Kosovo to 70.6% in Montenegro.

²² A recent breakthrough in advocacy for political change are social movements with formalized structure, such as the Albanian Hashtag Initiative or Serbian Ne davimo Beograd. They engage citizens and advocate for common goods – socio-economic development, clean energy, fair elections, citizen-friendly urban development etc. Although their background is in civic action, once they run in elections, they essentially become political parties, regardless of the legal form. Their common feature is the left-wing orientation, similar to political entities that are civic movements only by origin, such as the Montenegrin Ura!/Crno na bijelo or the Kosovar Vetëvendosje.

²³ As in Della Porta and Diani (2015).

²⁴ See Save the Blue Heart of Europe – Action Weeks for Balkan Rivers.

²⁵ According to an interviewee, what makes the access to traditional media even harder is that the civic challengers often lack the knowledge of public relations, and have troubles crafting their messages to appeal to wider publics.

²⁶ As some interviewees warn, the independence of the civil society media will not be helped if the big donors, such as the EU, insist on diversification of funding type, which will require stronger reliance on private sector donors, as has been proposed in draft Guidelines for EU support to civil society in Enlargement Region 2021-2027 (TACSO 2021).

²⁷ For instance, the European Commission and the Embassy of the United States in Belgrade issued statements in August 2020, urging the Government of Serbia to avoid pressure on civil society. See Civicus (2020).

²⁸ Several interviewees attribute the lack of expertise to intensive emigration of highly qualified people from the Western Balkans during the past two decades.

²⁹ According to several interviewees.

³⁰ According to USAID (2019).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Most interviewees agreed about this. Additionally, some pointed to the phenomenon that the governments in the region are at times more likely to consult and trust foreign than domestic expertise. One interviewee said that this speaks of an “internalization of the neo-colonial attitude towards the people in the Balkans”.

³³ According to USAID (2019).

³⁴ This passage lists the key objections to donor policies raised by interviewees.

³⁵ What is more, according to several interviewees, is that while the former, undemocratic governments at least pretended that they were not engaging in partocratic practices, for the sake of the EU, the members of the new, democratic ones, as the EU’s favorites, seem to feel entitled to establishing their parties’ control of the institutions.

³⁶ Riha (2015).

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