



BiEPAG

# Unleashing the Potential for Change through Social Movements and Civic Initiatives

*December 2021*

***Vedran Džihic, Marika Djolai, Jelena Vasiljević and Alida Vračić<sup>1</sup>***

---

<sup>1</sup> We thank Florian Bieber for his comments.



# Abstract

---

The past decade in the Western Balkans has seen a proliferation of civic initiatives and protest. They have focused on a variety of issues, ranging from the destruction of urban space, environmental destruction, to corruption scandals, and even unresolved murders. Whereas their success has varied, they showed that many citizens in the region are deeply dissatisfied with the lack of accountability of the ruling regimes, and ready to actively engage in their societies. Local civic initiatives and new forms of civic engagement prove to be worthy of further attention for exploring democratization potentials in the region. With their focus on tangible and concrete issues that are affecting the daily lives of citizens, they have a high mobilization potential and ability to cut across ethnic divides and enhance citizens' sense of agency. Even with limited impact achieved or fast dissipation, they nevertheless create a new momentum in the public discourse and collective memory, from which the new opportunity structures emerge for future possible changes.

---

**Local civic initiatives and new forms of civic engagement prove to be worthy of further attention for exploring democratization potentials in the region.**

---

# The rise of democratic civic engagement in the Western Balkans

---

In late November 2021, thousands of Serbian citizens gathered across the country to protest against a law on expropriation that would facilitate the construction of a large lithium mine in Western Serbia by multinational company Rio Tinto. The protesters were driven by the threat of large-scale environmental destruction and the deal's lack of transparency. The government's initial response has been to allow masked thugs armed with sticks to beat protesters under the watchful eye of the police. These protests, alongside the recent miners' strike in Bosnia, show that citizens across the Western Balkans are taking to the streets when unable to have their voices heard through elections and institutions.

---

**Even in countries with less developed democracies, civic activism is dynamic in addressing citizens' needs stemming from economic, legal, environmental or social problems and uncertainties, and the lack of political will and institutional capacities to address them.**

---

Globally, the last decade has seen a rise of civic initiatives and citizens' activism – from anti-austerity movements to Fridays for Future. In the debates on how to revive European democracy that centre around the rising prominence of participative democracy, civic activism is recognised as a key issue.<sup>1</sup> Citizens are politically active beyond elections and use direct activism to influence political decisions, policies and to participate in governance. Even in countries with less developed democracies, civic activism is dynamic in addressing citizens'

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Youngs, "Getting Europe's Direct Democracy Right, Carnegie Europe" Carnegie Europe, 2018 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/11/15/getting-europe-s-direct-democracy-right-pub-77750>.

needs stemming from economic, legal, environmental or social problems and uncertainties, and the lack of political will and institutional capacities to address them.

The Western Balkan countries followed this trend over the past decade and saw a proliferation of civic initiatives and protests. This occurred against an increasingly illiberal equilibrium.<sup>2</sup> Instead of EU membership, rule of law and better economic standards, the three decades of transformation from one-party rule to political pluralism and economic liberalization also brought widespread corruption, a rise in inequalities, abuse of political and economic power, and – as of recent in many WB countries – state capture and significant democratic backsliding.

New civic and protest initiatives and movements have focused on a variety of aspects, ranging from criticism of authoritarian tendencies to very concrete issues such as the destruction of urban spaces, environmental degradation, corruption scandals, and even unresolved murders.

---

**We are witnessing a series of large-scale, anti-systemic protests and citizens' activism in protecting their local communities, urban heritage and the environment. Local civic initiatives and movements have become prominent as a way of protesting or objecting to what is wrong. They often develop over time as grievances and local problems grow or emerge "overnight" through ad-hoc mobilization of citizens.**

---

There have been numerous initiatives and movements in recent years, such as the 2014 Bosnian Plenums, the "colourful revolution" in North Macedonia that led to a regime change in 2017, or the 2018-2019 "1 of 5 Million" protest marches in Belgrade and those in Banja Luka where citizens demanded the truth about the death of David Dragičević in 2018. The biggest single-event protest in Belgrade since October 5 2000 was held in May 2016, when the local initiative Don't let

---

<sup>2</sup> Agon Maliqi. *Transition to What? Western Balkans democracies in a state of illiberal equilibrium*, 2020, Sbunker. <https://sbunker.net/uploads/sbunker.net/files/2020/December/04/Transition-to-what-Western-Balkans-democracies-in-a-state-of-illiberal-equilibrium1607078207.pdf>.

Belgrade D(r)own (which later transformed into a party-movement) organized a protest against the illegal demolitions that took place on Hercegovačka street making way for the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project<sup>3</sup>. Some of the largest protest gatherings in recent Montenegrin history (with more than 20,000 attending) took place in 2019 when the self-organized, horizontal Resist (Odupri se) movement was formed in response to the so-called “envelope scandal” that exposed massive corruption of the previous government. In Albania, civic protests erupted against the demolition of the National Theatre building, which protesters attempted to halt in May 2020. The movement grew popular and quickly turned into a protest against Edi Rama’s government. In the neighbouring Kosovo, citizens frequently took to the streets to object, often violently, to the manner in which their country is governed, and the lack of transparency in politics. In 2020, citizens protested when President Thaçi nominated Avdullah Hoti to replace elected Prime Minister Kurti – pre-empting Kurti’s landslide victory in the February 2021 snap elections.

We are witnessing a series of large-scale, anti-systemic protests and citizens’ activism in protecting their local communities, urban heritage and the environment. Local civic initiatives and movements have become prominent as a way of protesting or objecting to what is wrong. They often develop over time as grievances and local problems grow or emerge “overnight” through ad-hoc mobilization of citizens.

---

<sup>3</sup> Natalija Zaba, “Belgrade Protest Movement Takes to the Streets,” *Balkan Insight*, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/11/protest-movement-takes-to-the-streets-06-10-2016/>



---

# Environmental activism and the (re)birth of local civic engagement

---

The actions aimed at the protection of natural resources and the environment are possibly the most significant type of local engagement, taking place across the region and based on a common denominator. A recent example of successful local civic mobilization occurred in the Bosnian city of Jajce, a well-known tourist attraction with iconic waterfalls. Citizens opposed the construction of a small hydropower plant on the Pliva river.<sup>4</sup> The investor attempted to take advantage of legal loopholes and pandemic-related restrictions in order to build the plant. Citizens of Jajce, many of them young students and activists, decided to launch a petition and put pressure on authorities throughout December 2020, to postpone the planned public hearing. The Jajce initiative attracted widespread public attention across Bosnia and Herzegovina. It confronted entrenched interest groups through a series of innovative and, ultimately, successful actions. Not only did the initiative mobilise the local population, it made efforts to identify and communicate the problem, inform citizens about the consequences, and employ the entirety of its organizers' skills, training and knowledge.

The "Brave Women of Kruščica" movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina blocked a bridge crossing the eponymous river for more than 500 days and nights, protesting the construction of two hydropower plants.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely this type of citizens' engagement that can serve as a future blueprint when addressing issues that matter both locally and nationally. While very distinct, in terms of the age and profile of its main activists, the "Brave Women of Kruščica" initiative and the Jajce hydro plant rebellion have much in common, including broad public support, national and international attention in their struggle against environmentally destructive projects. The example of "Brave Women of Kruščica" is not only highlighting the brutality and speed at which the rivers across the region are being taken over and converted into lucrative businesses, it is also a reminder of the bravery of women activists facing the possibility of

---

4 "As Investors Look to Dam the Pliva River, Citizens Rally Against Them, 4 Dec 2020, <https://www.wwf.org/en/?1436391/As-Investors-Look-to-Dam-the-Pliva-River-Citizens-Rally-Against-Them>.

5 "Brave Women of Kruščica" honoured for river protection, Euronatur Stiftung, 2019, <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/news/brave-women-of-kruscica-honoured-for-river-protection>,

being physically attacked and putting their hearts and minds into the fight. Their efforts resulted in winning the court case against two hydropower projects, a rare victory considering the extent of state capture in Bosnia and the force those in power are willing to use to defend their interests, including coercive measures. Such initiatives do emerge ad hoc and as a reaction to grievances, injustice, and corruption at the local level and often face challenges in the process of attempting to grow into something long-term and stable. Yet, they do demonstrate a great potential for integrating into conventional democratic politics with a new type of civic governance and highlight the fact that citizens care about common good.

---

**Such initiatives do emerge ad hoc and as a reaction to grievances, injustice, and corruption at the local level and often face challenges in the process of attempting to grow into something long-term and stable. Yet, they do demonstrate a great potential for integrating into conventional democratic politics with a new type of civic governance and highlight the fact that citizens care about common good.**

---

The resistance against environmental destruction is a common denominator for the entire Western Balkans. Recently, a lithium mine in Western Serbia proposed by the multinational Rio Tinto company raised concerns about the possibility of it causing severe environmental damage. This is planned to be one the world's largest mines on a greenfield site and the biggest European lithium mine.<sup>6</sup> Rio Tinto's track record, as well as the untransparent deals by the government, led thousands of citizens to protest against the project in Belgrade, also blocking bridges across the country, particularly in the most affected area. These protests reflect localized mobilization, such as the so-called "Rakita Resistance"<sup>7</sup>, consisting of united villagers acting against the construction of

---

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Boffey, "Rio Tinto's past casts a shadow over Serbia's hopes of a lithium revolution," *The Guardian*, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/19/rio-tintos-past-casts-a-shadow-over-serbias-hopes-of-a-lithium-revolution>

<sup>7</sup> "Activists in Serbia get hands-on in fight against hydropower," *Euronatur Stiftung*, 2020, <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/news/activists-in-serbia-get-hands-on-in-fight->



---

a mini hydropower plant (MHP) – they collectively demolished a concrete water pipe in the riverbed of Rakita River. In Montenegro, the civic initiative “Let’s Save Sinjajevina”<sup>8</sup> emerged as a spontaneous reaction to the decision by the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Montenegro to destroy obsolete weapons and ammunition and establish military training facilities and training grounds on ecologically rich grazing land. The protests in Sinjajevina continued despite the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

All of these initiatives, ranging from launched petitions, ad hoc solidarity-based actions and protests, to issued policy proposals, indicate a desire for a stronger role and influence of the public over legislative and policy-making processes, and for the citizens’ voice to be heard. The spontaneity of smaller-scale and locally embedded civic initiatives gives them a certain level of authenticity and freedom in their activities. Even though their success has varied and may disappear after the goal is achieved, these initiatives indicate that many citizens in the region are far from passive, in fact seeking to shape their own future. Citizens’ activism can articulate their voice more accurately than electoral outcomes which, in hybrid regimes lingering between full autocracies and democracies, tend to be manipulated and flawed.

---

**Even though their success has varied and may disappear after the goal is achieved, these initiatives indicate that many citizens in the region are far from passive, in fact seeking to shape their own future. Citizens’ activism can articulate their voice more accurately than electoral outcomes which, in hybrid regimes lingering between full autocracies and democracies, tend to be manipulated and flawed.**

---

Against this backdrop, the traditional network of civil society and non-governmental organizations is increasingly less perceived as the engine of democratization and Europeanization. Their donor- and project-oriented work, often focusing on partial institutional reforms rather than systemic issues, and the cooperation with local and central governments, has turned them at times

---

*against-hydropower.*

<sup>8</sup> Sinjajevina inhabitants demand a consultation and more information about the Military Polygon. Sinjajevina Blog.2020, <https://sinjajevina.org/2020/07/29/sinjajevina-inhabitants-demand-a-consultation-and-more-information-about-the-military-polygon/>.

into a less trusted actor with diminished capacities to channel and articulate citizens' dissatisfactions and grievances. Conversely, protests and local actions in the Western Balkans have become an important way of expressing anger and objection over government policies and antagonism against political leadership and their lack of sensitivity or will to address and solve citizens' problems. Grassroots activism in the region is showing signs of health and has a potential to shake up the deeply entrenched problems.

---

# Potential for social and political change?

---

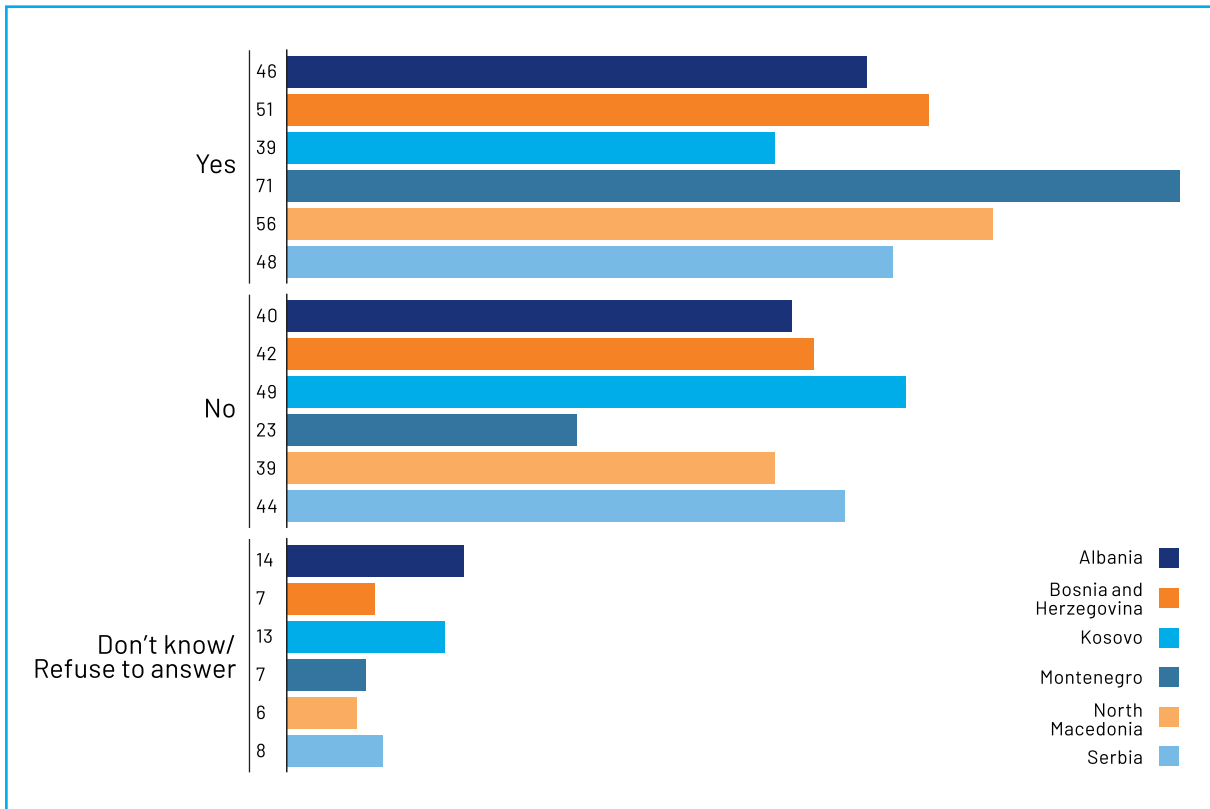
In “The Western Balkans in times of pandemic – public opinion EFB/BiEPAG 2020 survey”<sup>9</sup>, 20% of the citizens in the Western Balkans reported being voluntarily engaged in their local communities, which is in line with global trends when it comes to activism. A V-Dem worldwide survey from December 2020 received a similar response about citizens’ engagement, indicating a 16-25% participation as a large share of the population. The EFB/BiEPAG survey found that the greatest level of participation, over a quarter, pertained to organizing activities for local groups (youth, elderly, etc.), taking care of community spaces (parks, buildings, etc.), organizing cultural events, caring for the elderly, and working at local food kitchens, and was found among the citizens of BiH and Albania. Citizens of Kosovo and North Macedonia reported between 12 and 16% of social engagement. Of those who have become active, 40% said they engage regularly, and the same percentage reported doing so spontaneously. These results indicate a strong sense of solidarity as the main driver for engagement. Nevertheless, in some countries the majority of respondents (e.g. Kosovo, 61.4%) said they lacked interest in being socially engaged.

However, fewer people are willing to protest. According to the survey, most citizens never participated in public protests. The main reason they stated was a lack of faith in the influencing power of public protests, where just 52% of the respondents believe the protests can contribute to actual social, economic or political changes (see table 1). When it comes to the last issue, the exception is Montenegro (70%), where this difference in perception can be linked to the outcome of the 2020 elections – they resulted in a change of government preceded by waves of protests.

---

9 EFB/BiEPAG public opinion survey 2020, [https://balkanfund.org/pubs/uploads/The\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_in\\_times\\_of\\_.pdf](https://balkanfund.org/pubs/uploads/The_Western_Balkans_in_times_of_.pdf)

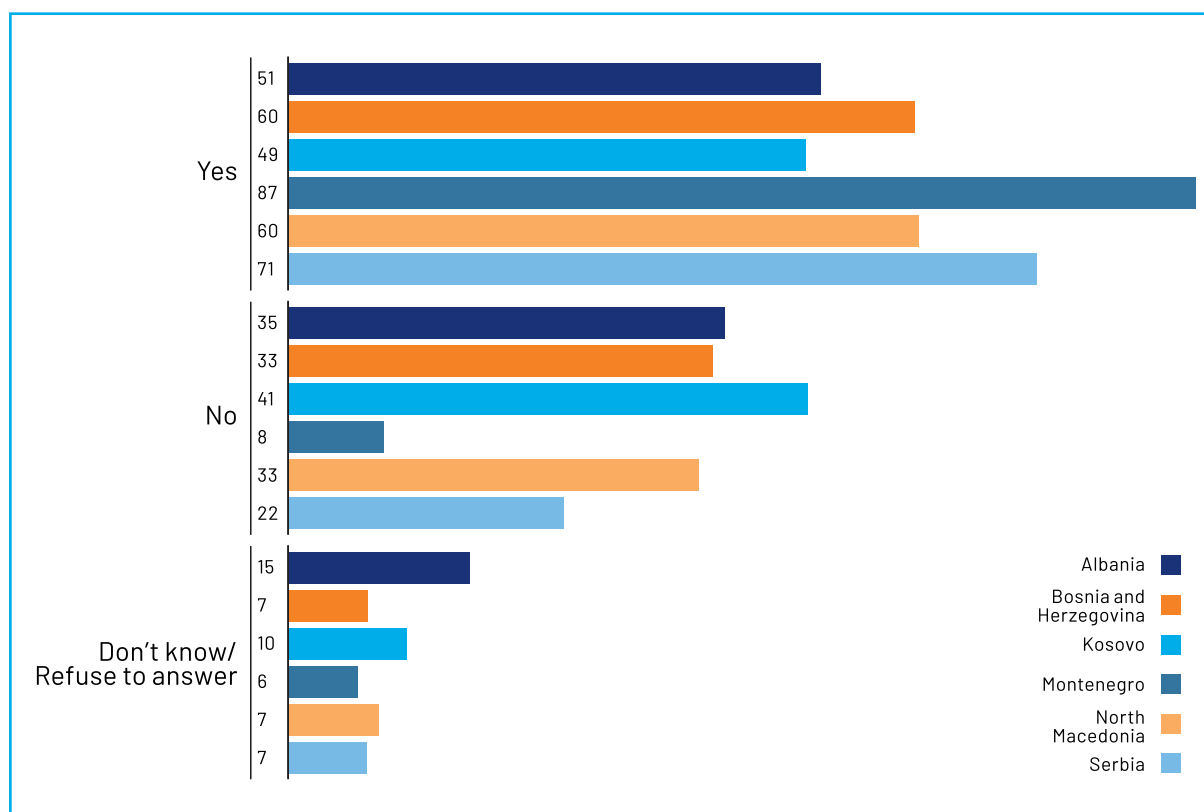
**Table 1: Do you believe that public protests can contribute to actual social, economic or political changes?**



While some citizens resort to protests, the majority still consider conventional means of political engagement as the default option and, according to the survey, most regularly vote in elections (80%).<sup>10</sup> Across the region, the majority of citizens tend to believe that elections can contribute to social, economic or political changes (see table 2). This indicates that a significant proportion of citizens expect political changes to come via traditional institutional channels. Given the fact that one of the keys in achieving political and democratic changes seem to come from political party-social movement alliances, the question arises whether the transformation of protest movements and local initiatives into political movements and parties, following the path of Vetëvendosje! in Kosovo, URA in Montenegro, Možemo in Croatia or Ne davimo Beograd in Serbia, is the most effective way for channelling popular dissatisfaction with politics and governance into actual change.

<sup>10</sup> Florian Bieber, Milica Delevic and Tena Prelec: *No longer voting for the devil you know? Why the Balkans' collective action problem might be easier to break than we think*, BiEPAG, January 2021, <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Elections-No-longer-voting-for-the-devil-you-know.pdf>

**Table 2: Do you believe that public elections can contribute to actual social, economic or political changes?**



Both protests and grassroots movements demonstrate a genuine desire for activism and change, which might be one of the most relevant avenues for advancing genuinely progressive causes in the Western Balkans and continuously challenging the illiberal equilibrium. The authoritarian trend goes hand in hand with a weakened prospect of EU accession as motivation for democratic reforms. During recent protests across the region, the EU flag, once a symbol of opposition to authoritarian regimes, has been absent. Both illiberal tendencies and undermining of the importance of joining the EU have increased during the pandemic. Despite the continuing trend of public support for EU accession, the citizens are growing increasingly sceptical of achieving that goal – with 44.2 % of the population of Serbia who think they will never become an EU member, and 27.5% and 33.8% sharing the same view in Bosnia and North Macedonia, respectively, a percentage that grew between 2020 and 2021. The Western Balkans thus need a new democratization narrative and strategy.

The grassroots initiatives, in particular, demonstrate the potential of mobilization and a genuine quest for wider political and social change in the region. With their focus on tangible and concrete issues that affect citizens' daily lives, they have high mobilization potential and the ability to cut across ethnic divides and enhance citizens' sense of agency. Even with limited impact achieved or fast dissipation, they nevertheless create new momentum in the public discourse and collective memory, and thus open new opportunity structures for potential democratic changes in the future.

The grassroots initiatives, in particular, demonstrate the potential of mobilization and a genuine quest for wider political and social change in the region. With their focus on tangible and concrete issues that affect citizens' daily lives, they have high mobilization potential and the ability to cut across ethnic divides and enhance citizens' sense of agency. Even with limited impact achieved or fast dissipation, they nevertheless create new momentum in the public discourse and collective memory, and thus open new opportunity structures for potential democratic changes in the future.

---

Two bigger questions remain: Firstly, how to achieve structural systemic change through direct institutional engagement without compromising the fundamental values and principles attained as grassroots movements? Secondly, how to reconcile the fact that stronger civic engagement is required to make progress, but that many citizens still seem to be passive or only focused on elections?

Particularly in "illiberal equilibriums", where state and institutional capture is strong and incumbent parties tend to control both the elections and the public, new ways of mobilization and citizens' action can help demask the power structures and open the citizens' perspective for alternatives. The widespread injustice, corruption, and environmental destruction have led to deep grievances and anger among the population and increased their vulnerabilities. The quest for normal, better, "liveable" life of many has the potential to trigger the mobilisation and participation of the broader public and lead to much-needed political changes.

---

# Recommendations for growth

---

The new generation of civil society activists combine different skills, knowledge, and adopt new approaches. Coupled with traditional local know-how, they provide a blueprint for all future citizen-centred activities. Investing in individuals with a vision and energy to mobilize people, resources, and their own networks is key. It is also essential for external actors, the EU, EU member states and donors to support these movements and, by doing so, to acknowledge the value of local knowledge and expertise, rather than imposing external agendas and funding priorities.

The similarity of motives and topics that incite various movements across the region highlights the necessity of establishing and promoting platforms for their networking, cooperation, horizontal learning and mutual reinforcement, such as the Engaged Democracy Initiative (EDI).<sup>11</sup> Attaining a regional character could help them exercise more political pressure on their local and national governments; this could also help them achieve stronger visibility and influence.

o1.

As many movements are local, external actors such as supportive EU member states or donors can provide assistance to national and regional collaboration. There are currently few spaces for the exchange of expertise and know-how, and coalition building. Facilitating such networks and exchanges (such as EDI – see above) can be important for groups, to learn from each other and cooperate.

o2.

While there is an increasing number of active citizens-led initiatives at the local level, the majority of citizens still predominantly expect social and political change to come

---

<sup>11</sup> In 2020, the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and the Institute for Democratic Engagement Southeast Europe (IDESE) joined forces and created the Engaged Democracy Initiative (EDI). EDI involves mainly local civic initiatives, movements and organizations, as well as researchers, social businesses, socially engaged citizens and journalists in a non-hierarchical and horizontal regional network for supporting, promoting and pursuing values of open, solidarity-based and democratic societies across our region. See <https://www.balkanfund.org/engaged-democracy-initiative> and <https://idese.community>

through institutional and conventional party channels. One of the important avenues to explore is how to promote political change through political party-movements alliances. Furthermore, genuine political change requires change at the ballot box. Thus, offering support and capacity building to social movements as to whether to opt for critical oversight or run for elections will be important for translating the movements' concerns into lasting change.

- o3.** All future EU activities should incorporate a strategy for ensuring the sustainability of grassroots organizations, including mobilizing funds from other sources. Grassroots, bottom-up citizens' initiatives should receive calibrated and continuous support from European institutions and other international actors in the Western Balkans.
  - o4.** Civic initiatives need resources and support in order to be able to maintain their independence and have a positive long-term impact. Raising awareness of these initiatives and social movements in the region and accepting them as democratic and emancipatory allies of all EU's and international democratization efforts would give additional traction to their actions and end goals.
  - o5.** The European Union is well-placed to encourage the work of civil society and civic initiatives in the region, and link some of the priorities (e.g. the environment) with the EU conditions immediately, through regular communication and strategic documents.
  - o6.** The EU and its member states should regularly consult with a broader range of social actors, extended beyond the traditional civil society.
  - o7.** In the preparation of its annual reports, the European Commission needs to monitor the space for social movements more carefully and provide more critical analysis in case these movements are suppressed, or their activities curtailed.
-



# Methodology

---

The primary data used in this BiEPAG policy analysis come from a public opinion poll conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, in two waves (July and August 2020 and 2021). Survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample consisted of minimum 1000 respondents aged 18+, using mix mode: telephone and online interviews – CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) and CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing), while post-stratification was done by region, gender, age, type of settlement and education. Data collection was implemented by Ipsos Strategic Marketing and it was commissioned by the European Fund for the Balkans.

---

**European Fund for the Balkans 2021. All rights reserved. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily represent the positions or views of the European Fund for the Balkans.**

---

## About us

---

*The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) promoting the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is grounded in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It adheres to values that are common to a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. It is composed of prominent policy researchers from the region and wider Europe with demonstrable comprehension of the Western Balkans and the processes shaping the region. Members are Florian Bieber, Matteo Bonomi, Dimitar Bechev, Srđan Cvijić, Marika Djolai, Milica Delević, Vedran Džihić, Richard Grieveson, Donika Emini, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Srđan Majstorović, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Gjergi Vurmo, Jelena Vasiljević, Natasha Wunsch.*

**<https://biepag.eu>**

*The European Fund for the Balkans is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and King Baudouin Foundation that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas – fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration.*

*The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.*

**[www.balkanfund.org](http://www.balkanfund.org)**

Contact: ALEKSANDRA TOMANIĆ, Executive Director,

[aleksandra.tomanic@balkanfund.org](mailto:aleksandra.tomanic@balkanfund.org)

---

*The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration.*

**<http://csees.uni-graz.at/>**

*The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.*

Contact: UNIV.PROF. DR. FLORIAN BIEBER,  
Professor of Southeast European History and Politics,  
[florian.bieber@uni-graz.at](mailto:florian.bieber@uni-graz.at)

