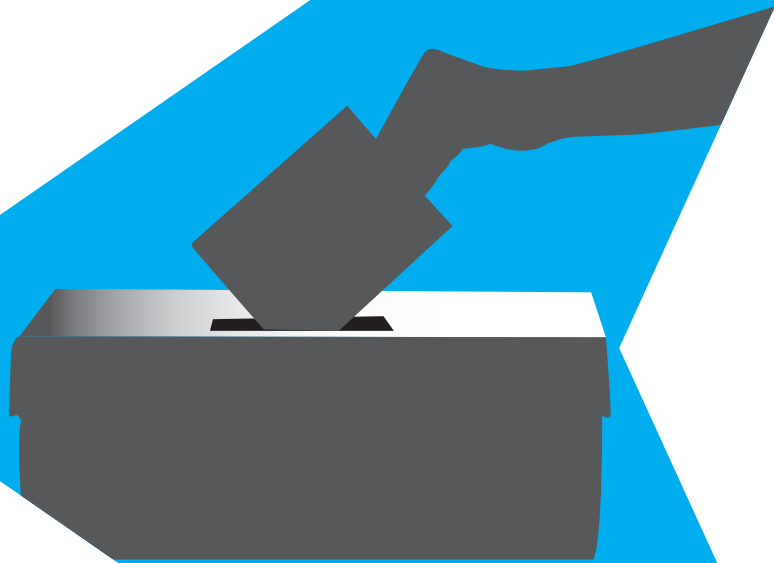




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## No longer voting for the devil you know?

### Why the Balkans' collective action problem might be easier to break than we think

Recent electoral outcomes have challenged the notion that elections in the Balkans are not able to bring about change. How has the public responded? It is argued that, in spite of the manifest obstacles for challengers to prevail over incumbents, public opinion is contingent upon the recent experiences in each country. Once shown the way, and in spite of a long period of stasis (or even state capture), citizens start believing that change is possible. The findings of the brief indicate that, in relation to electoral participation, the 'collective action' problem in the Balkans – characterised as lack of confidence in the possibility of change, leading to disillusionment with the democratic process and individual unwillingness to act to bring about change – might not be as difficult to break as previous research had indicated.

Tena Prelec and Jovana Marović<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In South East Europe, elections are often dismissed as mere window-dressing to democracy, churning the same elites over and over. However, recent votes have challenged that notion. After more than 30 years in power, Milo Đukanović had to concede the victory of the August 2020 parliamentary elections to a wide-ranging coalition of parties that had considerable ideological disagreements, but one aim in common: bringing down the old regime. Yet, Montenegro is not the only place where the status quo is being shaken up. In November 2020, municipal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina have returned an unusual outcome: in many cities, citizens have ditched candidates from the three main ethnic parties and embraced political outsiders. A year earlier, Kosovar voters similarly rejected established parties, crowning a former opposition movement (Vetëvendosje) as the relative winner of the election. For one reason or another, the old adage 'vote for the devil you know' is not sure to work any longer.

Is a change now on the horizon and, if so, can it be long-lasting? How is the public responding to old and new challenges linked to the electoral process? Based on a large-scale survey conducted on a nationally representative sample of citizens in all six countries of the Western Balkans, the discussion that follows will analyse these questions in relation to three main themes: trust in the electoral process to bring about change; attitudes towards the political opposition and their methods; and citizens' outlook on out-of-country voting.

In doing so, this policy brief deals with the home-grown potential of breaking out of the 'collective action problem'<sup>2</sup>. The high individual costs of acting to try to bring about change and the low perceived chances of success make it unlikely for citizens of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries to express their grievances against the regime. As studies have shown, citizens often choose not to challenge their governments under such circumstances<sup>3</sup>. While individuals may be better off cooperating as a group, they fail to do so because the perceived obstacles are so great that they revert to participating in mechanisms that perpetuate old problems and, often,

old power structures (such as clientelistic practices or voter abstention). While previous research has looked at the ability of external actors, such as the EU and the US<sup>4</sup>, to break the collective action problem and deliver change through elections, citizens' response has been widely overlooked in this context. The evidence analysed in this brief helps raise questions over the assumptions held so far.

## Trust in the electoral process: can elections deliver change?

In 2020, there were some major changes on the region's political stage, and the most surprising was certainly the one in Montenegro where, after the August parliamentary elections and after more than three decades, the opposition won a chance to form a government for the first time without Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, in it. This outcome affected the change in citizens' perception of elections as a tool for change: 80% of Montenegrins now believe in what was unimaginable just a few months ago:<sup>5</sup> that the government could be replaced in elections. This is a significantly higher percentage than in the rest of the region. This same figure stands at 43% in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia, and only 38% in Albania. In the middle, there are two countries which have also experienced, in one form or another, a change in the government's composition as a result of elections over the past half-decade: Kosovo (56%) and North Macedonia (46%).

1 The authors would like to thank Dr. Milica Delević, Prof. Florian Bieber and Prof. Elizabeth David-Barrett for their comments.

2 Mancur Olson, "The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups", 1971, Harvard University Press.

3 Joshua A. Tucker, "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions", *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 5, Issue 3, September 2007, pp. 535 - 551.4 Krastev, Ivan (2008), "Europe's other legitimacy crisis", *Open Democracy*.

4 Petrova, Tsveta, "Diffusion brokers and regime change waves: The US role in the wave of Central and Eastern European Electoral Breakthroughs", *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 26, Iss. 2, (Spring 2018): 227-250.

5 A public opinion poll conducted in July 2020, just before the August parliamentary elections in Montenegro, showed that only 49.5% of respondents believed that elections would be free and fair, either wholly or with reservations, while 41.7% of respondents thought they would not be free and fair and 8.7% could not say. See: „Between needs and political offers: Are there real choices for the citizens of Montenegro?", Center for Civic Education, July 2020, <http://media.cgo-cce.org/2020/07/CGO-FES-lzmedju-potreba-i-politickih-ponuda-2020.pdf>



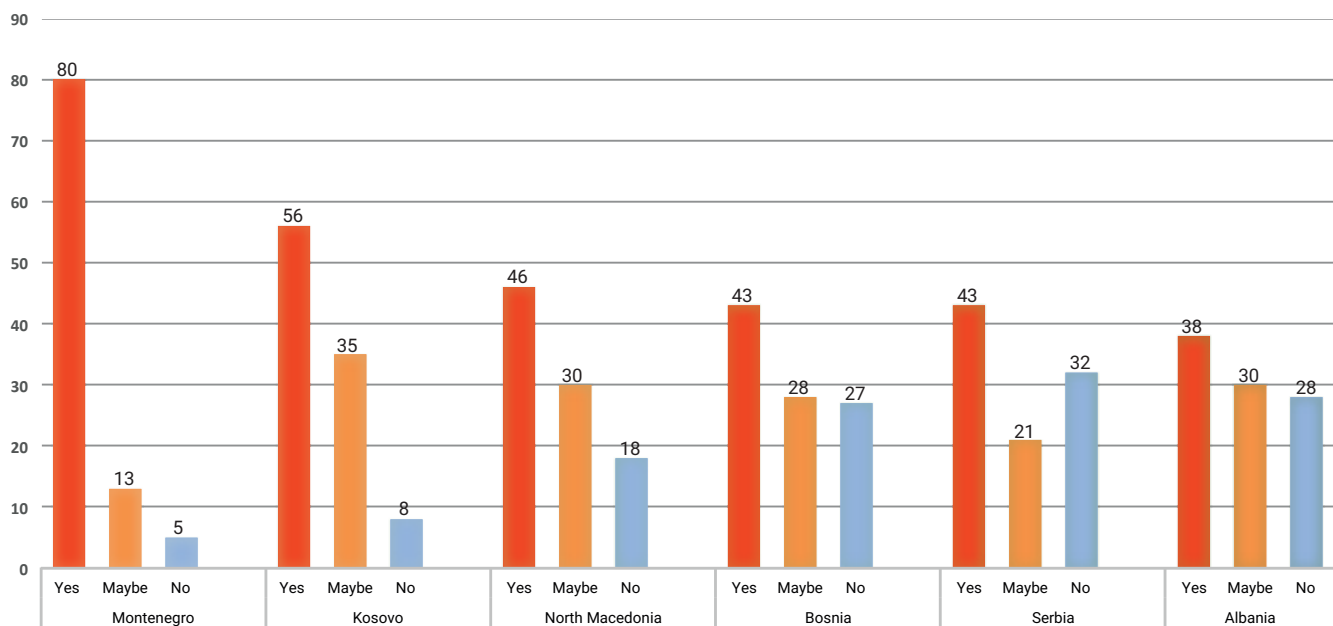


Table 1. Belief that the government can be changed through elections

Such low confidence in citizens' ability to meaningfully take part in the democratic process should be seen in connection with the greatest perceived obstacle to free and fair elections: the pressure on voters. The electoral success of opposition parties depends to a large extent on the number of citizens who are afraid of losing some of their benefits if they do not vote for the ruling party.<sup>6</sup> Mandatory voting in exchange for one-off favours, social benefits, and employment in public administration are frequent mechanisms of influence and pressure on voters.<sup>7</sup> This pressure is the most significant perceived obstacle to free and fair elections in all Western Balkan countries. It is, however, less prominent in Albania and Serbia, with 21% of respondents in Albania and 27% in Serbia, compared to 43% in Montenegro, stating that pressure on voters is an issue. This might explain, at least in part, the popularity of the ruling parties in Albania and Serbia: if the status quo suits these voters, they will be less inclined to complain about it. However, it should also be noted that in all countries except Albania (where this percentage is slightly lower and stands at 48%), the vast majority of respondents said they have never experienced any kind of election-related pressure first hand. Citizens believe that the most common form of pressure on voters is politicised employment, i.e. the promise of a job or the threat of losing their job (ranging from 26% of respondents in Albania to 57% in Kosovo).

Despite the belief of a large chunk of respondents that elections cannot change much, citizens state that they regularly partake in them. In all surveyed countries, more than half of respondents stated that they regularly go to the polls: a percentage that ranges from 69% (Albania) to 85% (Montenegro). The last elections in Montenegro confirmed this: in spite of the coronavirus crisis, turnout was very high, exceeding 76%, which was one of the factors that led to the change of government. Again, a number of factors have influenced such a high turnout.<sup>8</sup> In several countries, there is a stark incongruence between the results of the public opinion survey and the turnout recorded at elections. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, as many as 83.9% stated that they take part in the vote, but the officially recorded turnout at municipal elections in November 2020 barely exceeded 50%. It is not the first time that this discrepancy is highlighted, in relation to municipal as well as to national elections. While over-reporting of voter behaviour is one possible reason, organisations dealing with election monitoring in Bosnia and Herzegovina maintain that the explanation for this conundrum is to be sought, at least partially, in the out-of-date voter roll.<sup>9</sup> The unrealistically high number of voters on the roll, connected with high emigration, is a problem across the region. The need to clean the electoral register, as suggested by

6 Gentiana Kera and Armanda Hysa, "Influencing votes, winning elections: clientelist practices and private funding of electoral campaigns in Albania", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 1., January 2020, pp.123-139

7 Marko Kmezić and Florian Bieber, ed, „The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion“, BiEPAG, March 2017, pp.15-33 <http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf>

8 Jovana Marovic „Chess games after the 2020 elections in Montenegro – Black on White“, Tirana Observatory, 8 October 2020, <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2020/10/08/chess-games-after-the-2020-elections-in-montenegro-black-on-white/>

9 Jovana Marović, Tena Prelec, Marko Kmezić „Strengthening the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: Call for a Revolution against Particularism“, BiEPAG, January 2019, p. 38-39, <http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Strengthening-the-Rule-of-Law.pdf>

repeated analyses and already partially done in some countries (e.g. in North Macedonia),<sup>10</sup> looms large.

Voter apathy is driven by slightly different motivations from country to country. Those citizens who are not taking part in the voting process quoted several key reasons for their decision: in Albania, the main motive is the lack of interest in the voting process (34%). Election irregularity, leading to the belief that elections are already decided in advance, is the most quoted reason in Bosnia and Herzegovina (33%). Macedonians, on their part, lament that they have no one to vote for (30%). These data are reflected by the low percentage of respondents who state that they take part in protests or in local activist groups.<sup>11</sup> A silver lining is that the belief that one's vote is not going to change anything is, in relative terms, the least popular option: it ranges from 5% (Albania) to 20% (Serbia) of respondents disinterested in the voting process. These data indicate, again, that citizens' interest in the electoral process could be higher than often given credit for.

## Political opposition & dissent: do boycotts work?

It is a known fact that trust in government and institutions in the Western Balkans is very low across the board.<sup>12</sup> The political opposition, however, does not fare much better. In all surveyed countries except Kosovo, a relative majority of respondents believe that the opposition is not well organised. In a combined total, almost 48% believe that the opposition is completely disorganised (22.3%) or poorly organized (25.5%), compared to a combined total of about 38% who think that the opposition is moderately (23%) or well organized (15.6%). The harshest judgment of the political opposition is recorded in Serbia, where 84% have a low opinion of its effectiveness, with 43% deeming it completely disorganised. In Kosovo, where 'outsider' parties and political figures achieved considerable electoral gains in recent years, by contrast, this figure is significantly lower: only 13.4% think the opposition is completely disorganised, whereas 33.9% think it

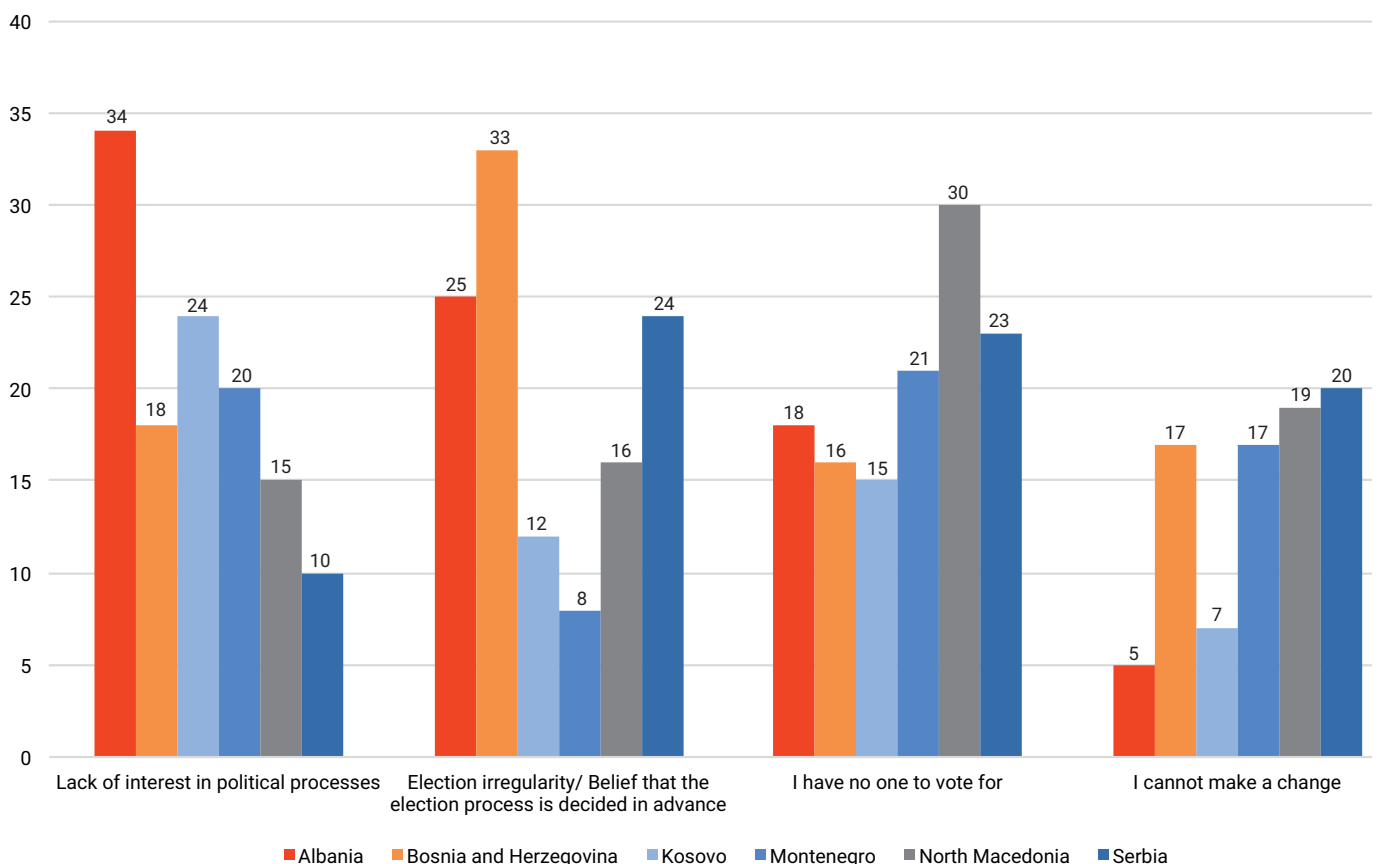


Table 2: Reason for election abstention

10 North Macedonia 2020 Report, European Commission", October 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north\\_macedonia\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf)

11 Marika Djolai "Social (dis)connectedness in the Western Balkans. Civic engagement in the age of failed democracy" BIEPAG, January 2021

12 "Balkan Barometer 2020 - Public Opinion Analytical Report", 2020, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications>



is well organised (with a further 19.4% deeming it is moderately well organised). Within a wide range of reasons why there is low trust in the work of the opposition, citizens point out that it is not united, has no leader(s), cares only about its interests, and operates with a lack of capacity and infrastructure and/or a lack of an adequate platform or programme.

Overall, there is no widespread support for electoral boycotts: 56.2% of respondents said that they do not support boycotts as a means of political struggle against irregular elections, whereas 32.2% said that they do. However, this percentage varies across countries. In Serbia, where the opposition's boycott at the June 2020 elections has not yielded tangible positive outcomes for the opposition, only 25.8% expressed support for this tactic. In North Macedonia, by contrast, as many as 47.8% look favourably at boycotts. The latter country's experience in the aftermath of the wiretapping scandal in 2015, including through the recommendations set out by the Priebe report,<sup>13</sup> brought a partial improvement of the level playing field for incumbents and challengers, resulting in an interim government(s) and the eventual change in the ruling elite through the ballot box in late 2016-2017. As appears clear, the opinion of citizens in regard to opposition's effectiveness and the use of boycotts is, in both cases, contingent on recent electoral experiences, and is by no means unmovable.

## Emigration and political participation: what do we know about out-of-country vote?

In all countries, a majority of citizens think that the voting of the diaspora in greater number would significantly affect election results, with the highest recorded percentage in Montenegro, 75%<sup>14</sup>, and followed by Kosovo, 63%. Most respondents consider diaspora voting poorly regulated, with the highest percentage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 65%. It is also interesting that in Kosovo, the reason why a relatively large percentage of people (36%) considers out-of-country voting well regulated is that the diaspora has a right to vote at all. In Albania, for example, none of the respondents chose this reason (presumably, because dissatisfaction with out-of-country voting is very high). Most significantly, the fact that a relative majority of respondents who said that the diaspora vote is well-regulated could not, at the same time, mention one single reason to explain their choice, is a clear indication that citizens do not know enough about this topic.

- 13 "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015", Brussels, 8 June 2015, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news\\_corner/news/news-files/20150619\\_recommendations\\_of\\_the\\_senior\\_experts\\_group.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf)
- 14 Although Montenegro gained a new ruling majority in August 2020, the new government was voted in only in December, so this information most likely refers to the previous long-term ruling party in Montenegro (DPS), for which the diaspora 'traditionally' voted.



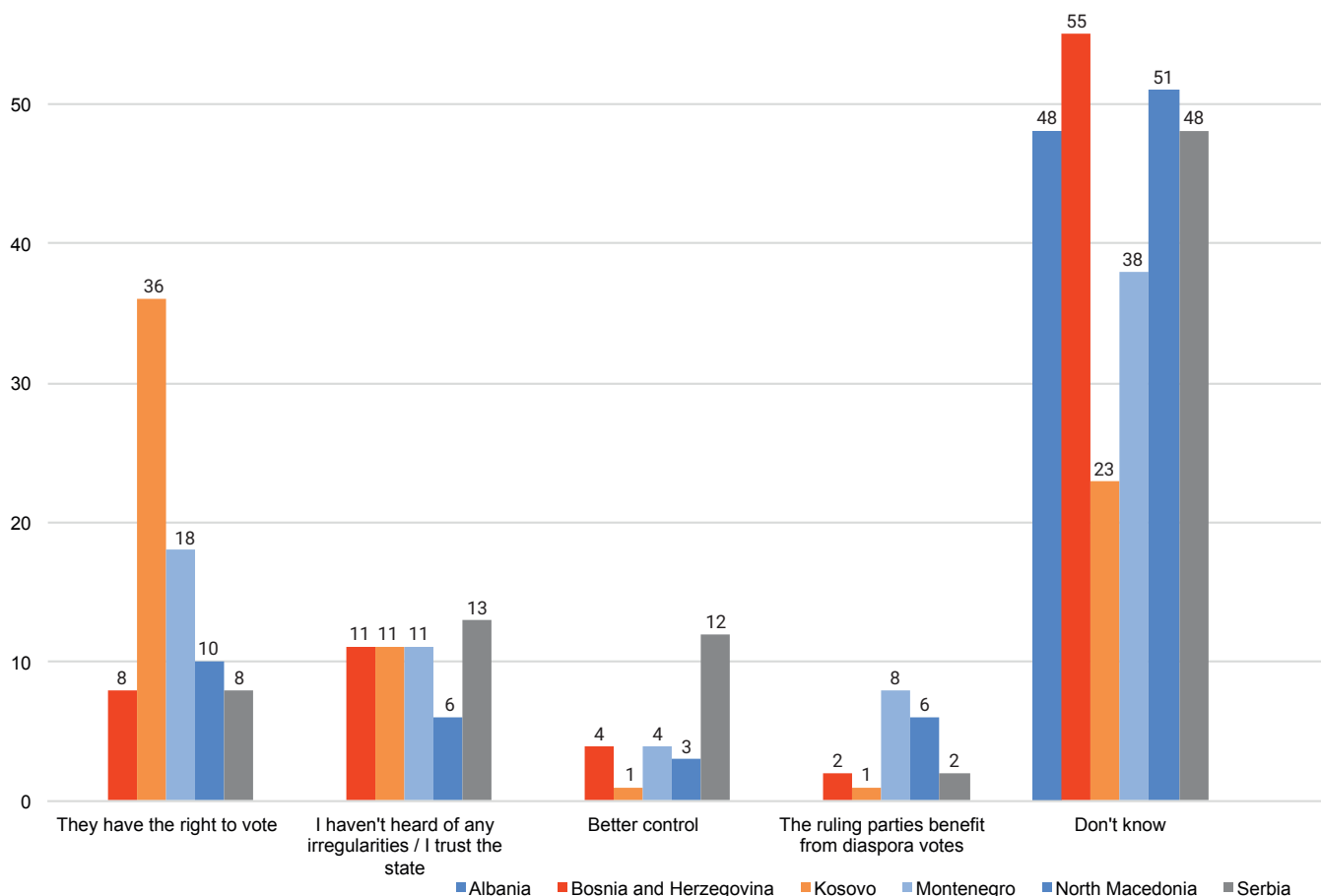


Table 3: Opinions on why out-of-country voting is well-regulated

The diaspora vote is a poorly covered subject in public discourse. Studies have shown that even those Balkan expats who are keen to take part in the electoral process from abroad are confused about the voting procedure and often experience barriers to casting their vote.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as our survey data show, it is only logical that citizens who have stayed in their country of origin have very limited knowledge about it. Those respondents who believe that voting is not well regulated do not have a clear idea about how it could be improved, with the exception of Montenegro, where the main suggestion is to deprive the diaspora of their right to vote<sup>16</sup>. Out-of-country voting is a topic that has long been pushed under the rug in several countries, precisely out of fear that a better or different regulation of this area could affect political processes and possibly lead to a change in

government (e.g. in Albania)<sup>17</sup>. Having in mind the very steep emigration data, this topic should be an important part of electoral reform discussions in any Western Balkan country.

15 Tena Prelec "The Serbian Diaspora's Political Views: A Study on the 2017 Serbian Presidential Election", Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, Volume 21, 2019 - Issue 1: Migration in the Western Balkans: What Do We Know?

16 This is a specific case, probably due to years of controversy over who has the right to vote in the elections in Montenegro, as there are different interpretations of the Law on Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament. This law states that the right to participate in elections belongs to a person who has resided in Montenegro for at least two years before the elections, so a number of political parties claim that it is unconstitutional to extend the right to vote of those who have lived outside Montenegro for many years.

17 Exit, "The Albanian diaspora and the diaspora vote", 11 November 2020 <https://exit.al/en/2020/11/11/exit-explains-the-albanian-diaspora-and-the-diaspora-vote/>





## Conclusions

Despite the frequent view that elections cannot make a real difference, due to the extreme advantages enjoyed by incumbents in areas such as access to public resources and control of the media,<sup>18</sup> recent ballots in the Western Balkans have shown that change is possible even under such (unfair) conditions. This 'uneven playing field' includes weak electoral laws, the misuse of public resources for electoral purposes, and the increased representation of ruling parties in state-sponsored or state-linked media. The biggest obstacle for free and fair elections is considered to be the pressure on voters (e.g. through promises or threats linked to politicised hiring); however, most respondents say they have never experienced it themselves. This, to an extent, can also be interpreted as a fear of presenting such patterns which could lead to the loss of privileges and retaliation.

Opinion polls often indicate that citizens' trust in institutions is low, mainly due to the unsatisfactory situation in the countries and the feeling that not everyone is equal before the law. Our survey has shown that trust in the opposition is not high, either. While they are largely disappointed with the government, citizens often do not see the opposition as a credible alternative, and in addition to criticising its disorganisation, disagreements include disunity, lack of leadership and lack of adequate capacity and programmes. Although they generally do not support electoral boycotts as instruments capable of making a real difference, opinions vary from country to country, depending on its effectiveness so far. Thus, the support for boycott is higher, for example, in North Macedonia than in Serbia, contingent upon recent experiences. The vote of citizens living abroad is a

poorly represented topic in political discourse, often out of fear that changes on this front could threaten the political elites in power. As a consequence, it is not surprising that citizens have a very low level of knowledge about it.

Most importantly, the analysis presented above indicates that citizens might be more engaged in the democratic process than is usually thought. Official data, even when seemingly reliable and transparent, should not be taken at face value. Voter turnout might in fact be higher than official statistics would let us think, and there is space for it to grow even further. Furthermore, the significantly higher trust in the electoral process in Montenegro, and partially also in Kosovo and in North Macedonia, after election results which confirmed that such change is possible, cannot be overstated. On the other hand, the participation in public mobilisation does not seem to follow (at least not yet).<sup>19</sup>

A change of the ruling class is, of course, not enough in itself. If the old majority is replaced by a new one continuing the same practices, this can have perverse consequences – potentially even spearheading another period of authoritarian rule<sup>20</sup>. Hence, the "changeability" of the government is an important precondition for democratisation, but it must lead to the improvement of institutions' performance and their independence for it to have long-lasting positive effects. These caveats notwithstanding, our findings indicate that overcoming the 'collective action problem' in the Western Balkans might be less daunting than foreseen in respect to electoral participation. Once changes are set in motion, the realm of what is possible can expand in the public's eye very quickly. The difficult part is, however, that first step – how to turn the corner?

## Methodology

The primary data used in this BiEPAG policy analysis come from a public opinion poll conducted in the six Western Balkan countries in October 2020. Survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample consisted of minimum 1000 respondents aged 18+, through telephone and online interviews, by the following ratio: Albania (phone + online, 90:10), Bosnia and Herzegovina (phone + online, 80:20), Kosovo (phone, 100), Montenegro (phone + online, 90:10), North Macedonia (phone + online, 90:10) and Serbia (phone + online, 80:20). Results are presented in percentage and are subject to following statistical errors: Albania  $\pm 3.39\%$ , Bosnia and Herzegovina  $\pm 3.39\%$ , Kosovo  $\pm 3.32\%$ , Montenegro  $\pm 3.36\%$ , North Macedonia  $\pm 3.34\%$  and Serbia  $\pm 3.38\%$ . Data collection was implemented by Ipsos Strategic Marketing.

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- 18 Jovana Marović, Tena Prelec, Marko Kmezić „Strengthening the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: Call for a Revolution against Particularism”, BiEPAG, January 2019, <http://biEPAG.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Strengthening-the-Rule-of-Law.pdf>
- 19 An avenue for further research is to compare these issues with work done on other geographies, such as Michael Biggs' research explaining mobilisation in the US even when it seemingly contradicts the collective action problem. See: Michael Biggs, "Positive feedback in collective mobilization: The American strike wave of 1886", *Theory and Society*, 2003, Vol. 32, pp. 217–254.12 Mair (2013), op. cit
- 20 Tena Prelec, "Regime Change and the Rule of Law: Serbia's Lessons to Montenegro", *Politikon Network*, December 2020 <https://politikon.me/2020/12/05/regime-change-and-the-rule-of-law-serbias-lessons-to-montenegro/>





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