# How to break the illiberal equilibrium in the Western Balkans?

## New generation, new democratisation perspective

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Political parties are the key actors of the illiberal equilibrium in the Western Balkans[1]. While they are declaratively pro-western, pro-democratic and pro-rule-of-law, in practice they are continuously compromising democratic values and are directly undermining the integration of these countrites into the EU. Although they win elections and gain international legitimisation on the grounds of their declared pro-European agenda, all of them (to different extents) use their political mandates to informally exploit state institutions and abuse public resources for private and party aims. Besides, by controlling the media and providing favourable business conditions to their owners, incumbents tend to control and monopolise the public discourse in their own favour. The way parties are organised on principles of patronage and rent-seeking is in striking contrast with the EU's principles of rule of law, institutional independence and freedom of expression which are ironically simultaneously preached by all of these parties. Due to the poor economic standards and the relatively low educational and professional capabilities of the population, they rule on the basis of clientelism, favouritism and personalised networks of informal exchange. They equalise the state and the party by installing party loyalists in all echelons of power including the crucial areas of the state apparatus responsible for impartial execution of the law and fight against corruption and organised crime. In addition, recent examples of turnovers of power in the region show that although the democratic changes are still possible, they are not sufficiently sustainable to change the way how politics is exercised. In sum, the prevalence of party loyalty over meritocracy significantly disrupts institutional impartiality and undermines EU-sponsored reforms in the fundamental areas of democracy and rule of law.

In parallel, the EU's credibility in the region is in a steady decline due to the unclear and distant membership prospects of the WB countries. Moreover, the thin support of the EU to the Western Balkan countries in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing regional role of Russia and China as vaccine providers is further diminishing western credibility in the region. The weakening of the EU anchor is further solidifying the clientelist model of governance and opens room for corrosive influence from third-party authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countriessuch as Russia, China and Turkey[2]. Despite the decreasing trend regarding -

- the EU's importance, the EU is still seen as the main democratizing driver of the region both by the majority of citizens who still favour EU membership, and also by policy experts who are aware that WB countries are unable to further democratize without the external incentive of EU conditionality. As a consequence, almost all political parties in the region base their official political programs on the prospect of EU membership and reforms.

In the meanwhile, parties' counterweights in the political and societal space, like independent media and civil society are weak and unable to provide alternatives to the clientelist modus operandi and parties' monopolistic role in society. Mainstream media are tied to the party and business networks and interests, while the civil society consists mainly of donor-dependent CSOs who despite their important role and expertise as guardians of democratic values, have weak or no constituencies. Despite the notable foreign aid for state institutions and CSOs in support of reforms, expanding capacities and ensuring good governance such assistance is not enough to decompose the illiberal equilibrium. As a result, a novel approach is necessary to generate new pockets of social and political autonomy, independent from party monopoly and its clientelist political economy.

This policy brief aims to contribute towards a new democratisation narrative in the region, in addition to the existing, but the fading idea of exogenous Democratisation via Europeanisation. While incumbent political parties rule based on contradiction, simultaneously breaking the European values they continuously preach, citizens in the region lack effective counterweight mechanisms to de monopolize parties' domination over state institutions and society. The new democratisation narrative should primarily focus on endogenous democratisation which will counterweight the existing illiberal power structures that currently dominate social and political life. The new wave of democratisation should mobilise the new generation of citizens who are part of global outsourcing or freelance markets and who, unlike the previous generations, enjoy considerable economic wellbeing and political autonomy. For instance, in 2018 Serbia and N. Macedonia were on the top of the world's rank list of freelancers per capita, while Montenegro and Bosnia and Hercegovina are amongst the top 10, with Albania being at the 11th place[3]. These people have a significant democratic potential that needs to be further nurtured to create vigorous civic activism based on modern technology and cosmopolitan values.
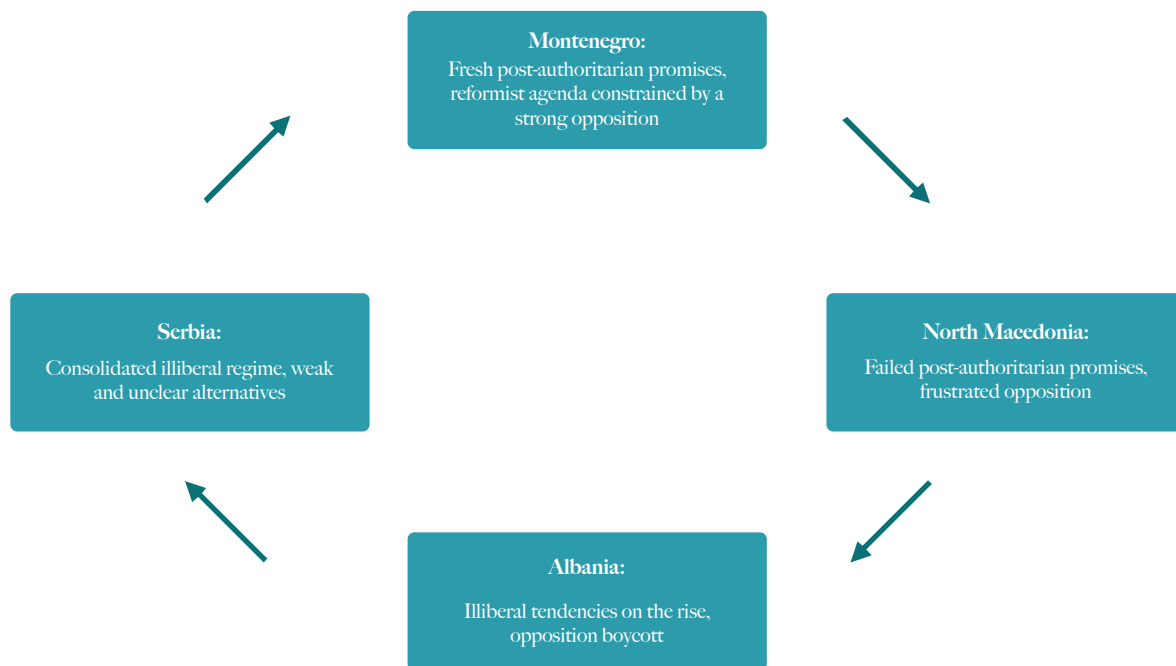
## Turnover of power brings a momentary but not a sustainable change

The prevalence of party loyalty over meritocracy is, to different extents, visible in all six WB countries (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). The study focuses on the four WB countries which are already in the pre-accession negotiations, or at least have candidate status: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Although Montenegro and Serbia opened the negotiations talks in 2012 and 2014 respectively, they are still far from closing the negotiations due to ineffective reforms in the key sectors. Similarly, Albania and N. Macedonia, despite the European Commission's recommendation to open membership negotiations, have not even started the negotiations due to

- the recent enlargement scepticism in some of the most influential EU member states, and the prolonged bi-lateral issues with Greece and Bulgaria in the case of N. Macedonia. Despite their problematic and slow EU integration process, future EU membership still enjoys a two-thirds majority support in all four countries[4]. They also share numerous negative similarities: all four are characterised as transitional/hybrid regimes[5], score relatively high on Transparency International Corruption Perception Index[6] and are lagging behind the EU's average in numerous rule-of-law indicators[7]. Moreover, they are all characterised by widespread clientelism that significantly influences electoral outcomes[8], low trust in state institutions and an overall belief that the law is not applied to everyone equally[9]. Also, these countries score low on international rankings for freedom of expression and media freedoms[10], and have civil societies which are relatively weak as counterweights to the power of political parties[11].

The study looks at some of the basic features of contradictory, clientelist based politics in the four selected countries. Although these countries share numerous similarities and problems, they are currently in different stages of the illiberal equilibrium and can provide us with different perspectives how illiberal politics is conducted. For instance, Montenegro now has a new coalition government after an almost 30-year period of monopolistic rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) which was characterized by numerous authoritarian features covered up and legitimized by their pro-European agenda. Similarly, in N. Macedonia over the past four years there has been another declaratively reformist government, which is expected to lead the country towards further democratization and EU membership after a previous 11-year period of authoritarian, yet declaratively pro-European, rule by the VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). However, N. Macedonia's government is already showing notable signs of compromised integrity, which are even more visible in Albania, as a more pronounced exemplar of contradictory illiberal politics, where after almost seven years of rule by the Socialist Party of Albania (PSSh), there is a notable illiberal turn which is again covered with numerous façade reforms and superficial Europeanisation. Finally, Serbia in this study is taken as an example of the most advanced stage of illiberal politics, of superficial and façade reforms which result in competitive authoritarianism with uneven political competition and monopolized political power, similar to the earlier regimes in Montenegro and N. Macedonia under DPS and VMRO-DPMNE, respectably.

## Illustration 1: Different stages of illiberal equilibrium

**Montenegro:**
Fresh post-authoritarian promises, reformist agenda constrained by a strong opposition

**Serbia:**
Consolidated illiberal regime, weak and unclear alternatives

**North Macedonia:**
Failed post-authoritarian promises, frustrated opposition

**Albania:**
Illiberal tendencies on the rise, opposition boycott

## Montenegro

Montenegro has been an EU membership candidate since 2010, and started accession negotiations in 2012. Montenegro has often been considered as a leader of the EU integration process: to date, they have opened all 33 screened negotiating chapters and have provisionally closed three. However, over the past decade Montenegro's EU prospects were significantly constrained by the serious democratic and rule-of-law shortcomings that developed as a result of the monopolistic position of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and their leader Milo Đukanovic (currently President of Montenegro), and that was continuously in power for almost 30 years from the breakup of Yugoslavia. Its rule ended with the parliamentary elections held in August 2020, when despite their electoral win, they failed win the necessary majority of MPs in order to form a new government. Instead, a new, self-declared reformist government has been formed by three (previously-separate) opposition blocks: the centre-right coalition 'For the future of Montenegro' led by Zdravko Krivokapić, who became a new prime minister; the 'Peace is Our Nation' coalition, led by Aleksa Bečić (who became the Speaker of Parliament); and United Reform Action led by Dritan Abazović (who became Deputy PM). The new government is perceived as technocratic, because it gathers non-partisan experts, but is also seen as pro-Serbian, as the new PM Zdravko Krivokapić emerged as a key political leader during the clash between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the DPS. Despite the fact that parts of the newly-established ruling coalition may have pro-Russian standpoints, it is expected that the new government will maintain the previous geostrategic course of the country.

While it is too soon to evaluate the possible ambivalent rule of the new political establishment in the country, the previous almost three-decade rule by the DPS is one of the best examples of ambivalent politics. DPS rule was characterised by a notable self-proclaimed pro-EU agenda, though on the other hand in practice it was largely violating principles of good governance and democracy in order to consolidate political dominance. This was visible through various instances of institutional capture, electoral clientelism and political influence in the economy and media. For instance, the DPS installed a comprehensive networks of party loyalists at all government and administrative levels, while its highest members were involved in numerous unresolved criminal and vote-buying scandals. DPS' stability was largely affected by their strategic shifts from being allies of the Milošević regime in Yugoslavia in the early 90s, to a shifting towards the idea of Montenegrin nationalism and the creation of an independent Montenegrin state in 2006. As a consequence, the DPS often used the symbolic narratives of Montenegrin nationalism in order to label itself as a patriotic, state-building party with a Western Euro-Atlantic agenda, as opposed to the opposition which was often discredited as pro-Serbian and pro-Russian. Besides this, the DPS exerted strong political influence on the public service broadcaster, and although unlike the political monopoly, the media space was quite diversified and included some critical media, these were often subject to physical assaults including the murder of one editor-in-chief in 2004, which remained unsolved. Moreover, the previous government influenced the independence of the media through allocation of public funds and defamation cases against journalists, which eventually led to a decreased quality of objective reporting, censorship and self-censorship. So far, Montenegrin civil society has been largely pro-EU and has played a vital role in holding the DPS government accountable: however, its influence on policy making was more declarative than substantial, because DPS officials were often finding ways to side-line CSOs from the actual decision-making process.

## North Macedonia

North Macedonia has been an EU membership candidate since 2005, but due to its bilateral problems (first with Greece, and now with Bulgaria) has not opened accession negotiations yet. Similarly to Montenegro, it also underwent a notable regime change in 2017, when the SDSM took power and terminated the 11-year authoritarian rule of VMRO-DPMNE. They came to power after series of mass protests and snap elections which lead to a new parliamentary majority between SDSM and the ethnic Albanian king-making party, DUI. During their first years in of ice they stopped the previous practice of abuse of public institutions and resources for party means, and have freed up the media landscape. However, they have also failed to meet the expectations of the electorate who expected drastic reforms and prosecution of high-level officials. Instead, despite their nominally different and more transparent governance practices, after more than three years in power most of their efforts seem more declarative than substantial and there is a growing dissatisfaction. Also, their rule has been characterised by several scandals (see, for example, the extortion case in 2019[12]), which has resulted in growing public dissatisfaction and perceptions of corruption[13]. A large part of this dissatisfaction is due to their coalition with the DUI, who have continued many of the malp -

- practices of their previous coalition with VMRO-DPMNE. DUI are probably the best example of the previously mentioned contradictions in the region: as a post-war party established after the 2001 armed conflict, they have often been labelled as pro-European guarantors of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA)[14], while simultaneously abusing the OFA's principles of equitable ethnic representation in order to install their party loyalists in key administrative and judicial positions. Earlier, during VMRO-DMPNE's rule, N. Macedonia's politics were characterised by an extreme centralisation of power which led to mass abuse of public resources and institutions for private and party gains, and excessive control of the media. Moreover, by taking advantage of the name dispute with Greece and the vulnerable Macedonian identity, they developed an advanced ethno-nationalist narrative, which considering their almost complete control of the media landscape came to dominate Macedonian public opinion. This democratic decline was noted in numerous domestic and international reports and good-governance indices[15].

## Albania

Albania has had the status of EU candidate country since 2014, but has still not formally opened accession negotiations. Albania's political landscape is highly polarised between the incumbent Socialist Party of Albania (PSSh), led by the current prime minister Edi Rama, and the opposition Democratic Party of Albania (PDSh), led by Lulzim Basha. A third party, over the past decade has played the role of 'kingmaker', is the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), led by Albanian President Ilir Meta.

Rama's government is a good example of a contradictory political rule. On one hand, they are cordially welcomed in European capitals and label themselves pro-EU reformers, while on the other, Rama, with his personalistic and centralised style of governance, has often undermined the development of independent public administration while simultaneously incorporating non-partisan personalities and civil society activists into his cabinet[16]. Thus, their governance is a continuation of winner-takes-all politics, and is characterised by the standard blurry lines between the state and the party and between the public and private (party) interests. Similarly, Meta's LSI have used their kingmaker position to maximise access to administrative rent-seeking and power, both in the periods when they were partners of PSSh and partners of PDSh.

Media independence in Albania is also under pressure from censorship and self-censorship due to defamation cases against journalists and pressure from media owners who trade of freedom expression for their business interests. In parallel, there is growing state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda leading to asymmetrical reporting and manipulated public opinion. Besides this, Albania' s civil society is experiencing 'a shrinking role and influence in the country's policy and decision-making processes'[17]. CSOs are often side-lined and discredited in public discourse, while the emergence of new civic movements is constrained by the existing political polarisation and the notable concentration of power of the incumbents.

## Serbia

Serbia became an EU membership candidate in 2012, and started accession negotiations in 2014. To date, they have opened 18 chapters (out of 35) and have provisionally closed two. However, Serbia's EU prospects are constrained by the slow pace of reforms, and by the Kosovo issue which remains the 'question of all questions' that must be sorted out prior to Serbia's membership in the EU. Serbian politics is dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and their leader, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. They came to power in 2012 and since then they have won three parliamentary elections (in 2014, 2016 and 2020), further increasing their electoral dominance. For instance, in 2020, when they won 189 of 250 seats in the Parliament as most of the opposition parties either boycotted the elections or did not manage to pass the threshold of 3% of votes to win seats in the Parliament. SNS, together with their junior coalition partners, who are almost all remnants of the former Milošević's establishment, have claimed to rule as a pro-EU establishment, while simultaneously undermining democracy and maintaining their pro-Russian, and as of lately, pro-Chinese sympathies. In this respect SNS has mastered the art of political ambivalence, sending differentiated messages to different target groups depending on the context and the audience[18]. Similarly to VMRO-DPMNE in Macedonia, they have taken advantage of the existing institutional weaknesses and clientelist expectations of the electorate and established full control over state institutions via instalment of party loyalists in all branches and echelons of power. Besides this, they took advantage of post-conflict vulnerabilities in order to reinforce narratives from Serbia's troubled 1990s, in order to maintain the support of the majority of Serbia's radical electorate, and have exploited the polarisation between different civic-minded electorates.

Media freedoms are at an all-time low, as the public discourse is being created and shaped by TV stations and tabloids that are said to be directly or indirectly influenced by the SNS[19]. These tabloids, besides being sensationalist, often nurture misinformation, Euroscepticism and pro-Russian attitudes[20]. In parallel, independent media who hold to professional standards have a small reach and are often subject to smear campaigns and attacks that often remain unsolved. Moreover, the SNS has significant control over internet portals, and over social media through fake social media profiles aiming to further influence the public discourse and discredit professional reporting. Besides this, CSOs and other independent civic initiatives included in social and political life are often undervalued by pro-governmental media structures, while new CSOs and initiatives connected to the ruling establishment are mushrooming.

## Towards a new democratisation narrative: How to change the unwritten rules of politics?

The described contradictory behaviour of the political elites is an important domestic vulnerability which undermines the prospects of further democratisation of these countries. From the briefly-presented examples in each of the four analysed countries, we can see that political

elites instead of acting as the main change agents in the society as they often label themselves, are in fact the key veto players who obstruct the further Europeanisation of the region. They simply do not practice what they preach. These contradictions are further enhanced by the loss of credible enlargement prospects, as none of these countries is expected to join the EU during the current mandates of the incumbent political parties. Thus, they trade off the long-term EU future and compliance to the EU's democratic and good-governance standards for short term benefits that would further solidify their own political positions.

The question is how to change the unwritten rules of Western Balkan politics? Although turnovers of power provide a notable democratisation prospect, the elaborated evidence suggests that the cycle of contradictory politics inevitably leads back to the illiberal equilibrium. The change of actors might create a momentary change, but not sustainable progress, because the structural problems of clientelist political economy remain prevalent despite the reformist agendas of new governments. As a result, they are incentivised towards contradictory politics in order to satisfy populations' divergent interests and expectations. On one hand they need to show they are committed to democratic reforms and EU-membership, while on the other they need to 'deliver' upon the clientelist expectations of the electorate.

## Looking forward – it's time for new political demand

**The illiberal equilibrium needs to be challenged by new forms of civic activism.** So far, the demand for good governance has been induced and financed by exogenous actors, which contrary to the expectations, has not led towards notable endogenous, bottom-up democratisation. Instead, the clientelist demand for party employments and favouritism has overridden the demand for impartiality, professionalism and good governance. Despite everyone preaching about it, meritocracy is not necessarily desired by large parts of the population who have never practised it and lag behind in terms of education and market employability. For the majority of the population, the public sector is still seen as the most desired employer[21] and that is significantly reproducing the clientelist model of governance that parties use to keep and expand their monopolistic power in these societies. Things are not too different in the private sector, where people due to the low salaries are often struggling to get adequate economic independence sufficient to ensure their full political independence.

On the other hand, thousands of young, highly skilled people in the region are part of the global market as employees in outsourcing industries or as a freelance, digital professionals. Some rough estimations suggest that countries in the region are amongst the world's top in the number of freelancers per capita. For instance, according to some estimations based on the data from the World Bank and the freelancing web platforms, Serbia and Macedonia have 3.5 and 3.4 officially registered freelancers per 1000 people, followed by Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Albania with 1.6, 1.5 and 1.3 freelancers per 1000 inhabitants respectably[22]. In reality, we can expect that the proportion of people who work from home on the global markets, not only as freelancers but as associates of different global companies is -

- significantly higher. Although these numbers are only indicative, and probably still insignificant to make a prompt political change, they show a clear pattern that the labour market is evolving and that numerous young people have found an alternative to the existing non-merit clientelist modus operandi in their respective countries. As a consequence, they enjoy financial and political independence their parents never had. Besides the positive economic implications, this is a great opportunity for endogenous democratisation and change of the existing rules of the game. This new generation should be encouraged to take advantage of their financial and political independence, and together with the older generation of liberally-minded citizens and pro-democratic actors, they can create a new demand for politics based on principles of meritocracy and fairness.

**Sounds overly optimistic? Here are some more specific ideas on how to start:**

1.  **Nurture and support professional, independent journalism via new, innovative ways of media financing.** Due to the small market size, the WB media landscape is financially dependent on money from the existing political and business elites. The latter's shady, rent-seeking interests undermine media freedoms and guarantee political control over media narratives. Thus, the existing positive sources of change in the WB media landscape should look towards alternative, crowd-funding mechanisms. Free and professional journalism has a price, and the new generation of citizens who enjoy more economic and political freedoms should be given opportunity and encouragement to pay for this independent media content and therefore to support independent reporting and well-grounded investigative journalism. For instance, if 100.000 people donate at least 10 euro annually to get independent media content, for example unravelling the ties between politics and crime and illustrating the misuse of public goods, that would be one million euro of crowd-funded money independent from any potential censorship attempts from the political and business elite. Moreover, such initiatives will ensure a better connection between providers and receivers of media content and would additionally encourage civic activism against the currently untouchable political and business elites.

2.  **Civil society needs to re-connect with the citizens: the mutual trust between the existing advocates of democracy and their natural constituencies needs to be enhanced.** Civil society in the region is based on two separate groups. The first are the well-organised civil society organisations with funding and know-how but without any constituency, while the second are the vibrant constituency-based civic initiatives with no or very little funds and sustainability. This gap between the established CSOs and the emerging civic initiatives needs to be narrowed down with better communication between the traditional CSOs and the other formal and informal forms of civic engagement. Although the trust in the traditional forms of civil society is higher than the trust in state institutions and political parties, citizens remain disconnected from CSOs and rarely support or fund them. In order to change this, a larger number of people need to be informed and positively affected by the actions of the traditional CSOs.

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Most simply, this means that their events in expensive hotel venues need to be replaced with open air public gatherings, while the countless pages of expert reports need to be streamlined into easy-to-understand narratives which might attract further civic interest and action. Closer connection to the constituencies may open new avenues for cooperation, donating and solidarity – if people understand better what CSOs and other civic initiatives are doing, they would be more inclined to donate and directly participate in these processes.

3. **Think local, act local: Donor communities should incentivise local engagement and development.** The gap between urban centres and peripheries is one of the global challenges of contemporary democracy, because people in the peripheries, due to their lack of prosperity, are more vulnerable to populist political agendas. In the region, peripheries are even more affected by poor economic perspectives and political party dominance which lead to increased apathy and mass emigration. Moreover, many of these communities are characterised by even more pronounced gender discrimination and rampant 'local sheriff' corruption and patronage. Despite this, many of the mid and small sized towns in the region still have significant civic potential that should be further nurtured and encouraged. The rare local actors of change need to be supported in order to revive culture, tourism and informal education. The same goes for the rural and agricultural communities which are often dependent on state subsidies and party dominance – these areas should also be in the focus of the future development efforts, by offering them financial and educational aid in order to help cultivate new products that can be more easily distributed and exported without any involvement of the state.

4. **Mobilise on 'common good' topics and take advantage of the most pressing issues.** Illiberal politics needs to be challenged by focusing on topics which are an indisputable common good for everyone regardless their political or ethnic backgrounds. Environmental protection, the fight against air pollution or urban mafia, or actions against small hydro-plants in preserved areas are all topics that could mobilise not only the new generation of financially and politically independent citizens, but also their peers or parents who are still trapped in the vicious circle of party clientelism. Even if these actions end up being only partly successful in curbing these negative phenomena, they might still destabilise the existing illiberal equilibrium of party dominance, and could show up the way towards new, and progressively more successful, grassroots movements.

5. **Be patient, there is no quick fix – the next stage of democratic transformation will be a marathon, not a sprint.** The change of the existing patterns of illiberal politics may take more time than we think. It took the existing power structures at least three decades to capture societies, and their domination cannot be broken overnight. However, the current illiberal equilibrium can be significantly deconstructed by the joint forces of the existing and the forthcoming change agents. Parties will inevitably remain the leading political force (as they are elsewhere too), but their actions need to be determined by different political demands. Unlike the previous generations raised under socialism, or during the shady Balkan transitional -

- period where economic and social uncertainty lead to preference of party loyalty over meritocracy and favoured cheap economic security over political freedom, the new generation of politically and economically independent citizens have significant democratic potential. They need to be rightly guided and encouraged to raise their voice against the malpractices of the incumbent elites, to take action in various civic networks based on solidarity, trust and social innovation, and to use the 21st century technology not only to earn from the global markets but also to nurture cosmopolitan values in their countries, civic communities and families.

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