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**The Relationship between Perceptions  
of Inequality and Political  
Participation: The Case of the  
Western Balkans**

Bruno Martorano

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Bruno Martorano  
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# **The Relationship between Perceptions of Inequality and Political Participation: The Case of the Western Balkans**

Bruno Martorano

## **Summary**

This paper discusses how disparities and in particular perceptions of inequality may have influenced political participation in Western Balkans over the last years. The arrival of the international crisis in the last quarter of 2008 has had not only economic but also significant political consequences on the region. While citizens' participation through conventional channels has continued decreasing, there has been a rising opposition to political and economic institutions channelled by the emergence of new social movements. This paper shows that these political changes were largely motivated not by observed changes in income distribution but by people's perceptions of rising disparities between rich and poor. This analysis is further supported by the empirical testing of a number of mechanisms that may shape the relationship between inequality and political participation such as expectations, changes in living conditions and corruption.

**Keywords:** inequality; perceptions of inequality; expectations; corruption; political participation; Western Balkans.

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# Acronyms

|      |  |
|------|--|
| EBRD | European Bank for Reconstruction and Development |
| EU   | European Union                                   |
| GDP  | Gross Domestic Product                           |
| LiTS | Life in Transition Survey                        |

# Practice summary

This paper discusses how disparities and, in particular, perceptions of inequality may have influenced political participation in the Western Balkans over recent years. After the decade of armed conflicts, these small countries started their economic and political transition in the early 2000s. Yet the arrival of the international financial crisis in 2008 had not only economic but also significant political consequences for the region. While citizen participation through conventional channels has continued to decrease, there has been a rising opposition to political and economic institutions channelled by the emergence of new social movements. This paper argues that these political changes were largely motivated not by observed changes in income distribution but by people's perceptions of rising disparities between rich and poor people.

## **Why do perceptions matter more than the objective value of inequality?**

This paper reconsiders two strong assumptions which are implicit in the recent literature linking inequality and political changes. The first is that people have equal access to information; yet this is not true because access to information is not the same for all individuals. The second assumption is that people have the same ability to assess the value of inequality in society. Yet this is also far from reality, since people do not have the same skills. Rejecting both assumptions, this paper argues that perceptions of disparities matter more than the objective value of inequality in explaining certain motivations and behaviours and, in particular, political participation. Indeed, it seems that the recent crisis has had a dramatic impact, especially on subjective assessments of living conditions. What is interesting to observe is that people feel that disparities have increased even though the level of inequality has decreased or remained stable. On average, around 62 per cent of respondents to the Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) III in Western Balkan countries believe that the gap between rich and poor has become larger, while only 5 per cent believe the gap has narrowed.

## **How might changes in perceptions of inequality affect political participation?**

This paper shows empirically that perceptions of inequality play a key role in people's participation in political activities. In particular, perceptions of rising disparities decrease people's participation in voting in parliamentary elections but increase people's participation in protests. The results also point out that perceptions of inequality have a stronger effect on alternative forms of political participation such as voting in local elections, participating in strikes and signing a petition. In addition, this paper confirms that political participation is influenced by other factors such as current economic, social and demographic factors and that the determinants of mobilisation through conventional and unconventional channels are very similar.

This analysis is further supported by the empirical testing of a number of mechanisms that may shape the relationship between inequality and political participation. Income shocks at national level (such as the 2008 financial crisis) increase feelings of failure and disappointment, which in turn make people more averse to inequality. In particular, the worsening of national economic conditions or unexpected economic shocks are perceived as a result of circumstances that go beyond individual responsibility, reducing tolerance to inequality and therefore influencing how people engage with political activities. At the same time, high expectations about future economic conditions increase people's tolerance of inequality. However, trust in political institutions plays a key role in shaping political participation. Indeed, perceptions of high levels of corruption tend to increase people's preference to participate through unconventional channels, reflecting a belief that traditional political actors are not able to represent all strata in society, particularly the most vulnerable groups.

## **Key policy lessons**

These results highlight the need to reduce inequality in order to improve the quality of democracy. However, as shown by the analysis, policymakers should also pay attention to people's perceptions, subjective assessments and expectations about the future. Moreover, citizens may be more inclined to respect political rules if political institutions are seen as representative, fair and transparent. Therefore, it is important to take all these factors into serious consideration in order to increase the successful implementation of a set of reforms (especially in crisis times) and promote the process of democratic consolidation. Other democratic institutions may have important roles in such contexts. For example, the existence of parties or movements capable of giving voice to the experiences and views of the most marginalised groups may be crucial in preventing resentment, discharging grievances, and thereby mitigating social and political instability.

# 1 Introduction

Political participation is a key ingredient of the democratic process (Almond and Verba 1963; Linz and Stepan 1996; Gaventa and Martorano 2016). As explained by Barber (1984: 267), 'if all of the people can participate some of the time in some of the responsibilities of governing, then strong democracy will have realized its aspirations'. In contrast, 'where few take part in decisions there is little democracy' (Verba and Nie 1972: 1). Following these lines, a large body of the literature focuses on the consequences of growing disparities on citizens' engagement with political activities. Yet, the existing theoretical and empirical literature provide mixed conclusions. According to a widespread argument in the political science, rising or high levels of inequality might be hypothesised to provide people in the bottom of the distribution with additional motivations to engage in politics (Filetti 2016). Nonetheless, the recent empirical evidence tends to show that inequality decreases citizens' engagement in political activities (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Karakoc 2013; Filetti 2016; Solt 2008).

Analysing the recent waves of protests across the world, some scholars have also provided contrasting results. Ortiz *et al.* (2013), for example, report that the vast majority of demonstrations during the recent global financial crisis were motivated by people's indignation at the increasing inequalities between ordinary communities and the richest groups. Yet, other scholars show that inequality does not seem sufficient to explain these events. In particular, Justino and Martorano (2016) show that the number of protests has increased in Latin American countries even though inequality has decreased; Verme (2014) also shows that inequality decreased in the period before the Egyptian revolution.

This paper contributes to this literature focusing on the recent experience of the Western Balkans. After the decade of armed conflicts, these small countries started their economic and political transition in the early 2000s. Yet the arrival of the international financial crisis in the last quarter of 2008 has had significant economic and political consequences for the Western Balkans. In 2009, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita dropped by 2.7 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The country most affected was Slovenia, which recorded a GDP reduction of 8.2 per cent, while Albania was the only country recording a positive performance (+4 per cent). Over the most recent period, poverty in the region has slightly increased while inequality has decreased (Koczan 2016). However, it seems that the crisis has had a dramatic impact, especially on subjective assessments of living conditions. Indeed, people report high dissatisfaction with their living conditions and the share of people reporting that they feel poor is higher than the share of people below the monetary poverty line (Koczan 2016).

At the same time, there is a growing sentiment that traditional political actors are not able to represent all strata in society, particularly the most vulnerable groups. Moreover, in many countries, the slow and demanding process of access to the European Union (EU) has increased political frustration and has reduced popular support for European institutions (Milošević and Džuverović 2015). As a result, while citizen participation through conventional channels has continued to decrease, there has been a rising opposition to political and economic institutions channelled by the emergence of new social movements (Milošević and Džuverović 2015). For example, in the spring of 2011, Facebook protests erupted in many cities in Croatia (Stiks and Horvat 2012); in 2012, significant protests occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina, blocking off the Federal Parliament building; and in Slovenia, forcing the government's resignation (Musić 2013).

Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to analyse how perceptions of the recent evolution of inequality have influenced people's engagement in political activities in this region. In doing

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<sup>1</sup> Data on GDP are extracted from the World Development Indicator database.



so, I use information extracted from the Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) III conducted between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in collaboration with Transparency International and the World Bank. This paper shows that perceptions of inequality affect participation in political activities. In particular, perceptions of rising disparities decrease people's participation in voting in parliamentary elections while they increase people's participation in protests. In addition, this paper confirms that political participation is influenced by other factors such as current economic, social and demographic factors and that the determinants of mobilisation through conventional and unconventional channels are very similar. This analysis is further supported by the empirical testing of a number of mechanisms that may shape the relationship between inequality and political participation such as expectations, changes in living conditions and corruption. I find that, in a context of rising disparities, the high expectations about future economic conditions increase people's tolerance of inequality while low expectations tend to increase a sense of powerlessness, contributing to the lack of agency and the 'silent' acceptance of current conditions. Income shocks at national level increase aversion to inequality, influencing political activities, while high perceptions of corruption decrease participation through democratic conventional channels and increase participation in protests.

These results provide important contributions to the literature. Although there is a large number of works analysing the relationship between inequality and political participation, this is one of the first studies to analyse the specific role of perceptions of inequality. To the best of our knowledge, there are only three contributions which have tried to explore this idea looking at recent facts. In particular, Loveless (2016) reports that perceptions of rising disparities have generated stronger demands for democratic participation in 13 Central and Eastern European countries. Verme (2014) analyses the evolution of perceptions of disparities in Egypt in the period before the recent revolution. Justino and Martorano (2016) investigate the impact of perceptions of inequality on the increasing number of protests and civil unrests in Latin America. However, the latter two studies lack a proper measure of perceptions of inequality. This work also advances this literature by identifying which mechanisms may shape the relationship between inequality and political participation. Finally, to my knowledge, this is the only paper to econometrically test the relationship between inequality and political participation in the Western Balkans.

## 2 The consequences of perceptions of inequality on political participation

### 2.1 The literature on inequality and political engagement

A large body of the literature argues that inequality reduces citizens' engagement in political activities (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Karakoc 2013; Solt 2008; Verba and Nie 1972). In particular, this strand of the literature argues that people at the bottom of the distribution tend to participate in politics less than people at the top even though the former group should have higher motivations to challenge inequalities (Gelman 2009; Krosnick 1991; Lijphart 1997). Several arguments have been suggested in order to explain these contradictory results. One of the most popular ideas is that political engagement is shaped by individual resources in terms of money, time and (civic) skills (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).<sup>2</sup> Money and time are helpful to contribute to political activities. Civic skills are necessary to make money and time useful for the development of political institutions (*ibid.*). Thus, inequality leads to unequal involvement in politics and therefore to uneven capacity to

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<sup>2</sup> Verba *et al.* (1995) refer to several types of political participation such as voting in elections, working in or contributing money to a campaign, taking part in a protest, etc.

influence the political agenda (Solt 2010). This, in turn, tends to create a vicious circle, according to which less participation influences individual endowments, fuelling economic inequality (Gaventa and Martorano 2016). Inequality may depress political participation through alternative channels. For example, high disparities may reduce motivations for participation among disadvantaged groups (Goodin and Dryzek 1980). The continuous marginalisation may generate the idea that voting (or participating through alternative channels) can actually be futile (Szewczyk 2015) and convince poor citizens to abandon engagement in political activities (Lukes 2005; Pateman 1971; Schattschneider 1960). Consequently, inequality may fuel a sense of powerlessness, contributing to the lack of agency and the 'silent' acceptance of the status quo among some population groups (Gaventa and Martorano 2016). Furthermore, poor people are also less optimistic about their future due to the fact that they have fewer opportunities to appreciate their talents (Appadurai 2004). In this setting, they may believe that economic and social positions achieved by better-off people may not be achieved by them, thus reducing their expectations about the future and any efforts to promote better living conditions (Ray 2006). These psychological processes may contribute to generating inequality traps, in which poor people tend to assume behaviours that reproduce their initial conditions and trap them at the bottom of the income distribution.

A large number of empirical studies confirm these hypotheses, looking at the experience of developed countries and, in particular, the United States. They show that people with low income, occupation status or education background tend to participate less than their counterparts (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995; Gelman 2009; Krosnick 1991; Lijphart 1997; McDill and Ridley 1962; Scott and Acock 1979). Solt (2008) shows, in particular, that inequality negatively influences political engagement among the poorest strata in 23 countries. Anderson and Beramendi (2008) report a negative impact of inequality on electoral participation in a group of advanced economies. The negative impact of inequality on political participation is also confirmed by a number of analyses which use data at the subnational level (Boix 2003; Mahler 2002; Solt 2004). Finally, a number of works investigate the different dimensions of inequality. Campbell (2006), for example, reports that high disparities at different geographical levels in the United States reduce political participation in the form of protests and signing a petition.<sup>3</sup> Krauss (2015) provides an additional interesting result analysing the role of social class in spite of inequality.<sup>4</sup> In particular, he shows that individuals perceived to belong to a low social class tend to engage less in political activities than other groups. Persson (2010) analyses the impact of income and education inequality on political participation using data on more than 40 elections in 25 countries. He shows that inequality in these two dimensions has opposite effects; while economic inequality inhibits participation mainly among the richest deciles, 'educational inequality has a positive effect on those with lowest education, i.e. it increases the probability of participation for those in the lowest stratum' (Persson 2010: 2).

On the other hand, rising or persistently high levels of disparities may also be hypothesised to increase people's participation in political activities. Several contributions in the literature have attempted to explain why inequality may fuel political participation. First, it is possible that economic difficulties increase sense of deprivation (Runciman 1966), which in turn may provide people in the bottom of the distribution with additional motivations to participate in political activities (Filetti 2016). Second, high inequality and rising disparities may increase social tensions, polarising the political debate. This in turn is expected to cause a rise in political interest (Oliver 2001), which is considered one of the most important determinants of political participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba *et al.* 1995). While people may

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, he refers to inequality at national, provincial and metropolitan levels.

<sup>4</sup> Krauss (2013) uses different sources of information. In particular, he has developed four studies. Participants in the first study were students from a large university in the midwestern United States of America (USA). Data in the second, third and fourth study were based on an experiment online developed through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Krauss also uses some secondary data to complete his analysis.

have the same political skills, they pursue different interests, which tend to change according to their economic and social position. For example, low-income families have more incentives to participate and support redistributive policies. By contrast, rich people tend to oppose these policies in order to defend their privileged positions (Szewczyk 2015). As a result, contrasting interests fuel the political motivations of the worse-off and the better-off for increasing their political participation (Persson 2010). Finally, it is possible that high within-group inequality may lead to an increase in political participation when low-income individuals tend to imitate the participatory behaviour of high-income individuals (Giles, Wright and Dantico 1981; Szewczyk 2015).

The idea that inequality increases political participation is also supported by a number of empirical works. For example, Oliver (2001) shows that people living in unequal communities tend to vote and engage in political activities to a greater extent than people living in more equal areas. Campbell (2006) reports that high inequality at the municipal level increases people's economic and time contribution to campaigns, while high disparities at the county level increase the probability of voting in elections. Schroeder (2009) depicts that economic segregation matters when seeking to understand political participation. Galbraith and Hale (2008) confirm that spatial inequality influences voter turnout, using data on the US presidential elections over the period 1992 to 2004.

## **2.2 Perceptions of disparities may matter more than the actual level of inequality in explaining people's engagement in political activities**

Overall, the literature on inequality and political participation provides mixed results at best. While some scholars have shown that inequality boosts people's engagement in political activities, others have demonstrated that disparities may depress political participation.

This section discusses how inequality or rising disparities may influence political participation, reconsidering two strong assumptions implicit in the literature. First, many works assume that people benefit from the same information; but this is not true, because access to information is not the same for all individuals. Second, they assume that people have the same ability to quantify the value of disparities in society; yet this also does not stand, as it is quite evident that people do not have the same set of skills. Indeed, there is a new literature arguing that people's understanding of inequality is based on cognitive elaborations driven by *misperceptions* of the reality (Brunori 2017; Chambers, Swan and Heesacker 2014; Cruces, Perez-Truglia and Tetaz 2013; Fernandez-Albertos and Kuo 2013; Gimpelson and Treisman 2015; Justino and Martorano 2016; Norton and Ariely 2011; Osberg and Smeeding 2006). Therefore, the main hypothesis of this paper is that *perceptions of disparities* matter more than the objective value of inequality in explaining certain motivations, behaviours and, in particular, political participation. Moreover, people may attempt to influence the political agenda by using different political channels. They may increase their participation through conventional channels such as elections and voting. People may also engage through unconventional channels and particularly more vociferous forms of political engagement, such as civil protests, demonstrations or occupying buildings.

The relationship between inequality and political action is also mediated by several complex factors (Dahl 1971). I discuss below potentially relevant mechanisms, which I test in subsequent sections. In particular, I will focus on *expectations, changes in living conditions, and political trust*, which may all influence the connection between inequality and political engagement as well as the channel through which people decide to participate in political activities.

1. *Future expectations.* The basic idea is that individuals may be more tolerant of existing disparities if they believe that their position will improve in the future. According to the famous 'tunnel effect' articulated by Albert Hirschman, an individual stuck in a serious

traffic jam could hope that his turn to move will come soon when the cars in the other lane begin to move (Hirschman and Rothschild 1973). Similarly, people left behind economically may show a high tolerance of rising disparities resulting from rapid economic growth because they expect to benefit from this increasing prosperity in the future (Deaton 2013). As a result, in such a context, greater inequality may not fuel social or political instability (Justino and Martorano 2016).

2. *Changes in living conditions.* Yet, rising inequality may lead to opposite reactions when processes of modernisation and social changes are not able to fill aspirations and expectations in the society (Huntington 2006). In such a setting, economic shocks at household or national level (such as the 2008 financial crisis) may cause increased feelings of failure and disappointment, which in turn would increase people's aversion to inequality. As a result, high or increasing disparities may lead to rising frustration about norms and rules, which in turn motivate people to change the status quo (Melamed and Samman 2013).
3. *Political trust.* The way in which people participate may be influenced by views about political and social institutions. For example, trust in government may facilitate participation through conventional democratic channels. In particular, citizens may be more inclined to respect political rules if political institutions are seen as representative, fair and transparent. In contrast, citizens may reduce their engagement in politics when governments or other political actors are perceived as corrupt, unrepresentative and divisive (Fischer and Torgler 2013; Shapiro 2002). In such a context, protests may be considered as the most effective way of influencing political discussions and the decision-making process (Justino and Martorano 2016).

### 3 Data and empirical strategy

In this section, I test empirically the relationship between perceptions of inequality and political participation. The empirical analysis is based on Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Data are extracted from the Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) III conducted between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 by the EBRD in collaboration with Transparency International and the World Bank. The LiTS III reports information related to different areas, including economic and political participation. The survey is nationally representative and contains data on about 1,500 households per country; the questions were the same in all participating countries, thereby providing harmonised sets of information. I use this survey to estimate the following model:

$$\text{political participation}_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{inequality}_{ij} + \alpha_2 Z_{ij} + \rho_j + u_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  and  $j$  identify individual and country respectively, while  $u_{ij}$  is the idiosyncratic error term. In terms of empirical strategy, I apply an OLS estimator with country fixed effects in order to reduce potential omitted variable biases, while controlling for unobservable factors such as institution quality and macroeconomic conditions, which may influence participation in the political discussion.

To measure political participation through conventional or unconventional channels, I consider two different variables assuming the value 1 if the respondent reported having participated:

1. in the most recent parliamentary elections<sup>5</sup>
2. in a lawful demonstration or thinks he/she might do.

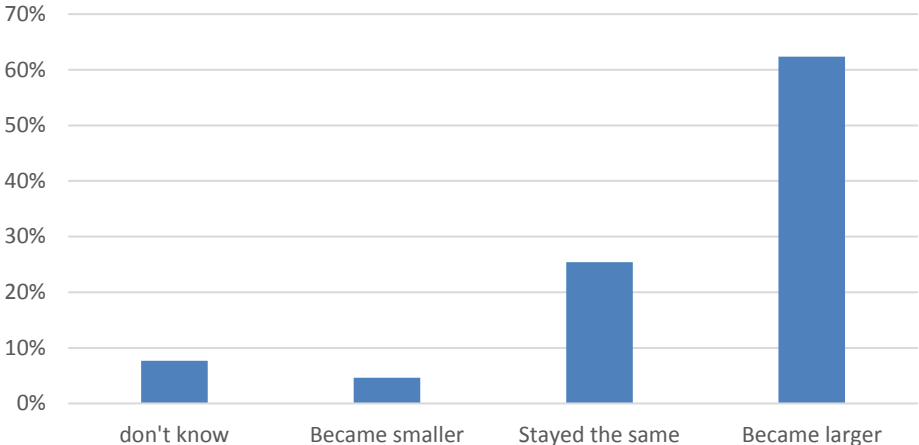
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<sup>5</sup> This paper focuses on parliamentary elections because all these countries are parliamentary republics.

Around 7 out of 10 respondents on average reported having participated in the most recent elections. With regards to protest, about 11 per cent reported having participated in a lawful demonstration while 37 per cent reported that they might do in the future.

As explained above, the main assumption is that people are not able to quantify the recent trend of inequality in their country; these *misperceptions* may be very important to explain political participation. Therefore, I use a subjective measure of the evolution of inequality. People were asked to place their views about the change in the gap between rich and poor in the past four years. They had four answer options: ‘don’t know’; ‘became smaller’; ‘stayed the same’; ‘became larger’. I have recoded this variable into a binary indicator with value 1 if the respondent believed that the gap between rich and poor has become larger, and 0 otherwise. What is interesting to observe is that people feel that disparities have increased even though inequality has decreased or remained stable (Figure A1). On average, 62 per cent of respondents felt that the gap between rich and poor has become larger while only 5 per cent felt that the gap has become smaller (Figure 1). However, there are large differences across countries. For example, in Albania, around 40 per cent of respondents report that the gap between rich and poor has become larger, while in Slovenia the figure was close to 90 per cent (Table A1).

**Figure 3.1 Change in the gap between rich and poor**



Source: LITS III.

In the equation, Z refers to a set of variables introduced to control for factors that may influence political participation. I use the same set of control variables for all the empirical estimations. First, I introduce information on the household income decile to proxy for living conditions. As reported above, the literature provides mixed results about the impact of economic conditions on political participation. On the one hand, economic resources may play a key role for engaging in political activities as postulated by the resource model (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1975). On the other hand, it is possible that financial problems fuel anger and frustration and increase incentives to participate in protests (Sen 2008). Second, I introduce a set of variables to capture the respondents’ demographic characteristics, particularly age, sex and civil status. Finally, I include information on the education of the respondent as well as two dummy variables indicating if he or she is a worker or student. More educated people are expected to be better informed and more involved in political processes than other population groups (Justino and Martorano 2016). Students and workers may be more likely to get involved in political actions thanks to their participation in student movements and labour unions (Valenzuela 2013). Variable definitions and descriptions are reported in Table 3.1 while summary statistics are reported in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.1 Variable definitions and descriptions**

| Variable                         | Description  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Vote for parliament              | 1 if the respondent has participated in the most recent parliamentary elections  |
| Protests                         | 1 if the respondent has participated in a lawful demonstration or think he might do  |
| Perceptions of rising inequality | 1 if the respondent agrees with the statement according to the gap between rich and poor has become larger   |
| Income decile                    | Household income decile  |
| Female                           | Female = 1; male = 0   |
| Age                              | Age  |
| Married                          | 1 if respondent is married   |
| Education                        | class of education: 1 (no degree/no education); 2 (primary education); 3 (lower secondary education); 4 (upper secondary education); 5 (post-secondary non tertiary education); 6 (tertiary education - not university); 7 (Bachelor's degree); 8 (Master or PhD degree) |
| Worker                           | 1 if respondent works  |
| Student                          | 1 if respondent studies  |
| Urban                            | 1 if respondent lives in urban area  |

Source: Author's calculations based on the LiTS III.

**Table 3.2 Descriptive statistics**

| Variable                         | Obs   | Mean  | Std. Dev. | Min | Max |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|-----|-----|
| Vote for parliament              | 11454 | 0.68  | 0.47      | 0   | 1   |
| Protest                          | 12013 | 0.48  | 0.50      | 0   | 1   |
| Perceptions of rising inequality | 12013 | 0.61  | 0.49      | 0   | 1   |
| Income decile                    | 8995  | 5.34  | 2.87      | 1   | 10  |
| Female                           | 12013 | 0.52  | 0.50      | 0   | 1   |
| Age                              | 12013 | 47.85 | 17.36     | 18  | 95  |
| Married                          | 12013 | 0.61  | 0.49      | 0   | 1   |
| Education                        | 12013 | 3.99  | 1.69      | 1   | 8   |
| Worker                           | 12013 | 0.72  | 0.45      | 0   | 1   |
| Student                          | 12013 | 0.04  | 0.20      | 0   | 1   |
| Urban                            | 12013 | 0.53  | 0.50      | 0   | 1   |

Source: Author's calculations based on the LiTS III.

## 4 Empirical results

Table 4.1 reports the results of the regression analysis. On the one hand, perceptions of rising disparities decrease people's participation in parliamentary elections. In particular, the probability to vote is 5 per cent lower for people who believe that the gap between rich and poor has become larger. On the other hand, perceptions of rising disparities increase people's participation in protests. In this case, the probability to take to the street is 5 per cent higher for people who perceive that income disparities have increased during the past years. This latter result is also in line with those reported by Justino and Martorano (2016) for Latin American countries.

Table 4.1 also confirms that political participation is influenced by current economic conditions. People who report higher income levels tend to participate more in parliamentary elections as well as in protests. Looking at the demographic factors, it is possible to observe that older people are more likely to participate in political activities through conventional channels. By contrast, females tend to participate less in protests, while students and people living in urban areas are more inclined to engage in political activities through unconventional channels. Finally, regression results suggest that people with a high probability to participate both in voting elections or in lawful demonstrations are part of working and educated social groups.

**Table 4.1 Determinants of individual participation in voting in parliamentary elections and protests in the Western Balkans, 2016**

|                                  | (1)<br>Vote in parliamentary<br>elections | (2)<br>Participation in<br>protests |
|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Perceptions of rising inequality | -0.050***<br>[0.014]                      | 0.046***<br>[0.014]                 |
| Income decile                    | 0.013***<br>[0.003]                       | 0.015***<br>[0.003]                 |
| Female                           | -0.012<br>[0.013]                         | -0.072***<br>[0.014]                |
| Age                              | 0.005***<br>[0.000]                       | -0.004***<br>[0.000]                |
| Married                          | 0.026*<br>[0.015]                         | -0.017<br>[0.015]                   |
| Education                        | 0.016***<br>[0.004]                       | 0.039***<br>[0.005]                 |
| Worker                           | 0.077***<br>[0.017]                       | 0.104***<br>[0.017]                 |
| Student                          | -0.066<br>[0.043]                         | 0.151***<br>[0.039]                 |
| Urban                            | 0.000<br>[0.014]                          | 0.025*<br>[0.014]                   |
| Constant                         | 0.342***<br>[0.039]                       | 0.517***<br>[0.037]                 |
| Observations                     | 8,700                                     | 8,995                               |
| R-squared                        | 0.074                                     | 0.139                               |

Notes: regression with robust standard errors. Robust standard errors in brackets. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## 5 Robustness tests

In this section, I develop a series of robustness tests to check the validity of the results discussed above by (1) excluding people who do not know about the recent evolution of inequality; and (2) using alternative dependent variables.

1. *Excluding people who do not know about the recent evolution of inequality.* In the baseline estimation, people who report that they do not know about the recent evolution of the gap between rich and poor are included in the computation of the binary indicator measuring perceptions of inequality. The justification was that these people did not refuse to reply to the question; they were only not able to provide a proper evaluation of the evolution of inequality in their countries.

An alternative strategy is to treat these answers as missing values (exclude them from the binary indicator measuring perceptions of inequality). Table 5.1 shows that, using this strategy, the regression results are very similar to the baseline estimations. In particular, perceptions of rising disparities decrease people's participation in parliamentary elections while they increase people's engagement in protests. The only difference is related to the size of the coefficients. According to Table 5.1, the probability to vote is 8 per cent lower for people who report that income disparities have increased during recent years, while the probability to take to the street is 3 per cent higher for the same group. The remaining results are the same for the baseline estimations. The only exception is related to the student coefficient; according to Table 5.1, students are less likely to vote in parliamentary elections.

**Table 5.1 Determinants of political participation in the Western Balkans, 2016 – alternative computation of perceptions of inequality**

|                                  | (1)<br>Vote in parliamentary elections | (2)<br>Participation in protests |
|----------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Perceptions of rising inequality | -0.080***<br>[0.014]                   | 0.030**<br>[0.015]               |
| Income decile                    | 0.014***<br>[0.003]                    | 0.015***<br>[0.003]              |
| Female                           | -0.009<br>[0.013]                      | -0.066***<br>[0.014]             |
| Age                              | 0.005***<br>[0.000]                    | -0.004***<br>[0.000]             |
| Married                          | 0.015<br>[0.015]                       | -0.018<br>[0.015]                |
| Education                        | 0.016***<br>[0.005]                    | 0.041***<br>[0.005]              |
| Worker                           | 0.064***<br>[0.018]                    | 0.105***<br>[0.017]              |
| Student                          | -0.083*<br>[0.045]                     | 0.151***<br>[0.040]              |
| Urban                            | -0.002<br>[0.014]                      | 0.030**<br>[0.014]               |
| Constant                         | 0.381***<br>[0.040]                    | 0.293***<br>[0.042]              |
| Observations                     | 8,153                                  | 8,403                            |
| R-squared                        | 0.076                                  | 0.135                            |

Notes: regression with robust standard errors. Robust standard errors in brackets. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1



2. *Alternative dependent variable.* In this section, I estimate the baseline model using alternative dependent variables that measure political participation. To measure participation through conventional channels, I consider participation in local and presidential elections. In order to test participation through unconventional channels, I consider participation in the form of strikes and signing a petition. All these variables are dichotomous, taking value 1 in case of participation and 0 otherwise.

Table 5.2 reports some interesting results. With regard to conventional channels, perceptions of rising inequality tend to reduce the probability to participate in local elections, but they do not affect participation in presidential elections. Concerning unconventional channels, results are remarkably similar to those for protests reported in the baseline estimation. In particular, the probability to participate in strikes or in signing a petition is 4 per cent higher for people who believe that income disparities have increased during recent years. As can be seen in Table 5.2, these probabilities are close to the probability to take to the street.

**Table 5.2 Determinants of political participation in the Western Balkans, 2016 – alternative dependent variables**

|                              | Vote in<br>parliamentary<br>elections | Vote in<br>local<br>elections | Vote in<br>presidential<br>elections | Participation<br>in protests | Participation<br>in strikes | Signing<br>petition  |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Per. of rising<br>inequality | -0.050***<br>[0.014]                  | -0.030**<br>[0.014]           | -0.011<br>[0.014]                    | 0.046***<br>[0.014]          | 0.042***<br>[0.014]         | 0.043***<br>[0.014]  |
| Income decile                | 0.013***<br>[0.003]                   | 0.005*<br>[0.003]             | 0.007**<br>[0.003]                   | 0.015***<br>[0.003]          | 0.014***<br>[0.003]         | 0.015***<br>[0.003]  |
| Female                       | -0.012<br>[0.013]                     | -0.019<br>[0.013]             | -0.017<br>[0.014]                    | -0.072***<br>[0.014]         | -0.073***<br>[0.014]        | -0.066***<br>[0.014] |
| Age                          | 0.005***<br>[0.000]                   | 0.004***<br>[0.000]           | 0.004***<br>[0.000]                  | -0.004***<br>[0.000]         | -0.005***<br>[0.000]        | -0.005***<br>[0.000] |
| Married                      | 0.026*<br>[0.015]                     | 0.040***<br>[0.015]           | 0.020<br>[0.015]                     | -0.017<br>[0.015]            | -0.007<br>[0.014]           | -0.009<br>[0.014]    |
| Education                    | 0.016***<br>[0.004]                   | 0.022***<br>[0.004]           | 0.010**<br>[0.005]                   | 0.039***<br>[0.005]          | 0.035***<br>[0.005]         | 0.042***<br>[0.005]  |
| Worker                       | 0.077***<br>[0.017]                   | 0.075***<br>[0.017]           | 0.063***<br>[0.018]                  | 0.104***<br>[0.017]          | 0.098***<br>[0.017]         | 0.093***<br>[0.017]  |
| Student                      | -0.066<br>[0.043]                     | -0.070<br>[0.044]             | -0.036<br>[0.045]                    | 0.151***<br>[0.039]          | 0.093**<br>[0.040]          | 0.094**<br>[0.041]   |
| Urban                        | 0.000<br>[0.014]                      | 0.008<br>[0.014]              | 0.029**<br>[0.014]                   | 0.025*<br>[0.014]            | 0.032**<br>[0.014]          | 0.049***<br>[0.014]  |
| Constant                     | 0.342***<br>[0.039]                   | 0.371***<br>[0.039]           | 0.436***<br>[0.041]                  | 0.517***<br>[0.037]          | 0.508***<br>[0.038]         | 0.474***<br>[0.037]  |
| Observations                 | 8,700                                 | 8,756                         | 7,786                                | 8,995                        | 8,995                       | 8,995                |
| R-squared                    | 0.074                                 | 0.066                         | 0.145                                | 0.139                        | 0.133                       | 0.141                |

Notes: regression with robust standard errors. Robust standard errors in brackets. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## 6 Potential mechanisms

In this section, I investigate the conditions under which rising disparities influence participation in voting elections and/or in protests, following the discussion in section 2. The first mechanism I examine is whether the relationship between perceptions of inequality and political participation is mediated by future expectations. As explained above, high expectations about the future increase people's tolerance of inequality. In particular, people do not care (or care less) about current disparities if they believe that their economic and social position will improve in the future. To measure expectations, I compare answers extracted from two questions in which people located themselves on a scale that measures one's position in the wealth distribution today and four years from now. In this way, it is possible to distinguish between three groups: people who believe that their position will worsen (low future expectations); people who believe their position will not change; and people who believe their position will improve (high future expectations). Table 6.1 (columns 1 and 2) shows that people with perceptions of rising inequality and low expectations about the future tend to participate less either through conventional or unconventional channels. By contrast, the interaction term between perceptions of rising inequality and high expectations about future conditions is never statistically significant. This latter result is in line with the tunnel effect hypothesis (Hirschman and Rothschild 1973), showing that people who believe that their economic and social position will improve in the future are more tolerant of current disparities.

The second mechanism I examine is whether the relationship between perceptions of inequality and political participation is mediated by changes in living conditions. The main assumption is that an income shock may increase aversion to inequalities, which in turn could motivate people to mobilise. In order to test this mechanism, I consider two different statements. In the first one, people were asked their views about recent changes in household living conditions – i.e. 'my household lives better nowadays than around four years ago'. Answers could range between 1 ('strongly disagree') and 5 ('strongly agree'). In order to test my assumption, I have recoded this variable into a binary indicator with value 1 if the respondents reported some or a complete disagreement, and 0 otherwise. As can be seen in Table 6.1 (columns 3 and 4), the interaction term is not statistically significant in the case of participation in protests while it is negative and statistically significant in the case of participation in voting elections. Yet, changes at national level may be perceived in a different way from changes at household level, weakening the sense of individual responsibility and feeding collective frustration and anger.

To test this alternative channel, I use information extracted from the following question: 'The economic situation in our country is better today than around four years ago'. As with the previous questions, answers could range between 1 ('strongly disagree') and 5 ('strongly agree') and I have recoded this variable into a binary indicator with value 1 if the respondents reported some or a complete disagreement, and 0 otherwise. Table 6.1 (columns 5 and 6) shows that the coefficient of perceptions of rising inequality is never statistically significant. However, the result is different when we interact this variable with the changes in a country's economic conditions. In particular, the interaction term is negative and statistically significant in the case of parliamentary elections and it is negative and significant in the case of protests. So, tolerance of inequality tends to decrease while people prefer to take to the street if the worsening of economic conditions is understood as a result of forces that go beyond the individual's responsibility.

The third mechanism I examine is whether the relationship between perceptions of inequality and political participation is mediated by the level of corruption in the political system. As explained in section 2, the lack of trust in political institutions and high perceptions of corruption among the political elite may play a key role in political participation. To measure

the perceived level of corruption, I use information extracted from the following question: 'How many of the following people [i.e. president/prime minister and officials in office] do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?' People were asked to place their views on a scale ranging from 1 ('none') to 4 ('all of them'). Also in this case, I have recoded this variable into a binary indicator with value 1 if the respondents reported some perceptions of corruption, and 0 otherwise. Table 6.1 (columns 7 and 8) shows an interesting result. The coefficients referred to perceptions of inequality are not statistically significant. By contrast, the interaction term is negative and statistically significant in the case of voting in parliamentary elections and positive and statistically significant in the case of participation in protests. While perceptions of inequality *per se* might not be sufficient to explain how people engage in politics, the feeling of increasing disparities in a corrupt environment motivates people to mobilise through unconventional channels and reduces their participation in voting elections.

**Table 6.1 Mechanisms**

|  | <i>Future expectations</i>     |                                  | <i>Worsening of household living conditions</i> |                                  | <i>Worsening of country economic conditions</i> |                                  | <i>Corruption</i>              |                                  |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|  | <i>Vote in parl. elections</i> | <i>Participation in protests</i> | <i>Vote in parl. elections</i>                  | <i>Participation in protests</i> | <i>Vote in parl. elections</i>                  | <i>Participation in protests</i> | <i>Vote in parl. elections</i> | <i>Participation in protests</i> |
| Perceptions of rising inequality (pri) | -0.047***<br>[0.016]           | 0.043***<br>[0.016]              | -0.037**<br>[0.015]                             | 0.041**<br>[0.016]               | -0.025<br>[0.017]                               | 0.026<br>[0.018]                 | 0.005<br>[0.017]               | -0.018<br>[0.017]                |
| Income decile                          | 0.013***<br>[0.003]            | 0.015***<br>[0.003]              | 0.012***<br>[0.003]                             | 0.015***<br>[0.003]              | 0.013***<br>[0.003]                             | 0.015***<br>[0.003]              | 0.013***<br>[0.003]            | 0.015***<br>[0.003]              |
| Female                                 | -0.011<br>[0.013]              | -0.071***<br>[0.013]             | -0.012<br>[0.013]                               | -0.072***<br>[0.014]             | -0.012<br>[0.013]                               | -0.072***<br>[0.014]             | -0.011<br>[0.013]              | -0.073***<br>[0.013]             |
| Age                                    | 0.005***<br>[0.000]            | -0.004***<br>[0.000]             | 0.005***<br>[0.000]                             | -0.004***<br>[0.000]             | 0.005***<br>[0.000]                             | -0.004***<br>[0.000]             | 0.005***<br>[0.000]            | -0.004***<br>[0.000]             |
| Married                                | 0.026*<br>[0.015]              | -0.017<br>[0.015]                | 0.026*<br>[0.015]                               | -0.017<br>[0.015]                | 0.026*<br>[0.015]                               | -0.017<br>[0.015]                | 0.029**<br>[0.015]             | -0.021<br>[0.014]                |
| Education                              | 0.016***<br>[0.004]            | 0.040***<br>[0.005]              | 0.016***<br>[0.004]                             | 0.039***<br>[0.005]              | 0.015***<br>[0.004]                             | 0.040***<br>[0.005]              | 0.017***<br>[0.004]            | 0.038***<br>[0.005]              |
| Worker                                 | 0.078***<br>[0.017]            | 0.105***<br>[0.017]              | 0.078***<br>[0.017]                             | 0.104***<br>[0.017]              | 0.078***<br>[0.017]                             | 0.103***<br>[0.017]              | 0.078***<br>[0.017]            | 0.103***<br>[0.016]              |
| Student                                | -0.066<br>[0.043]              | 0.151***<br>[0.039]              | -0.066<br>[0.043]                               | 0.151***<br>[0.039]              | -0.066<br>[0.043]                               | 0.151***<br>[0.039]              | -0.066<br>[0.043]              | 0.151***<br>[0.038]              |
| Urban                                  | 0.000<br>[0.014]               | 0.024*<br>[0.014]                | 0.001<br>[0.014]                                | 0.024*<br>[0.014]                | 0<br>[0.014]                                    | 0.025*<br>[0.014]                | 0.006<br>[0.013]               | 0.018<br>[0.014]                 |
| pri * high future expectations         | 0.013<br>[0.019]               | 0.026<br>[0.019]                 |   |                                  |   |                                  |                                |                                  |
| pri * low future expectations          | -0.049**<br>[0.023]            | -0.043*<br>[0.024]               |   |                                  |   |                                  |                                |                                  |
| pri * worsening hh living conditions   |                                |                                  | -0.030*<br>[0.017]                              | 0.011<br>[0.017]                 |   |                                  |                                |                                  |
| pri * worsening nat. ec. conditions    |                                |                                  |   |                                  | -0.041**<br>[0.017]                             | 0.033*<br>[0.018]                |                                |                                  |
| pri * corruption                       |                                |                                  |   |                                  |   |                                  | -0.098***<br>[0.017]           | 0.115***<br>[0.017]              |
| Constant                               | 0.336***<br>[0.039]            | 0.508***<br>[0.037]              | 0.348***<br>[0.039]                             | 0.515***<br>[0.037]              | 0.346***<br>[0.039]                             | 0.513***<br>[0.037]              | 0.323***<br>[0.039]            | 0.515***<br>[0.037]              |
| Observations                           | 8,700                          | 8,995                            | 8,700   | 8,995                            | 8,700   | 8,995                            | 8,700                          | 8,995                            |
| R-squared                              | 0.076                          | 0.141                            | 0.075   | 0.139                            | 0.076   | 0.14                             | 0.081                          | 0.147                            |

Notes: regression with robust standard errors. Robust standard errors in brackets. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## 7 Conclusions

This paper investigates the role of inequality and, in particular, of perceptions of inequality on people's engagement in political activities. In doing so, it focuses on the Western Balkans region, where many countries have experienced significant political changes and an increase in civil instability in recent years.

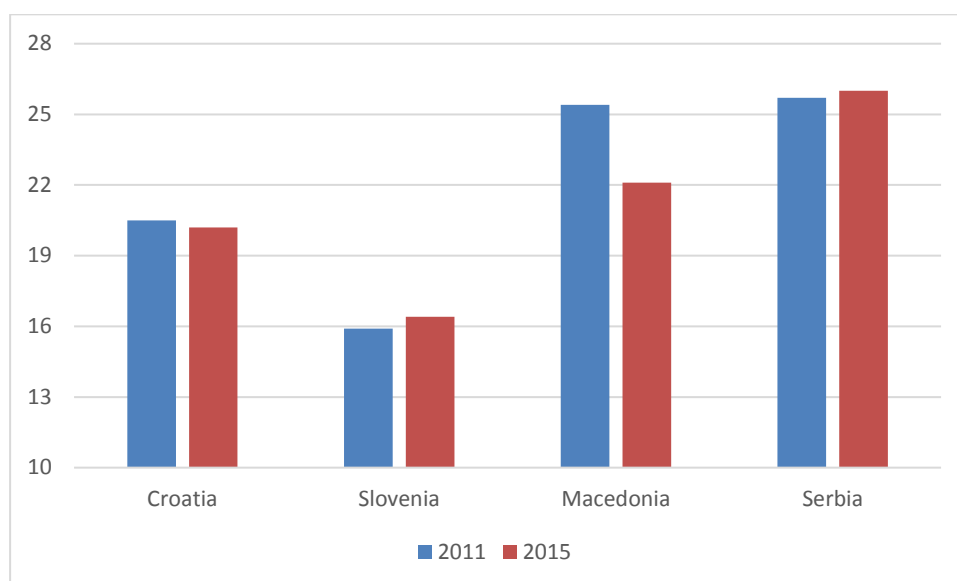
The regression tests confirm that perceptions of rising inequality influence political participation: on the one hand, they decrease people's participation in parliamentary elections; on the other hand, they increase people's participation in protests. In addition, this paper confirms that political participation is influenced by other factors such as current economic, social and demographic factors. In addition, it shows that the determinants of mobilisation through conventional and unconventional channels are very similar. Lastly, the results point out that perceptions of inequality have a stronger effect on alternative forms of political participations such as voting in local elections, participating in strikes and signing a petition.

The analysis also highlights that the relationship between perceptions of inequality and political participation is mediated by key mechanisms. Notably, high expectations about future economic conditions increase people's tolerance of inequality while low expectations tend to increase a sense of powerlessness, contributing to a lack of agency and the 'silent' acceptance of current conditions. Income shocks at national level increase people's aversion to inequality, influencing political activities, while high levels of corruption depress participation through democratic conventional channels and motivate people to take to the street.

These results highlight the need to reduce inequality in order to improve the quality of democracy. However, as shown by the analysis, policymakers should also give serious consideration to people's perceptions and subjective assessments of inequality, as this can aid successful implementation of a set of reforms and promote the process of democratic consolidation. Other democratic institutions may have important roles in such contexts. For example, the existence of parties or movements capable of giving voice to the experiences and views of the most marginalised groups may be crucial in preventing resentment, discharging grievances, and thereby mitigating social and political instability.

# Annexe

**Figure A1 Income share gap between first and tenth decile over the period 2011–2015**



Source: EUROSTAT data. Notes: the initial gap refers to 2011 in the case of Croatia and Slovenia while it refers to 2012 in the case of Macedonia and 2013 in the case of Serbia. The last gap refers to 2015 for all the countries.

**Table A1 Change in the gap between rich and poor by countries**

|                 | Albania | Bosnia and Herz. | Croatia | Kosovo | Macedonia | Montenegro | Serbia | Slovenia | All   |
|-----------------|---------|------------------|---------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|----------|-------|
| Don't know      | 8.13    | 3.17             | 4.79    | 8.52   | 8.83      | 13.72      | 10.44  | 3.95     | 7.68  |
| Became smaller  | 10.91   | 1.38             | 1.4     | 8.11   | 4.21      | 3.33       | 5.96   | 1.61     | 4.61  |
| Stayed the same | 40.51   | 27.87            | 27.5    | 26.5   | 21.93     | 28.21      | 24.43  | 6.36     | 25.38 |
| Became larger   | 40.45   | 67.58            | 66.31   | 56.86  | 65.04     | 54.75      | 59.17  | 88.09    | 62.33 |

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