



**The Narrow Corridor of Re-Democratization
in the Western Balkans (and beyond):**

Making Democratic Breakthroughs Work

Policy Paper | Florian Bieber, Claudia Laštro and Enej Lovrečić





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THE NARROW CORRIDOR OF RE-DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS (AND BEYOND):

MAKING DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGHS WORK

Florian Bieber, Claudia Laštro and Enej Lovrečić¹

When Péter Magyar defeated Viktor Orbán in the parliamentary elections on 12 April 2026, many observers were surprised by Orbán's quick concession, just a few hours after the polls closed. Many had expected a protracted power struggle, given the authoritarian features of Orbán's 16 years in power. Elections are often a critical moment for challenging competitive authoritarian regimes. Unlike closed autocracies, which do not allow genuine elections, competitive authoritarian regimes distort and manipulate elections while still relying on the facade of free polls. Such elections are a crucial opportunity to (re-)democratize competitive authoritarian regimes. Elections have typically been accompanied by broad social movements and protests, such as the color revolutions in the early 2000s, the defeat of the Gruevski government in North Macedonia in 2016, the defeat of Đukanović's long-ruling Democratic Party of Socialists in Montenegro in 2020, and Vetëvendosje's transition from a social movement to taking power in 2021. The defeat of long-standing autocrats does not necessarily translate into an immediate democratic breakthrough. There are three risks: First, new rulers inherit an authoritarian system and may be quickly tempted to abandon democratization in favor of using the established structures for their own advantage. This could be described as authoritarian continuity. Second, captured institutions are likely to continue exerting political control and behaving accordingly, thereby reducing reform efforts. Such a pattern could be described as continued state capture, even during a period of democratization. Third, outgoing autocrats might return to power, as they often retain substantial electoral support and can benefit from citizens' disillusionment if the new government's reforms fail to deliver quick, tangible results. This could result in cyclical autocratization. The experience of Serbia combines features of all three risks.

As Nobel Prize-winning economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue in their book "The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty", establishing a functional liberal democracy is a complex feat, and there is often only a narrow corridor to achieve this fragile form of government. A critical juncture arises when elected autocrats lose office, opening multiple paths toward democracy or a return to autocratic rule. Neither outcome is preordained. While post-Orbán Hungary is too recent to offer much guidance for other democratic

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transitions, the track record of the Caucasus and the Western Balkans in tackling competitive authoritarian regimes over recent decades offers some important lessons.

While the key driving force for sustainable democratic reform lies with domestic actors, the EU can play an important enabling role.

The Need for Speed

When authoritarian regimes are defeated at the ballot box, there is a broad expectation among citizens and international actors that the democratic winners will implement the necessary changes to achieve (re-)democratization.

However, simply replacing a regime with new faces is clearly insufficient. Some of the “winners” might not be genuinely democratic. These actors may perform or mimic democratic behavior without being substantively democratic. Systemic reforms are critical to reintroducing democratic institutions and practices and dismantling the structural legacies of authoritarian rule. It is therefore essential that reforms be enacted early in the transition to prevent former autocrats or new elites from derailing democratization.

The sense of urgency should guide early decision-making. Reforms enacted during the relatively short, concentrated transition period decisively shape long-term institutional trajectories and regime outcomes. In other words, the earlier democratic norms are established, the more deeply they become embedded, and the more difficult it is for authoritarian forces to exploit the system to regain power.

Early reforms not only create momentum and progress but also have the potential to garner public support. Public trust can be further strengthened by fostering confidence in key institutions, such as the justice system and the security sector. The latter sector in particular must be addressed promptly after regime change, as unreformed security structures pose a direct threat to democratic consolidation. Strong public support, combined with predictable governance, raises barriers to a resurgence of former power elites. When reforms are implemented slowly, a legal vacuum may emerge in which informal networks remain influential, and corruption persists. Serbia exemplifies such a trajectory: following the fall of the Milošević regime, reforms were introduced gradually, allowing corruption and political instability to endure. The democratic progress achieved in the early 2000s subsequently eroded, giving way to the rise of a new dominant actor and renewed autocratization.

While policymakers must recognize the urgency of democratic reform during this limited window of opportunity, it is equally important that reforms be carefully designed to avoid instability. Poorly designed or hastily implemented reforms, often introduced to satisfy external actors, can lead to weak institutions or legal uncertainty, as seen in Albania’s judicial reform and Kosovo’s vetting process. Similarly, rushed economic reforms risk causing social hardship

and alienating reform constituencies. This can create openings for the return of old autocrats or the rise of new populists.

The consequences of poorly designed reforms can provoke public backlash, ultimately undermining long-term support for democratic change. Unlike Slovenia's rapid yet coherent reform trajectory, Georgia under Mikheil Saakashvili experienced reform excess, overhauling the police force and implementing aggressive anti-corruption measures. While these reforms initially generated public support for his government through immediate, visible results, they were often centralized and top-down, implemented with limited institutional checks. Consequently, they weakened institutional independence, enabling abuse of power and the rise of a new hybrid regime.

In sum, the need for speed can undermine the (re-)establishment of democratic procedures. Questionable procedural shortcuts, such as removing compromised civil servants and amending legislation in haste, may appear justified by the goal of dismantling autocratic structures. But using autocratic means for democratic ends can ultimately generate new patterns of authoritarianism or trigger backlash, contributing to the return of old autocrats. This dilemma was evident in Poland's post-PiS government, in Zoran Đinđić's administration in Serbia, and now looms over Hungary's reform process under Péter Magyar.

What are the greatest obstacles to quick reforms during the initial phases?

a. Heterogeneous coalitions

Narrow majorities and complex coalitions reduce new governments' ability to break with authoritarian practices. These obstacles appeared in Serbia after 2000, in North Macedonia after 2016, and in Montenegro in 2020. In Serbia, the unwieldy coalition pitted conservative forces around Yugoslav president (and later Serbian Prime Minister) Vojislav Koštunica against the reformist Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. This exposed a deeper societal divide within the anti-Milošević coalition, making it difficult to advance a clear reform agenda. A similar scenario unfolded in Montenegro after 2020, where the coalition included democratic reformers and Serb nationalist parties that had little in common with the former beyond a shared dislike of Đukanović. In North Macedonia, the new government included DUI/BDI, the dominant party of the Albanian community, which had been an integral part of the Gruevski regime and therefore had little incentive to reverse state capture. Heterogeneous coalitions often reflect social division and polarization, which come to the fore once the common goal of defeating the autocratic incumbent has been achieved; this is a key feature of many transitional regimes.

b. Institutional blockages

In captured states, institutions carry a long legacy of serving a particular party or leader rather than the state and its citizens. Institutions are not easily 'uncaptured'. While some civil servants might readily transfer their loyalty in hopes of surviving the transition, others block and sabotage democratization either out of ideological commitment or anticipation of the return of 'their' patron. This creates a dilemma between maintaining institutional functionality and reckoning with those who abused their positions. Radical purges can disentangle former re-

gime networks, but they also risk rendering parts of critical state institutions nonfunctional for extended periods or leaving reforms superficial and disconnected from the broader institutional framework. This was evident in Georgia's police reform under President Saakashvili and in Albania's justice reform. In addition, institutional overhauls risk giving rise to new patronage and partisan networks under the incoming leadership, which may seek privileges and government jobs long monopolized by their predecessors. The result can be the continuation of state capture by a different party, as occurred in North Macedonia after 2016, even though the overall political system became more democratic.

c. Entrenchment of informal structures

While reforms may dismantle regime networks within formal institutions, informal structures, such as oligarchic networks, tend to persist. Cronies of the predecessor regime often shift their loyalty with ease to new ruling parties to protect their wealth and influence. This was evident in post-2000 Serbia, where tycoons associated with the Milošević regime largely retained their wealth and influence, thereby shaping the economic transformation and leveraging their interests. This points to a fundamental tension in post-authoritarian transitions: new governments must either confront or coopt informal networks. Confrontation risks economic instability and job displacement, which can erode the political momentum critical to sustaining reform. Cooptation, on the other hand, entrenches patronage dependencies and creates gateways for informal veto players, leaving democratic reforms shallow and reversible. Thus, new governments' approach to informal networks critically shapes whether democratic reforms take structural root or remain procedurally superficial.

Coalition Dynamics and the Risk of Power Reconcentration

The consolidation of post-authoritarian governments is commonly marked by a narrowing of the oppositional bloc that had been instrumental in bringing down the autocratic regime, a process that follows the expansive mobilization phase.

The defeat of competitive authoritarian regimes over the past decades was often enabled by tactical partnerships between opposition parties and civil society organizations, with cross-country variation in the quality and depth of these alliances. Civil society activities were key to building momentum for the institutional opposition ahead of critical elections. Often triggered by regime scandals, these movements created a common cause, translating dispersed anti-regime grievances into collective action: Georgia's Rose Revolution following the 2003 electoral fraud attempt by Shevardnadze's regime; North Macedonia's Colorful Revolution of 2016, provoked by the government's wiretapping cover-up; Armenia's Velvet Revolution of 2018, catalyzed by President Sargsyan's attempt to extend his tenure by switching to the Prime Minister's office; and the 2019-2020 church processions (litije) in Montenegro, triggered by a controversial religion law.

Beyond redirecting discontent into mass mobilization, alliances with civil society actors transfer ideational capital to opposition parties. When opposition credibility is tarnished by infighting or by situational cooperation with the regime, civil society actors, who often enjoy broader public trust, can bolster the opposition's legitimacy, as in the case of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), which ousted Milošević in 2000 and was backed by a vigorous NGO and activist campaign. Such alliances also resonate internationally, translating into external endorsement and critical funding, as with Serbia's DOS and Georgia's 2003 opposition.

Channeling broad public mobilization into institutional structures makes coalition compression a logical step in post-transition consolidation. Yet this process is highly contingent: it requires agreement among heterogeneous anti-regime actors on a viable political program, the division of responsibilities, and the allocation of positions and perks. This process, often marked by prolonged contestation, fragile majorities, and institutional stasis, was evident in post-2020 Montenegro. Whether this process yields transparent power-sharing arrangements and robust accountability mechanisms determines whether the transition moves toward democratization or slides back into autocratic patterns.

What are the main reasons for democratization failing?

a. Power concentration

When regime change propels a cohesive opposition into government, it can facilitate the reconcentration of power. A post-transition majority dominated by a single actor faces little pressure to share power. This enables it to cut ties with erstwhile allies who have become uncomfortable, staff political offices, and build patronage networks with limited accountability, as illustrated by Armenia's post-transition trajectory.

b. Civil society hollowing out

Conversely, when post-transition governments resemble counter-alliances between the political opposition and civil society actors, state-civil society relations are reconfigured. Civil society organizations lose their independent watchdog function upon entering government. Furthermore, their incorporation may redirect foreign donations away from the NGO sector. The entry of NGO-related personnel signals reform credibility, encouraging donors to channel support toward the new government, as in post-2003 Georgia, in Kosovo after 2021, and in North Macedonia after 2016, thereby weakening the civil society sector's capacity.

The Goldilocks Dilemma

There is a narrow path toward democratization after competitive authoritarianism, with either a return of populist autocrats looming or new rulers falling into the comfortable routines provided by competitive authoritarian systems. If the new coalition is too broad, it risks failing to pursue a unified reform agenda; too narrow, and it empowers too few. Similarly, institutions and civil society need to become allies of democratic reforms, but civil society can be co-opted by the new institutions and lose its ability to serve as a watchdog. Institutions can remain resistant to reform and bide their time for a return of the previous autocrat, or become too subservient to the new rulers, perpetuating the patterns of state capture.

This does not mean that the path out of competitive authoritarian rule is impossible or unlikely; however, it is far more complicated than breaking from outright autocracy, because the hybridity of elected autocrats provides more continuity than the rupture that occurs when closed autocracies are overthrown. To return to the example of Hungary, the seeming normality of election night creates the illusion that the transfer of power occurs within a democracy.

Recommendations

All democratic breakthroughs have been overwhelmingly driven by domestic actors, including political parties, activists, and civil society. While autocrats often blame foreign interference, external actors usually act as supporters rather than drivers of democratic change. Autocrats have leveled such accusations even when external involvement is minimal; these accusations should not deter external democracy supporters, in particular the EU, from providing strategic support.

The EU has the potential to play an important role in supporting democratization in the Western Balkans, having contributed directly to democratic transformations in North Macedonia in 2016 and in Slovakia in 1998, and now facing similar processes in Hungary and Poland. The EU's transformative potential has diminished in recent years, as enlargement has stalled and some member states and EU institutions have come to prefer stability over the uncertainties of genuine democratization, contributing to the emergence of stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans.

For Democratizing Actors

- 1** Implement rapid but structured reforms early. Immediately after the transition, prioritize a first wave of high-impact reforms in electoral law, judicial independence, the security sector, and media freedom. Setting a clear reform timeline within the short post-transition window prevents authoritarian backsliding. Establish independent oversight bodies early to prevent ongoing state capture. While maintaining reform momentum is essential, avoid overly centralized or top-down reforms that weaken institutional independence. Sequence and, where necessary, phase complex reforms to reduce backlash and ensure durability.
- 2** Ensure continuity of basic state functions during reforms to prevent governance from breaking down. Avoid legal vacuums by maintaining state functions throughout the reform process. Introduce merit-based appointments and vetting mechanisms rather than sweeping purges to preserve capacity while gradually (re-)democratizing.

For the European Union

- 1** *Prepare for the democratic transformation before critical elections, not after.* This should include administrative and political support from the EU for re-democratizers, drawing on experience from previous re-democratization episodes within the EU and in its neighborhood. It should also include financial assistance to support reform efforts.
- 2** *Maintain civil society funding after the transition, when independent watchdog capacity is most needed.* While assistance for good governance is crucial, it should not come at the expense of support for civil society. Even if civil society actors are represented in the new government, independent financial support should continue to be provided to civil society organizations outside government to sustain their watchdog capacity. Crucially, funding frameworks should also target grassroots initiatives to foster not only professionalization but also democracy-building among citizens.
- 3** *Facilitate power-sharing agreements among the opposition before the transition.* The EU should establish communication channels with opposition actors, including political parties. In particular, the European Parliament can draw on previous experience to serve as a communication channel and provide know-how. It can facilitate coalition-building among opposition parties to secure power-sharing arrangements ahead of critical elections. Power-sharing agreements are most stable when all parties perceive them as transparent, predictable, and fair. This safeguards against excessive demands or the dominance of any single actor after the elections, thereby sustaining room for post-election reform rather than power struggles.

About us

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a group of policy analysts, scholars, and researchers established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. It works to advance the European integration of the Western Balkans and to support the development of democratic, open, and resilient societies across the region. BiEPAG brings together leading experts from the Western Balkans and across Europe, recognised for their expertise and in-depth understanding of the region and the political, economic, and social processes shaping its future.

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The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation, and King Baudouin Foundation, dedicated to strengthening democracy, advancing European integration, and reinforcing the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's shared challenges. Its strategy focuses on three core areas: fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation, and supporting the EU integration process.

EFB works to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, while promoting cooperation among civil society actors through solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides platforms and opportunities for informed and empowered citizens to advocate for accountable institutions and democratic governance, with a strong emphasis on supporting continuous reforms in policies and practices as countries progress toward EU accession.

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was established in November 2008, following the designation of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. It is an interdisciplinary, cross-faculty institution dedicated to research and education, providing a platform for the university's diverse teaching and research activities on Southeast Europe, while fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Centre also serves as a hub for information and documentation, and as a point of contact for the media and the wider public interested in political, legal, economic, and cultural developments in Southeast Europe. Its interdisciplinary team, comprising legal scholars, historians, and political scientists, contributes to the field through articles, monographs, and other publications. The Centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to advance cutting-edge research on Southeast Europe.

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