



How to engage citizens?

Strengthening Civic Action in the Western Balkans

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HOW TO ENGAGE CITIZENS?

Strengthening Civic Action in the Western Balkans

1. The context of civic action in the Western Balkans

- **Transforming illiberal to consolidated democracies requires civic action**

The abuse of power and extraction of public resources for private gain by the Western Balkan political and business elites exist in parallel with democratic façade – the occasional democratic practices kept to satisfy internal, but mostly external pressure to democratize. Due to such circumstances, all the regional countries can be categorized as illiberal democraciesⁱ. Even when candidates with democratic provenance occasionally win elections, the inherited extractive system based on party patronage of institutions and on informal practices perseveres, because the new incumbents, the democratic political parties, have little incentives to change it and a powerful opposition to do so. To maintain the illiberal rule, the governments marginalize contenders, control the media and tilt elections. To legitimize their rule and generate public consent, they engage in narrative production on critical situations in the realms of national, economic, health and other types of security. They do so by framing actors, events and phenomena as threats, building on nationalistic and other biases and using the hate speech motifsⁱⁱ. The imperative to fend off the constructed threats protects the high officials from criticism and absolves them from responsibility for the abuse of public resources, human rights violations, rapprochement with foreign undemocratic actors, inflow of corrosive capital etc.

After winning elections, the democratic incumbents have thus far failed to dismantle the capture of institutions in the regional countries. This inability of democratic political leaders and their parties to promote the rule of law, social justice, sustainable development and regional reconciliation indicates that it is down to the civil sector to push for these democratic principles, by persistently advocating for policies based on them, and by continuously encouraging citizens to demand that the illiberal democracies of the region be transformed to consolidated ones.

- **Civic action challenges the illiberal democracies in three different ways**

One way to undermine illiberal governance through civic action is to disclose the individual acts of abuse of power. Investigative teams discover schemes for breaching the law, the ties of power-holders with autocratic regimes, corrosive capital and organized crime and bring these to public eye. Watchdogs follow public procurements or elections and point to foul play. Fact-checkers investigate politicians' claims and debunk conspiracy theories and rumors supporting illiberal regimes. The second way to disrupt illiberal rule is to do what do-tanks do – advocate for policy change based on research, work on raising public awareness of the rule of law, social justice, sustainable development and regional reconciliation, thus countering the confrontational narratives of the illiberal legitimization strategy, and empower the activism of citizens and their groups. Finally, illiberal governance can be opposed by standing up against the acts of abuse of power or injustice, as do the local civic initiatives and movements that mobilize citizens to protest against practices harmful to the environment and rally in support to common goods – socio-economic development, clean energy, women's and minority

rights, fair elections, citizen-friendly urban development etcⁱⁱⁱ. Aside from these, the other actors protesting injustice and demanding change are independent trade unions, think-tanks, artists, academics etc. However, it is the types of actors listed above, the “civic challengers” – investigative teams, watchdogs and fact-checkers, do-tanks and civic initiatives and movements – that directly and most frequently challenge and disrupt the Western Balkan illiberal equilibrium^{iv}. This is because the civic challengers act to produce new knowledge and political practices that both undermine the illiberal equilibrium and set the grounds for collectively building more democratic and inclusive societies.

• **The problem is that civic action lacks leverage**

The impact of the civic actors disrupting the illiberal rule will depend on their leverage. For investigative groups, fact-checkers and watchdogs, which aim to uncover and spread information, the leverage will lay in the outreach of their outlets and in their professionalism. For do-tanks, which research and advocate for policies, conduct campaigns to increase public awareness of democratic values and encourage activism, the leverage will lie in expertise and professionalism, in support of peer-networks and international democratic actors, in the ability to access political fora and in the ability to motivate and empower the citizens and their organizations for activism. For local civic initiatives and movements, the primary source of leverage will be constituencies – the number of people they manage to mobilize for protest or for other forms of action, but also their expertise in the issues they deal with and their knowledge of policy advocacy. To conclude, the sources of leverage differ per type of civic actors – some need topical expertise, some need knowledge of policy advocacy and networking, some need access to policy processes etc. However, one problem is common, undermining the leverage of them all. Sidelined by the mainstream media across the region, they all struggle to reach out to broader audiences, which curtails their efforts to inspire citizens for participation and activism and to mobilize protest.

How to reach out to people, how to engage them and by doing so generate the broad popular demand for democratic change? – remains the key question for the civic actors working to challenge the illiberal rule. In this text, various approaches to involving the citizens are explored, as well as the prospects of collaboration of local civic initiatives and movements with investigative groups, watchdogs, fact-checkers and do-thanks, with an aim to help each other increase the leverage, and with it, the impact on social change.

2. The ways of reaching out to citizens and engaging them

• **Investigative groups, watchdogs and fact-checkers**

For investigative groups and watchdogs to engage the citizens means to reach out to them in order to both spread the information they discovered and motivate the citizens to take part in actions disclosing corruptive practices, election frauds or other foul play. The Serbian crime and corruption reporting network *KRIK* is an example of an investigative group. It exposes murky cases of privatization, points at the connections of government officials with criminal circles and probes their wealth, questions large urban and local development projects and other malversations. The *KRIK* staff is often threatened and

exposed to smear campaigns in government-controlled media. With their products such as databases on politicians' assets, information about judges, high-corruption reports and others, this group reaches out to citizens only via their web platform, while their access to the mainstream media is blocked. *Pratimotendere* ("Wemonitortenders") is a watchdog monitoring public procurements in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They red-flag suspicious cases and alert the citizens about the possible abuse of public funds by various parts of administration. They are not restricted to reaching out to citizens via their web platform, as the citizens are also invited to engage and report suspicious procurements and corruption. Similarly, the fact-checkers engage the citizens as audience for their reports, but the citizens are also frequently invited to report suspected disinformation or to point at inconsistencies in politicians' claims. Such is the Albanian *Faktoje*, which rates the truthfulness of politicians' claims, keeps track of their promises and investigates stories and also engages directly with citizens through trainings for fighting disinformation in local communities.

• Do-tanks

Do-tanks engage the citizens in two ways. First, in their awareness-raising campaigns, the passive engagement means addressing the citizens as audience of traditional and social media and in street campaigns that promote particular issue or policy change. Citizens are engaged as active participants in awareness-raising campaigns as well, when they are included in seminars, public discussions, lectures and panels or when they are invited to share their experiences and knowledge and propose ideas for change. The second type of citizen engagement by do-tanks is the empowerment and encouragement of activism, where do-tanks provide local, smaller organizations and informal groups with grants for their projects, train them on particular topics (rule of law, youth employment, elections, environment protection, public finance etc.), teach them skills necessary for civic action, such as fundraising, project management, policy advocacy and communications and foster their networking and cooperation with other organizations.

A typical example of a do-tank's engagement in the empowerment of small organizations and informal groups and in their encouragement to participate in public life is the *Youth Bank Hub for Western Balkans and Turkey*, a four-year program implemented by *Divac Foundation* in partnership with *Prima Association*, *Mladiinfo International*, *Partners Albania* and *Community Volunteers Foundation*. Through this project a network of 20 youth hubs – local organizations of young people – was established, gathered around the goal to foster the involvement of young women and men in policy-making in the regional countries and educate them to do so. Attending a series of seminars and workshops, the youth organizations were trained in fundraising, project management and promotion of their projects, and they also learned how to pass on the knowledge to new organizations and informal initiatives and help them with their actions. On the other hand, young people were also directly included in the campaign to raise public awareness of the problems faced by youth, through series of roundtables in local communities held to discuss the position of youth and their ideas, and indirectly, as they were targeted by a robust social media campaign.

The awareness-raising campaigns that the *European Policy Institute Skopje (EPI)* engages in are meant to both inform the broad audiences on the policy issues and to induce their active participation in projects. For example, a recent *Clarify All!* campaign that *EPI* takes

part in aims to increase the knowledge of citizens regarding public problems and advocate for citizen-friendly policies to solve them. On the other hand, through the regional *WeBER* network, *EPI Skopje* engages citizens and their organizations directly, by training them to monitor the public administration reform in North Macedonia, and by inviting them to report on the problems they encounter while interacting with public administration. *EPI* also produces detailed publications on issues such as gender representation, human rights as well as on the topic of regional security, and infographics – thus enabling the interested parties to find information about these issues. However, these publications may lack the brevity and simplicity needed to attract the attention of media and of the citizens not familiar with these topics.

In their awareness-raising role, do-tanks also have a task to nurture activists – educate citizens on topics and issues relevant to establishment of consolidated democracies in order to contribute to developing the culture of democracy. *The School of Democracy* Program implemented by the *Center for Civic Education Montenegro* does just that – it introduces the students to the ideas of active citizenship, conflicts and coming to terms with the past, elections and political parties, public opinion and media, EU integration and globalization, while at the same time inducing civic activism through providing direct support to youth initiatives and to local initiatives dealing with regional reconciliation. Another example is the *Foundation Center for Democracy* yearly regional school of youth participation, *Politeia*, which teaches young women and men about local, national, regional and European policies.

Do-tanks focused on topics that require particular expertise, such as Kosovo's *Instituti GAP*, which deals with the issues of economy and public finances, are primarily oriented towards research-based advocacy for public policies, but they also engage citizens in various ways. Their awareness-raising campaigns include publication of detailed, clear and highly legible reports and infographics, targeting the segment of educated and informed audience. *GAP* reaches out to broader audiences too, using social networks, to inform and educate them about the topics such as unemployment in the pandemic, primary education reforms, National Development Strategy, investments in the local communities etc. *GAP* also works to develop capacities of local organizations to monitor election promises and budget spending in their communities, and trains university students on the topics of economy and public finances. As an awareness-raising tool, *GAP* has also developed four user-friendly platforms that provide information on expenditure of public funds, on road safety and transportation data, on European Reform Agenda, as well as extensive information on statistical data and economics on each of the Kosovo local communities.

• Civic initiatives

Civic initiatives and social campaigns around the protection and preservation of nature from the implementation of hazardous public-private projects have been a new trend to the Balkans for the last decade. There are several community-led initiatives throughout the region that try to bring the attention to the environmental and social disaster caused by the ongoing destruction of the natural resources, threatening the existence of the affected ecosystem and overall human wellbeing. *Save the Blue Heart of Europe* builds upon several local initiatives to protect the enormous ecological and cultural values of Balkan rivers from the construction of more than 3,400 hydropower dams.

Mbro Parkun Kombëtar Zall-Gjoçaj (“*Save Zall-Gjoçaj National Park*”) is an Albanian community-led initiative to stop the government from constructing two hydropower dams in the protected area of the national park. Faced with the arrogance of state institutions refusing to hear their pledges about the consultancy process irregularities and the sheer illegality of construction work within a national park, the villagers were forced to wage a war against the state and the concessionary company. A group of more active protestors raised awareness amongst the elderly, women, children and former residents about the impact of the hydropower plant upon their livelihoods. They engaged citizens from various regions to participate in public debates, organized field trips, documentary screenings and in the organization of peaceful protests, which initially had little media coverage. The community reached out to more experienced activists, environmentalists and civil society organizations to support them with the coordination of the campaign and building the court case. This initiative uses social media platforms to communicate updates about their struggle. Women have played a crucial part in the mobilization of people, uncommon to traditional villages in the Northern Albania. The community has encountered disproportionate physical and psychological violence from the police, which used long detentions to intimidate them. The pandemic restrictions rendered the public protests unfeasible, while the construction work continues unchecked. Part of the river is already dammed failing to provide access to water for one of the four affected villages. But the villagers seem keen to continue their fight.

Save Sinjajevina in Montenegro was created in 2018 when the Parliament passed a law to turn the highlands of Sinjajevina into military training grounds for NATO, without any environmental assessment or consultations. The mountains have been used traditionally by pastoral tribes whose lives fully depend on this land. Similar to the community of Zall-Gjoçaj, the residents organized their struggle around the emotional connection to the highlands and the need to preserve the land by turning it into a park of nature instead. The residents initiated an information campaign amongst the different *katuns* and the movement came together by reaching out to pastoralists, young people, activists, journalists from all around the country. They use the WhatsApp, mailing lists and other social media platforms to link various regions and engage people in the movement. Media portraits of the *Humans of Sinjajivina* were produced to demonstrate their lifestyle and the struggle to protect their land. Several groups like *Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories, Land Rights Now* etc., were involved, as they understood how important it is to have international allies on board. *Save Sinjajivina* was established recently as an official association in order to legitimize the movement on the institutional level and have access to funding for organizational costs. They feared, however, that this might provoke distrust considering how civil society organizations are looked down at by the public.

KolektivZ is a women-led grassroots organization from North Macedonia dedicated to building a more just, equitable and greener future. The collective was officially established last year by a group of activists from various citizen initiatives working collectively with climate and social justice. In September 2020, *KolektivZ* initiated the *Balkan Green Deal Coalition* to foster the cooperation across different activist groups and take over the implementation of the Green Deal document. The organization has a flat structure with members engaging voluntarily according to their free time, skills and other capacities. The collective reaches out to people by using their social media where they publish updates about their weekly meetings and other activities. Other ways they engage their audience is by calling on the community to actively participate in visioning exercises, physical meetings and solidarity calls like the one to support the informal groups most affected by the pandemic. Being part of other initiatives or more traditional CSOs, members organize regular skills sharing sessions, in order to share the experience and the knowledge built through the long engagement in civil society. When it comes to the struggles they face, funding is an ongoing limitation for the members to access more resources and infrastructure. Another constant issue for the collective is the struggle to access the mainstream media to amplify their political messages.

Sexual violence and rape culture towards women and girls in the region have been pressing topics currently sparking a wave of protests and social movements throughout the Western Balkans. These movements denounce the victim-blaming culture, while claiming safe spaces and bringing a shift in the dominant narrative which reinforces the patriarchal gender norms. *Verujem ti* (“*I Believe You*”) is an autonomous collective established five months ago by women, queer, feminist, anti-militarist activists in response to several high-profile rape and sexual harassment cases in what seems to be the Serbian equivalent of the *#MeToo Movement*. Due to the limited access to mainstream media, the collective is looking to grow their field presence in cities other than Belgrade by reaching out to local organizations and activists, like they did recently in Jagodina together with other independent women’s groups. They engage people in direct street actions, public discussions and regular group meetings. Most of the members are regular staff or consultants to traditional CSOs with a long experience in human rights and activism. This eases the difficulties they encounter in meeting different needs around the coordination of their activities by relying on the knowledge and network built from their previous experiences rather than setting in for donor driven solutions.

Another informal collective is Bosnian and Herzegovinian *Povorka ponosa* (“*Pride March*”), established in 2018 by a group of activists to build a national anti-fascist platform that addresses human rights issues with an emphasis on LGBT rights. *Pride* has a horizontal structure and a board committee of fifteen members who change annually by an open call to attract young members with or without background in street activism. A common issue they encounter is of financial nature, as they lack resources to cover for the operation of their activities. This generates the need for collaboration with more established local and international CSOs or other entities to cover the expenses like venue renting, travel costs, printing etc. As many organizations understand the need to organize the Pride march, they support it with their own resources. Besides this type of engagement, the collective reaches out to people through social media, particularly to Instagram influencers to share stories of LGBT people. Moreover, they mobilize activists and local communities in different cities around the country in meetings and flash mobs that address the difficulties that have been faced by LGBT people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the mainstream media are perceived to have grown neglective towards

the LGBT community since the pandemic hit, *Pride* is looking to organize more journalists' trainings and work more closely with personal contacts within the media industry, in order to make the LGBT community more visible.

Kolektivi per Mendim dhe Veprim Feminist (“*Collective for Feminist Thinking and Action*”) was born in Kosovo from a broader social movement *We March, We don't Celebrate* initiated in 2016 in order to bring March 8 closer to its origin of women manifestations. The need to organize on daily basis on the grounds of a leftist ideology that combines theoretical and feminist practice to tackle the totality of systemic oppression, brought together seven women activists to establish the *Collective* in March 2019. The *Collective* is financed by membership fees and voluntary contributions, proportionate to the members' incomes. The events are held in public spaces, not only to avoid additional costs but to also make them more accessible to students and activists. The *Collective* communicates through social media or through occasional mainstream media programs covering the events they organize. They engage followers and supporters in public debates about gender inequality and social injustice, in direct street actions and in manifestations against sexual violence towards women and girls, and in knowledge production by translating theoretical texts to Albanian. The *Collective* faces great difficulties in maintaining their website and in providing translations, due to their limited resources. Moreover, they encounter hate speech and bullying, in particular by men within the social movements that feel threatened by feminist organizations.

3. Takeaways

- The primary role of investigative teams, watchdogs and fact-checkers is to inform the citizens, which requires the ability to reach out to them. Lack of access to mainstream media and the lack of local media networks curtails the outreach, and hence, the impact⁵. These actors may be of use to local civic initiatives in several ways: prompted by the local activists, the investigative teams may be able to disclose the breaches of the rule of law in local communities; watchdogs may provide the know-how for monitoring of local public procurements, and fact-checkers could help in monitoring the politicians' claims, exposing rumors and debunking conspiracy theories.

- Do-tanks reach out to citizens via traditional and social media in order to inform them of the problems and phenomena that impact their lives and invite them to participate at roundtables and public debates, thus promoting the culture of participation and activism. All prominent do-thanks survey citizens about their problems and needs, to inform the policy solutions they advocate for. Many organizations have for years been working on educating citizens about key concepts of democracy and policies. In the past decade, do-tanks have increasingly been engaged in directly empowering activism – through funding the projects and developing capacities of small, local organizations, and sometimes informal groups, enabling them to translate their ideas to written documents and advocate for these policies. Moreover, in result of these programs, myriad of small organizations also learned to manage projects, raise funds and strategically communicate and network with relevant stakeholders. Sometimes the education is also provided in the topics that the smaller organizations deal with, as they tend to lack expertise to advocate for realistic, knowledge-based solutions. Although do-tanks have had success in encouraging local activism, their scope remains limited by the lack of culture of participation at the local level, but also in larger cities, and by the traditional

mistrust in civil society organizations. Finally, do-tanks are often too focused on dialogue with their peers, and lack the sense of urgency to address and involve the citizens, usually failing to adapt their policy documents for popular use and not committing to communication campaigns outside their funded projects.

- Civic initiatives that have recently been working on shaping of the new socio-political discourse in the Western Balkans have roots in institutional and political knowledge built in the civil society, even when led by local communities' activists. They tend to have an intersectional and inclusive approach by building open collective platforms that unite people regardless of their background. There is a common understanding that for a civic initiative to be more impactful, it needs to address the issue both on a community and institutional level. On the one hand, they engage the local community affected – more in touch with the local context and better connected – to put pressure on the government by disrupting the course of events. Moreover, seeing that an initiative is led by local people generates trust among citizens about the intentions of the movement. On the other hand, they push for their demands to be embraced institutionally by supporting the production of research, policies etc. and advocating for legal changes. The informal collectives and other civic initiatives bring together actors from more radical civic activism and from the traditional civil society in order to share knowledge and resources, to jointly strengthen their messages and mobilize people for democratic change.

- Common obstacles to civic initiatives are limited resources and lack of legitimization from state institutions, donor organizations and other international entities operating in Western Balkans. Several collectives consider registering as legal body, not only in order to be able to apply for small funding, but also in order to gain some institutional recognition, necessary for their advocacy work. At the same time, there is frustration and criticism against the amount of paperwork that is required from donor organizations. The donors' approach is perceived as a top-down, ready-made intervention which does not benefit best the community, failing to reflect their needs and interests. Therefore, they deploy the knowledge, skills and resources from within the collectives and from different allies to cover up for the material limitations.

- As none of the three types of actors has routine access to mainstream media, they rarely reach broader audiences, their leverage and hence their impact are curtailed.

4. How to support citizens' engagement?

- **Investigative teams, watchdogs and fact-checkers may:**

Join resources and know-how to set up national training centers, where mentoring and coaching sessions to civic initiatives can be provided. These centers would develop the capacities of local and country-wide civic initiatives to disclose foul play at the local level, to monitor elections and confront machinations, to monitor election promises of the local incumbents and local budget spending; also, they could be trained to fact-check the claims of local politicians and debunk the rumors and conspiracy theories. On top of that, civic initiatives could be trained to raise funds, to communicate with public and manage small projects.

- Include the trained civic initiatives as partners in the investigation, monitoring and fact-checking projects, by focusing on issues at the local level.
- Set up a national network as a peer-support to include all civic initiatives interested in investigative reporting, monitoring and fact-checking, organize topical task forces to promote joint activities of similar organizations and apply for donor funding through the network, for the small projects of the network members.
- Reach out to local citizens: use social media and local partners (civic initiatives) to disseminate the reports of the investigative teams, monitoring groups and fact-checkers. Also, using social media and local partners, they should engage the citizens in local communities.

• **Do-tanks may:**

– As they are already engaged in encouraging activism through development of capacities, networking and sub-granting, they should look for ways to increase the sustainability of the local organizations and informal groups that they are coaching and mentoring, by inviting them to jointly apply for future projects, or by inspiring them to make consortia among themselves and implement joint projects in the future, and by including them in their communication campaign activities.

– Provide more space in their platforms for the campaigns and the demands addressed by civic initiatives. In particular, strongly support the civic initiatives that address hate speech and smear campaigns, especially against LGBT and women organisations, by developing media campaigns, providing legal aid, asking for accountability of media regulators and other state entities involved.

– Not limit the awareness-raising activities to the duration of particular projects. Do-tanks should invest more efforts in developing regular, project-unrelated communication strategies for both the central and the local level, aimed to promote democratic values and principles, and make sure that their communication products – policy documents, panels, public statements and appearances and their social media campaigns target not only the experts and peers, but also the broader public.

• **Civic initiatives may:**

– Considering the limited time and energy that members of civic initiatives can invest, due to their employment engagements, a developed structure is needed to use their resources more efficiently. This would mean a clear job division to allow for a better workflow, with a more balanced distribution of tasks and responsibilities amongst the members, to prevent overload and burnout. An example would be thematic work groups that can be established permanently or on a case-by-case basis, where members contribute according to their skills and capabilities. Moreover, having a developed organizational structure in place ensures that new members are accommodated more easily when they join the movement.

– Reach out more regularly and with open minds to civil society organizations for learning practices, resources and infrastructure. Civic initiatives can benefit from traditional CSOs like do-tanks, watchdogs, fact-checkers etc., which could provide training sessions on how to produce media content, how to build a communication strategy during a public campaign, how to address state institutions and file official documents, draft

law recommendations, build their own capacities etc. Building stronger cooperation and mutual support amongst the actors of civil society organizations and grassroots activism is necessary to promote the local communities' demands for social justice and democratic changes. Civic initiatives should aim towards growth in the areas of education, financial stability and networking.

– Popularize more intensively by identifying and reaching out to supporters or allies who are vocal in media, like influencers, TV moderators, artists etc., so they could use their individual platforms to amplify the movements' messages.

• **The donors may:**

– Make sure that they are prioritizing the actors that most directly disrupt illiberal governance and push for democratic change – investigative groups, watchdogs, fact-checkers, do-tanks and civic initiatives and movements.

– Create a network of incubators of civic initiatives and movements 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.

– Focus on three main areas to support the activism of civic initiatives in the long run: educational growth (theoretical and institutional knowledge by reaching out to traditional CSOs, universities, foundations etc.), financial growth (resources for the movement and decent financial support for members engaging full-time) and network growth (by building allies and opening their structures to new memberships).

– Support all civic challengers by long lasting core (institutional) funding instead of project-based funding, especially to enable small and young organizations to cover rent, office infrastructure, salaries and to increase their capacities. Institutional funding is an urgency, as the staff of the movements and initiatives have precarious working conditions, are overworked and underpaid, and tend to become tired and disappointed.

– Ease the administrative requirements for civic initiatives regarding reporting. To improve the monitoring of the projects' flow and outcomes, user-friendly templates may be developed.

– Assessments and proposals of the types of civic challengers should be clearly reflected in donor policies, instead of providing top-down, ready-made solutions in calls.

– Support the programs of civic education and media literacy within official educational systems and as part of informal trainings in order to confront the traditional opinion demeaning civic participation and activism and motivate citizens to actively demand democratic change.

– Considering the highly problematic lack of access to media for all the three types of actors, 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 democratic values and norms. For broad outreach, the content should be disseminated via dense, national networks of local media, developed in each of the countries.

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

ⁱⁱEven when threats are real, they are presented building on nationalistic biases and using the hate speech motifs.

ⁱⁱⁱThese initiatives are not the same as the social movements with formalized structure, such as the Albanian *Hashtag Initiative* or Serbian *Ne davimo Beograd*. Although their background is in civic action, once they run in elections, they essentially play the role of 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*.

^{iv}For more on the phenomenon of illiberal equilibrium see Maliqi (2020).

^vThey engage the citizens only indirectly, by inviting them to report corruption, election machinations, spread of rumors working in favor of the illiberal democracies.

