BALKAN POLITICS

POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE BALKANS, 1991-2024

Edited by

Sevba Abdula, Ali Erken

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Sevba Abdula was born in 1984 in Skopje. In 2008, he graduated in economics at the University of Ankara. He completed his graduate studies at Istanbul University, in the Department of Political Sciences and International Relations on the topic "Religion and Nationalism: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian Nationalism. He completed also is doctorate studies in the Department of Political Sciences and International Relations at University of Marmara on the topic "Power, History and Identity: Narrative of Ottoman and Habsburg Emrpire in the Serbian historiography and history textbooks". His research is focused on the Balkans, nationalism, religion-state relations, history textbooks and Serbian nationalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Sevba ABDULA, Ali ERKEN

Undoubtedly, the Balkans have historically been one of the main and pivotal regions for empires, states, and modern nation-states. The 19th century, marked by national identity constructions and independence movements, alongside the ideological polarization and world wars of the 20th century, has been one of the main arteries of global politics. The post-Cold War era necessitated the rapid transfer and assimilation of perspectives regarding state, society, economy, and the individual from the free world to all parts of the globe. In this context, democratization has become the fundamental pillar for the Balkan nation-states. Although the region entered the 2000s amidst wars, it endeavored to construct democratic politics and culture by aligning its institutional structure and culture with the West. The processes of the European Union and NATO served as the largest umbrellas for this positive atmosphere.

The dissolution of the constitutional monarchy assemblies, which harbored significant experiences prior to 1945, along with the Jacobin and totalitarian communist periods, largely failed to pass this experience on to future generations. Under the dictatorship of the communist party, the participation of the populace in political life was obstructed for 40 years in the Balkans. The second wave of democratization that began after 1991 developed and deepened with various dynamics in many countries, albeit in a fluctuating manner. With the 2000s, influenced by the prevailing positive atmosphere in global politics, this process gained significant momentum in the Balkans, leading to the development of institutional capacity, political culture, state-building, and economic capitalism, thereby facilitating the convergence of modern nation-states with democracy.

In the last 25 years, the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-sectarian, and multilingual structure of the Balkans has intersected and integrated with democratic

culture and political structures, bringing a vibrant and contentious array of political ideologies to the region. This has produced a significant diversity and heterogeneity in a society that was once closed and war-weary, with all segments of society becoming organized in public life. Right, left, conservative, and radical parties have all been able to find representation in the assemblies. This rich and, in some ways, complex de facto situation has posed challenges in terms of governance. In particular, the processes of transferring and monitoring the institutional culture and law of the European Union to the democracies of the region have provided countries with a future perspective and hope; however, as this process has prolonged, it has been observed that the democratic political culture is eroded, taking advantage of the instability of international politics. While countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia have managed to stabilize their democracies as members of the European Union, instances like Bulgaria demonstrate that they sometimes remain distant from dominant parties that would drive the central political agenda within the framework of fragmentation. It is also important to note that in candidate countries for the European Union, fragile structures persist, particularly emphasizing that Bosnia and Herzegovina plays a key role in regional stability.

It is a fact that numerous studies have been written and works published regarding the political parties of this period. Notably, Vera Stojarova has been observed to dominate the literature in this context. Her works, such as "Party Politics in the Western Balkans", "An Overview of Far Right Political Parties in the Balkan Region", and "Political Party Selection", are particularly noteworthy. The recent publications of authors such as Bodo Weber, Fernando Casal Bertoa, Soeren Keil, Fernando Casal Bértoa, Zsolt Enyedi, and Peter Emerson are also valuable for examination.

The book at hand scrutinizes this 35-year period through various variables, centering on political parties, with a team of scholars. It features significant studies on the political life of Bulgaria, Montenegro, Greece, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, focusing on topics such as foreign policy, electoral politics and ideologies, democratization, fragmentation within parties, the far-right, minority parties, the transformation of movements into hegemony, and the governance of parties and the state.

Magdelana Kitanova examines the fragmentation observed alongside the democratization of Balkan political life through party systems and voter participation. The complex interweaving of historical, ethnic, ideological, economic, and religious factors has been shown to affect processes such as party systems, voter behavior, and fragmentation. According to the research, as fragmentation

within parties increases, voter participation decreases. Countries with a high presence of ethnic parties, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, exhibit high fragmentation and medium levels of participation. The study investigates the role of proportional representation systems in promoting multiparty systems in the Balkans by utilizing the ENP index.

The second chapter, authored by Sevba Abdula, focuses on the political history of North Macedonia post-1991, particularly after 2001, covering its elections, electoral districts, and political parties. This chapter outlines the main trajectories of North Macedonia over the past 25 years, highlighting key historical turning points and their causes. While it centers on Macedonian political parties, it also delves deeply into the Albanian bloc.

The third chapter, written by Salih Tzampas, examines the FEP party, which represents the Turkish minority in Greece. This study focuses on the party's political discourse and how it has positioned itself within the national narrative. The issue of Western Thrace can be contextualized as a case with historical, ethnic, and religious motifs between Greece and Turkey. The political participation of Turks remaining in Greece and their claims for rights have led to tensions and openings depending on the level of relations between the two countries. However, Tzampas notes that the FEP party, organized in Greece, is generally perceived as a national threat and defined by mainstream politics around a "resistance identity." This thesis is sought to be supported through the data from the Greek state and media.

In the fourth chapter, authored by Mira Sorovic and Zoran Dabetic, the Democratic Socialist Party in Montenegro is discussed. The origins of a party that dominated politics until the 2020s, the changes in its political orientation, and its decline are examined in detail. According to Sorovic and Dabetic, the democratization of Montenegro and the broader Balkan politics is shaped and transformed by both internal and external factors.

In the fifth chapter, the focus shifts to one of the prominent examples of the far-right emerging in European and Balkan politics. Thomas Lazaridis examines the LAOS party in Greece, emphasizing the historical development of the far-right and significant events in this process. The LAOS party, which serves as a prime example of the interplay between religion and nationalism in the Balkans, is analyzed by Lazaridis through its ideological framework, political cadres, media strategies, and electoral successes.

The sixth chapter, authored by Adnan Mestan, investigates the role of political parties in Bulgaria's democratization process between 1990 and 2007. Centered

around the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the Union of Democratic Forces, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, this study reveals how these three main parties navigated transitional phases and political crises, enabling the country to integrate into a democratic regime and European-Atlantic institutions without succumbing to ethnic conflicts.

Sava Mitrovic's seventh chapter delves into the foreign policy preferences and stances of political parties in Serbia. By providing a detailed framework of the positions held by both ruling and opposition parties on contentious topics such as Kosovo, EU membership, relations with great powers, and military neutrality, Mitrovic outlines the main backbone of Serbia's foreign policy.

Idlir Lika's contribution in the eighth chapter, examines the political development and ideological transformation of the Democratic Socialist Party (DPS) in Montenegro. In his work, Lika analyzes the DPS across four distinct periods, highlighting how the party has shifted from ideological commitment to a more pragmatic stance. He notes that the DPS has excelled by rapidly adapting to international and regional issues and opportunities. Furthermore, Lika argues that this pragmatic characteristic has led to a long-term democracy gap and the establishment of weak institutions.

In the ninth chapter, Arber Thaçi investigates Kosovo, the youngest nation-state and democracy in the Balkans. Centering on the Vetevendosje movement, which has dominated Kosovo's political life in the post-2020 era, Thaçi evaluates the discursive development of this political party through the theoretical lens of Ernesto Laclau. The study meticulously analyzes how an anti-system movement has evolved into a hegemonic actor over time.

The final chapter of this work includes an analysis by Harun Nuhanovic and Amina Hadzic regarding the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nuhanovic and Hadzic analyze how political parties in the country manipulate state institutions, resulting in inadequate governance. They particularly demonstrate how the political structure created by the Dayton Peace Agreement has transformed into an ethnically-based political framework that hinders reforms.

PARTY POLITICS IN THE BALKANS: ANALYSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTY SYSTEMS FRAGMENTATION AND VOTER TURNOUT

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Introduction

Political parties serve as fundamental institutions in democracies today. Their role often is as intermediaries between citizens and the state. Parties mobilise voters, aggregate interests and advocate for civic involvement. Party systems in the Balkans are the backbone and the drivers of political representation. However, the relationship between party systems and civic engagement is not uniform across regions, particularly in countries undergoing profound transformation. As countries are still on the journey of democratic consolidation amidst post-conflict realities, the role of political parties is even more fundamental in this region. Parties' effectiveness, however, is shaped by a wide range of factors including institutions, socio-political conditions, historical legacies.

The Balkan countries stand at the crossroads of historical complexity and political transformation, offering a distinctive context for exploring their party systems dynamics and influence on the democratic prosses in the countries.

The Balkan region is a historically complex and volatile area, having undergone major transformations in the post-conflict realities. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars faced in the region, Balkan countries have experienced challenges in rebuilding societies and establishing functioning democratic systems. These transitions have been shaped by the interplay of historical legacies, ethnic and socio-economic challenges. Despite European integration, the region remains marked by uneven democratic development with variations in the levels of government trust and fluctuating turnout levels.

Importance of Party Systems in Shaping Political Dynamics

The Balkans is home to a diverse array of political parties, many of which are small and often fail to secure significant electoral support. This proliferation of parties, while seemingly indicative of a vibrant democratic process, complicates the political landscape. In the Balkans, party systems have played a pivotal role in shaping politics dynamics, reflecting and reinforcing societal cleavages. The party systems in the Balkans were formed under the influence of various historical events and external factors. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent national liberation movements, many of the Balkan states began to build their own political structures. In the 20th century, especially after World War II, communist parties dominated the region, but after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, democratic parties began to take leading positions.

The evolution of party systems in the Balkans has raised further concerns that citizens involvement in democracy might be at risk, characterised by mix of old ideologies and new political movements. In time of crisis, we might not only witness that a fragmented party system in a country has a significant impact on the electoral outcomes, but does it also influence electoral participation and (de) motivation in citizens to be active agents in the democratic life of their country? Does the fragmentation of party systems influence electoral participation?

What is the relationship between party systems and voter turnout in the context of post-conflict Balkan democracies? Is party system fragmentation constant for specific countries or does it change over time? We are urgently in need of empirical evidence to be able to answer these questions.

Political participation rates reflect the degree to which citizens feel empowered to influence the decision-making process. Talking about Balkan countries, trends in political engagement show valuable insight into the health and inclusiveness of emerging democracies. When we have high levels of political participation,

we could say that there is a functioning democracy where the citizens feel represented and capable to influence change. On the other hand, low rates of political participation suggest dissatisfaction with political structure, institutions, leaders and parties. By analysing political participation in the Balkans in this chapter, we can illuminate how party systems fragmentation fosters or hinders democratic engagement. This chapter analyses parliamentary elections only as presidential elections occur not that often in countries. After in-depth research, it was evident that in presidential elections, candidates are not always associated with a certain political party. In some countries, the president is elected by the parliament, not directly by the people e.g., Albania.

This chapter aims to explore the relationship between party systems and electoral participation. It will shed more light on this relationship by discussing empirical findings from an analysis of voter turnout and a measure of party fragmentation across Balkan countries. In order to present evidence reflecting on the influence of the high/low fragmented party systems on the propensity of individuals to cast a ballot, I explore levels of voter turnout among Balkan countries[1] and analyse these findings in relation to the fragmentation of party systems in each country. The analyses use effective number of parties (ENP) as an accurate measure of fragmentation in a party system as it takes into account the relative vote share or seats that are being held by each political party (Sartori, 1976). Hence, in this chapter, I do not simply classify by multiparty vs two-party systems but analyse the effective number of parties to account for fragmentation in the party system. Consequently, I highlight trends, challenges and expose what are the implications for democracy in the Balkans.

Conceptualising the Relationship Between Party Systems and Political Participation

Party systems are one of the central phenomena studied across social sciences. For decades, scholars have analysed the influence of party configurations on the democratic life. A party system is the structure and dynamics between political parties, it is not simply a collection of parties within a country, including number of parties, ideology and competition (Sartori, 1976). The Balkans are home to a diverse range of political parties, where many are small and often cannot secure significant voter support. This proliferation of parties, while it seems indicative of a vibrant democratic process, has an effect on the political landscape.

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1   The term by most definitions fully encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Romania and Turkey.

Electoral systems and party systems are one of the most studied institutional determinants of voter turnout. Numerous studies reinforce that Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems boost political participation as they make voters feel they are creating a meaningful and direct impact by voting. Existing research highlights the clearer relationship between turnout and PR electoral systems as PR systems enhance voter motivation to cast a ballot (Jackman and Miller, 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Ladner and Milner, 1999; Bowler et al., 2003; Fornos et al., 2004; Milner and Ladner, 2006; Selb, 2009; St-Vincent, 2013). The unconventional wisdom that Proportional Representation systems, reduce the risk of "wasted votes" and create a direct link between individuals' preferences and electoral results, hence creating higher engagement. As per Duverger's law (1954), PR systems create multipartyism, and it is expected that more political parties will participate in the electoral race, and small political parties are not likely to be excluded from that race. This would encourage people to vote as they could have greater choice.

Balkan countries utilise Proportional Representation[2], which tends to foster multiparty systems. However, this model can also lead to political fragmentation, making it challenging to form stable governments. While other factors influencing turnout are explored in this chapter, the consistent use of PR across the Balkan region ensures that analysing electoral systems will not introduce significant variance in electoral participation.

The interplay between party systems and political participation is both direct and mediated by various factors. Fragmentation within party systems, for instance, can result in increased voter choice, potentially leading to higher participation by offering citizens more diverse political options (Powell, 1986). However, excessive fragmentation may also lead to political instability and voter disillusionment, especially in post-conflict societies where citizens may struggle to see tangible benefits from their involvement (Lijphart, 1999). The relationship between the number of political parties and turnout has been debated largely in the political science field. Key influential studies suggest that a higher number of political parties increases turnout as it increases the number of choices available to the voters, making it more likely citizens to feel they can easily find a party that aligns with their ideologies and needs (Blais and Carty, 1990). Citizens

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2   The parliamentary election in May 2023 in Greece was the first one under the simple PR system, which was introduced by SYRIZA in 2016 abolishing the 50 seat bonus. As parties were unable to form a government after the election, a second election took place in June 2023 where it was reverted to a modified version of the reinforced PR system, introduced by the New Democracy government in 2020 (Difford, 2023).

are more likely to find a party or a candidate that represents their interests as there are more options to choose from. In addition, a higher number of political parties creates a higher level of partisanship across individuals. However, it is important to note that even if there is a multi-party system within a country, this does not automatically mean that all political parties represent divergent ideas. Franklin (2004) argued that higher numbers of political parties mobilise the disengaged voters as the likelihood of parties focusing on underrepresented groups is greater in multiparty systems. The predominant argument in the literature is that a higher number of parties increases voter turnout as there are more alternatives to choose from and there are more parties that take part in the process of voter mobilisation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Koopmans and Kriesi, 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais and Massicotte, 2002).

On the other hand, research indicates that too many parties can lead to voter confusion or apathy, resulting in decreased turnout or no significant change. For instance, Stockemer (2017) analysed the effect of the number of parties on electoral turnout and reported that 22 studies showed a positive relationship, 13 showed a negative one, and 59 models revealed that the number of parties in unrelated to electoral turnout. The influential study of Powell (2000) discussed that coalition politics, which are very common in PR highly fragmented party systems, might result in voters feeling disconnected form the decision-making process, contributing to low turnout. Schneider and Schmitter (2004) suggested that coalition governments in fragmented party systems potentially lower the perceived efficiency of votes, leading to voter apathy and low engagement (Tsebelis, 2002; Van der Eijk and Van der Burg, 2004). Another influential study of Jackman (1987) concluded that a highly fragmented party system could lead to lower turnout as when we have smaller parties competing for government, and higher likelihood of a coalition government making it harder for parties to truly represent voters' interests. This would make voters uncertain about their ability to affect the outcome leading to doom abysmal parties actually reducing turnout rates (Geys, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008). Jackman and Miller (1995) suggest that party fragmentation in combination with low electoral competitiveness could reduce voter turnout as the electorate feel their vote would not matter. In addition, the authors' empirical analyses reported that as ENP increases, turnout rates increase as well, however beyond a certain level of fragmentation, the effect of the votes is diluted, which leads to voter apathy.

In the Balkan region, several types of party systems are identified based on Blondel's classification (1968) of party systems, which distinguishes between two-party systems, two-and-a-half-party systems, multiparty systems with a

dominant party and multiparty systems without a dominant party. Countries with multiparty systems tend to form coalition governments, presenting both opportunities for inclusive governance and challenges related to stability and accountability. Bulgaria is an example where there are multiple parties with a diverse ideological orientation, presented with a great challenge to form a stable coalition.

The conventional wisdom suggests that in systems with a higher number of parties, the electorate might be more likely to vote as they see more choices available to them and a greater possibility of their vote impacting the outcomes. This is the case for advanced democracies that have been widely analysed in the literature. However, there is little research on party systems in the Balkans, as mainly the western Balkans have been studied (Stojarova, 2013; Lastro and Bieber, 2013; Arpalier, 2020). Especially, this chapter contributes to the field of political research by analysing how party system fragmentation influences voter turnout in Balkan countries. Hence, this chapter aims to shed light on this debate by empirically analysing data over a period of 10 years in 12 Balkan countries.

Merely counting the number of political parties participating in elections does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics at play within each country. Hence, this chapter uses the effective number of parties (ENP) index as a critical tool for analysing party strength and diversity, setting the stage for deeper exploration. The party systems in this chapter is analysed by the effective number of parties as it presents a comprehensive tool for accommodating party system fragmentation in an accurate way the influential study of Sartori (1976) presented a nuanced approach in exploring and analysing party systems, focusing on the number and size of the political parties within a country. The author emphasised that the effective number of parties is an accurate measure of fragmentation in a party system as it takes into account the relative vote share or seats that are being held by each political party. Hence, in this chapter, I do not simply classify by multiparty vs two-party systems but analyse the effective number of parties to account for fragmentation in the party system. The ENP is a measure (direct and indirect) of how fragmented a party system is in a particular country. The higher the ENP, the more fragmented the party system becomes.

In addition, socio-economic variables have been shown to have an influence on political engagement (Norris, 2002) as the higher the wealth, the higher the turnout, in such wealthier societies are analysed to have more resources to mobilise participation and stable institutions (Teorell et al, 2007). As the relationship between the number of political parties and electoral turnout could depend on the contextual factors within each country, a country-level variable is included

in this chapter's analyses. GDP per capita features in the analysis as an indicator of economic development across countries.

Developing partisanship is more important for new democracies. If a country is a new democracy, it has a younger party system age. A study by LeDuc, Niemi and Norris (2010) found out that there is a positive relationship between the age of the party system and the number of partisans in a country. At the same time, their study reported that feeling closer to a party is less likely to occur in a post-communist country. The situation differs in new democracies where people learn how to participate in politics. In post-communist countries, the democratic experience is new. Therefore, parents may have difficulties and challenges to adapt to the new democratic system. This makes parties, partisanship, and electoral behaviour not necessary based on family and social groups or even social traditions which actually reinforce participation behaviour in advanced democracies (Dalton, 2016). In addition to that, the parties running for elections are newly formed and partisanship is less likely to occur in new democracies. All of these make it difficult for citizens to identify with a particular party, and at the same time to participate in politics in the context of Balkan countries. In addition, the extent of policy differences among parties is a critical consideration. In Eastern Europe, the frequent emergence of new parties, nevertheless, how much are actually their policies different? What is the ideological spectrum of these parties – whether they represent extreme-left or extreme-right or centrist positions? As a result, even though voters are presented with a vast option to choose from, there are not substantive differences among these choices.

Party Systems in the Balkans: Historical Context

The transition from communism to democracy with a multi-party system is a complex process that Balkan countries have undergone not long ago. This transition has shaped the region's contemporary political systems. Before the fall of communism, the majority of Balkan countries have been governed by single-party systems, characterised by strong central authority, suppression of political pluralism, and limited civil liberties. With the collapse of the communist regimes in the late 1980s and 1990s, most of the Balkan countries embarked on a transition towards democratic governance, however a lot of challenges for the process of democratisation existed (Diamond, 1996). On one hand, there was a desire to have more pluralistic political system that offers great representation and inclusiveness. And on the other hand, the democratic transition was hindered by deeply rooted legacies of autocratic governance, weak civil societies and a complete lack of experience with a competitive political process.

The transformation in the Balkans from communism to democracy needed the construction of new political institutions, being able to manage a multiparty system. In many Balkan countries, the lack of prior experience with democratic governance left institutions underdeveloped (Blais and Plach, 1997). Communist rule in the Balkan countries had suppressed the development of a vibrant civil society. Lust-Okar (2005) highlighted that the underdevelopment of a civil society in a post-communist country could lead to a weak and fragmented political landscape where citizens feel disconnected from the democratic processes. Civil society organisations, independent media, and grassroots political participation were all relatively undeveloped, making the institutionalisation of democratic practices more difficult. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Banac (1992) noted that the legacy of authoritarian rule fostered a climate of mistrust, preventing the formation of stable democratic institutions.

While some countries like Slovenia and Croatia made a smoother transition to democracy, other countries like Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, experienced violent conflicts during the process. This was driven by a combination of nationalist aspirations, ethnic tensions, and the collapse of a centralised control (Steinbruner; 1998). In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, ongoing wars hindered significant party competition until the late 1990s. Although Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro did not experience wars, their democratisation processes were severely impacted by challenging circumstances, including the collapse of the Albanian state in 1997, tensions with name dispute with North Macedonia, a low-intensity conflict in 2001 between Macedonians and Albanians (Boduszynski 2010).

Fragmentation of the Political Landscape

When it comes to post-communist countries, a defining feature is the fragmented party systems in the region, which have been analysed in the existing literature and can be contributed to the following several factors. First, some of the Balkan countries are characterised by a large number of small political parties that do not last long and lead to a more fragmented party system (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Serbia). Second, contrasting to the established democracies where the political formations have deep roots in the society, in the Balkans, parties lack deeper organisation and structure (Lewis, 2007). In addition, most parties in the Balkans are unable or not keen to form coalitions, which leads to political instability and frequent election cycles e.g. Bulgaria. Third, research has shown that in post-communist countries with ethnic divisions, parties are often categorised into ethnic lines, contributing to party fragmentation

and affect the political landscapes in Balkan countries (Mueller, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Kostovicova, 2005; Prorokovic, 2008). This is the case, especially for Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic parties dominate the political scene (Party of Democratic Action, Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats). Kovacevic (2012) stated that as parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina are divided into ethnic groups, this prevents the establishment of ideologically-different parties. Fourth, the influence of the EU, Russia or the US also play a role in reinforcing fragmentation. These external actors create division, which makes it even harder to form inclusive and cross-ethnic coalitions.

Although the majority of the existing literature highlights that a higher number of parties leads to higher turnout in elections, there are also studies suggesting a negative relationship between the two. In a highly fragmented party system, the excessive party competition might provoke voter disillusionment, dissatisfaction with coalition formation and lower turnout (Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Kostadinova, 2003). The review of the literature demonstrating both positive and negative relationship between party fragmentation and voter turnout, highlights the complexity of that relationship. Acknowledging and contextualising the unique political dynamics in the Balkan region as countries experienced regime changes and the transition from communist rule to liberal democracy will have potential influences on their political behaviour. This stabilisation process in newly democratised countries takes time and it has effects on citizens' behaviour. Hence, the relationship between party fragmentation and voter turnout in the Balkan region needs to be understood within the context of their transitional political landscapes.

Based on these insights, this chapter analyses further the relationship between party systems fragmentation and voter turnout in the Balkans. I propose to test a number of hypotheses that derive from the previously presented research features. I hypothesise that as the effective number of parties increases, voter turnout decreases in Balkan countries (H1). As the existing literature has reported that economic development is positively related to political participation and the higher the economic development, the higher the turnout is (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Siaroff and Merer, 2002), I hypothesise that higher GDP per capita increases voter turnout (H2).

Data and Methods

This chapter analyses the influence of the effective number of parties (ENP) on voter turnout in Balkan countries. The dependent variable, turnout, is operationalised as a continuous variable of percentage of turnout in parliamentary elections over the last decade (2014-2024). The turnout data for each parliamentary election for the respective country is derived from several sources e.g. IPU, International IDEA, National election commissions, Election Guide[3].

The independent variable, effective number of parties (ENP), measures party fragmentation, as ENP is the most common operationalisation for party fragmentation. The higher the ENP, the more fragmented the party system is, and the lower the ENP, the less fragmented the party system is in a particular country. This chapter uses the Gallagher's dataset on Election Indices (Gallagher, 2024), which features the Effective Number of Parties index at the parliamentary or legislative level, providing systematic data to depict and analyse party system fragmentation[4]. The data was crosschecked with the Comparative Political Data Set, which provides the same information on the ENP (CPDS, 2024)[5], and if there was any difference in the numbers, it was marginal. The indices that Gallagher uses are originally outlined in the influential, most authoritative Laakso and Taagepera's (1969) measures of the effective number of parties. Therefore, ENP is computed based on the Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula:

$$N=1/(\Sigma pi^2)$$

where N is the number of parties and *pi* is the fractional share of the *i*th component. This measure is also an indicator of the strength of parties.

The second independent variable used in this chapter is GDP per capita in order to account for economic development in each country. The chosen indicator of GDP for this chapter is GDP, current prices (Purchasing power parity; billions of international dollars) (International Monetary Fund, 2021). The Balkan region has diverse economies and a continuous variable for GDP shows more detailed

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3   Data for turnout percentage per country: Albania (Komisioni Qendror I Zgjedhjeve, 2024); North Macedonia (State Election Commission of North Macedonia, 2024); Bulgaria (Central Election Commission, 2024); Kosovo (Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve, 2024); Montenegro (ElectionGuide, 2024); Romania (International IDEA, 2024); Serbia (ElectionGuide, 2024); Croatia (ElectionGuide 2024); Greece (Election Guide, 2024); Slovenia (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2024); Bosnia and Herzegovina (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2024); Turkey (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2024).

4   The exact index used in this analysis is "(ii) the effective number of parties at the electoral level (Eff Nv, also termed ENEP)" (Gallagher, 2024).

5   In addition, the CPDS dataset does not feature some of the countries used in this chapter.

state of the economy across countries. The chosen indicator accounts for cost-of-living differences across countries.

Statistical Analyses

This chapter employs multilevel linear regression analyses. Using multilevel modelling ensures that an in-depth analysis is performed and how turnout it affected by the hierarchical nature of the data and context. The random effects account for unobserved heterogeneity which improves the model robustness and reliability.

Table 1. presents a general descriptive analysis of the dependent and independent variables used in the analyses including the minimum and maximum number, mean, and standard deviation.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables*

Variable	Min	Mean	Max	SD
Turnout	33.3	55.5	87.1	13.75
ENP	2.4	4.84	10.68	1.987
GDP	11.49	357.55	3277.51	681.148

Party systems: empirical evidence from Balkan countries[6]

How does the effective number of parties influence voter turnout in the Balkans?

Party Systems in The Balkans: Descriptive Account

The conceptual discussion of previous research emphasised the need for empirical evidence on what influence does a higher number of effective parties have on voter turnout in the Balkan region. On one hand, studies supported a positive relationship between ENP and turnout, mainly in developed democracies; on the other hand, studies have reported an alternative perspective that excessive fragmentation can lead to lower voter turnout due to disillusionment, complexity and coalition instability. Hence, I first present descriptive analysis of the variations of ENP across time and countries, differences in terms of the levels of turnout in Balkan countries, followed by statistical analyses to test out the hypotheses posed in this chapter.

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6   The 2024 Romanian parliamentary election, the 2024 October Bulgarian parliamentary election and the 2014 Serbian parliamentary elections are omitted from the statistical analyses as data is not available on ENP as per Gallagher indexes used in the analysis (Gallagher, 2024).

Table 2 shows Balkan countries' classifications of party systems based on the influential Blondel's categorisation (Blondel, 1968). Out of the 12 Balkan countries analysed, 25% of the countries are classified as multiparty systems without a dominant party, 33% are countries with multiparty systems with a dominant party, 42% are countries with two-and-a-half- party systems.

Table 2. *Party system classification (Blondel's 1968)*

Party system classification[7] (Blondel's 1968)	Countries
Two-and-a-half- party systems	Albania, Romania, Croatia
Multiparty systems with a dominant party	Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey
Multiparty systems without a dominant party	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Greece

Albania, Romania and Croatia are characterised by two main political parties that are dominating the political processes, where a smaller third party also plays a significant role, however it is a secondary role. This suggests a certain degree of political consolidation. As for Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, even though the political system features multiple parties, one party dominates the electorate. This suggest that the dominant party leverages institutional advantages e.g. media control, resources control. In terms of Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Greece and Slovenia, there are multiple parties that are competing for power and no party preserves power. In multiparty systems without a dominant party, we observe instability due to the fragmented parliaments and frequent coalition's inability to form a stable government e.g. Bulgaria.

Figure 1. shows graphically the change in the effective number of parties for each Balkan country across the years (2014-2024; Gallagher, 2024). A high ENP indicates a fragmented party system, where a low ENP reflects on a concentrated party system dominated by few main political parties. When it comes to analysing the Balkan region, its countries usually report high ENP scores reflecting the fragmented political system they belong to (Mueller, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Kostovicova, 2005; Prorokovic, 2008).

Historical legacies, social cleavages and the process of transition to democracy foster the development of multiple political parties that represent different

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7   Two-party-systems is not included in the table as not a single country has a two-party-system.

social groups as ethic-based electoral choices guarantee sustained fragmentation with small shifts over time. This reinforces the argument made by scholars (Mueller, 1992; Lust-Okar, 2005).

As shown in Figure 1, Albania has a two-party system, which is clear from its relatively low ENP score, indicating a concentrated party system dominated by the two main political parties (the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party). Bosnia and Herzegovina's ENP is the highest in the Balkans showing its complex ethically divided political system. The fragmentation of parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects deep societal divisions, especially ethnic, cultural, and economic cleavages. Bosnia and Herzegovina's ENP score is expected and aligns with the arguments reviewed in the literature (Banac, 1992).

The findings demonstrate that Bulgaria shows a steady increase in fragmentation, reflecting the growing number of reformist parties challenging the political elite in the country e.g. the emergence of We Continue the Change, There is such a People, Revival, Velichie etc. Kosovo's ENP peaked during the political shift with strong reformist movements and is declined when the dominant political parties consolidated power again. Serbia and North Macedonia display a lower ENP than most countries, which in Serbia could be explained by the dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party, where opposition fragmentation further depresses ENP score. The political polarisation is repressing the emergence of viable players to the party in power. As per North Macedonia, the ENP scores reflect a moderately concentrated party system with few dominant political parties.

Montenegro's increase in ENP scores in recent years reflects on the weakening of the dominance of the Democratic Party of Socialists and the rise of the new opposition coalitions. Romania's score of ENP reflects on the rise of new political parties challenging the traditional dominant ones. Croatia's ENP shows competition between the two main parties and the emergence of new reformist movements. Greece's ENP scores are related to its economic situation as the economic crisis and austerity measures influenced fragmentation, rising new parties and weakening the influence of traditional parties. As of Greece's 2023 ENP score, the Greece parliamentary election in 2023 was held under a new PR system which encouraged more parties to participate, hence the high ENP score again.

Slovenia shows a vast difference in the ENP score across the parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2022, echoing the consolidation of political movements and removal of smaller parties. Turkey's relatively low ENP score shows the dominance of the Justice and Development Party.

Figure 1. *Effective number of parties for each country (2014-2024)*
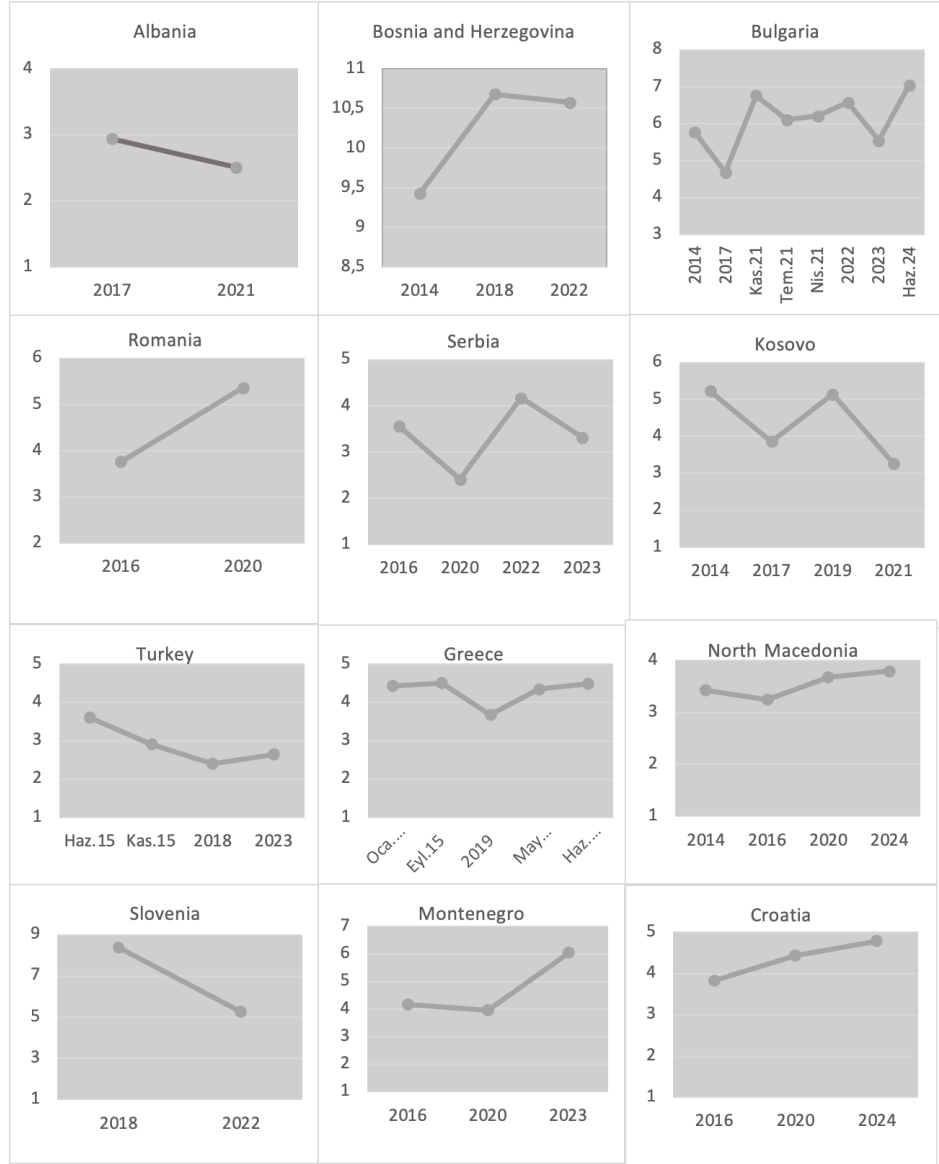
This data reveals that the highest political fragmentation is observed in countries characterised by strong ethnic, regional or inter-government divisions. Social cleavages lead to the emerging multi-party systems, where the proportional representation electoral system provides smaller parties with parliamentary representation. This results in a large number of parties competing for influence, complicating the creation of stable coalitions.

Political Participation in The Balkans: Descriptive Account

Figure 2 graphically present the mean of percentage of voting per country and compares the average levels of turnout across the Balkan countries analysed. It is evident from Figure 2 that turnout varies considerably across different Balkan countries. Turkey has the highest turnout which is not surprising as voting is compulsory in Turkey plus the political culture strongly emphasises on the duty of civic participation. Romania, Bulgaria and Kosovo are among the countries with lowest levels of turnout. The three countries have different historical trajectories and conflict pasts.

Figure 2. *Mean of percentage of voting per country* [8]
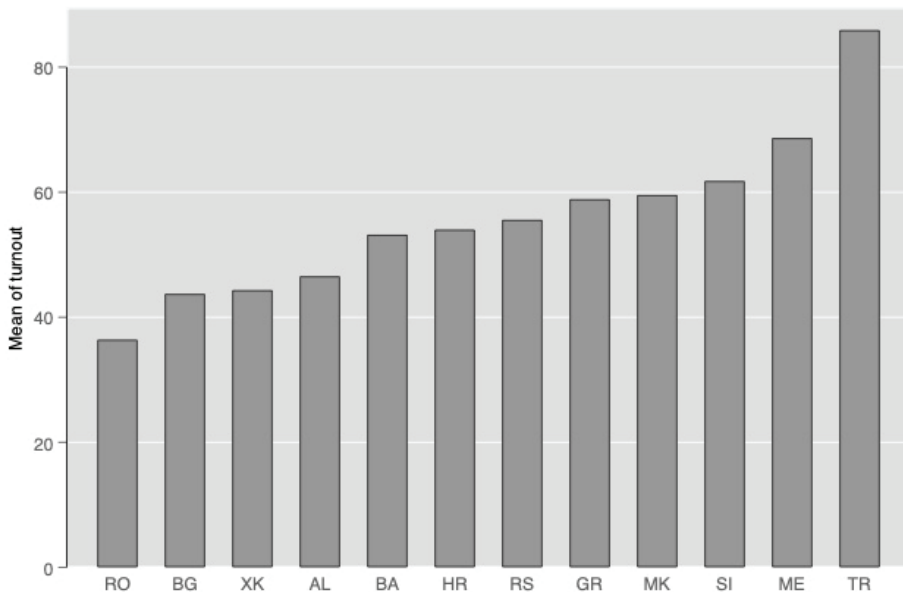
Next, trends in electoral participation across time and countries are shown in Figure 3: voter turnout in parliamentary elections across Balkan countries over the last decade. The turnout in Albania is relatively stable, same as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In terms of Bulgaria, voter turnout peaked at 50% in 2014 and has since then showed a declining trend that could be due to a fragmented political landscape or increased voter apathy due to the frequency

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8   The official country codes are used in the graphs (RO: Romania; BG: Bulgaria; XK: Kosovo; AL: Albania; BA: Bosnia and Herzegovina; RS: Serbia; GR: Greece; MK: North Macedonia; SI: Slovenia; ME: Montenegro; TR: Turkey).

of elections. Among the Balkan countries, Bulgaria is the only country with such a high number of parliamentary elections over the period of 10 years (9 parliamentary elections). The results for Bulgaria reflect the political instability the country has. Especially, in the period of 3 years, the country had 7 parliamentary elections due to the failure of political parties to form a stable coalition. This persistent political instability has led to voter apathy and fatigue, leading to low voter turnout. The voter turnout in the June 2024 parliamentary election was 34.4%, the lowest voter turnout since Bulgaria has become a democratic country, underpinning the voter apathy and disillusionment among citizens. For the case of Bulgaria, corruption in the election process could have a vast role as reported electoral violations in terms of vote-buying exist (Euroactiv, 2024) which further undermines the democratic process.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Romania and Serbia indicate noticeable consistency across elections in the levels of turnout with data showing stable electoral engagement with minor variations across the years. The results for Kosovo indicate growing political mobilisation as turnout rises from 38% in 2014 to 50% in 2021. The formation of new political movements and the appearance of reformist parties have motivated the voters, especially among younger electorate seeking change and anti-corruption measures. Turkey is the Balkan country with the highest voter turnout, reflecting strong electoral engagement, political interest, and strong sense of civic duty among citizens. The fluctuating turnout in Greece varies between elections reflecting the economic crisis in Greece. After a decade of austerity, Greek voters feel like there is no political party that can actually bring change. Montenegro displays strong electoral participation, representing a highly engaged citizens. Future analysis is needed to explore how the structures and functioning of party systems impact voter turnout in the region.

Figure 3. *Voter turnout in parliamentary elections across Balkan countries for the last decade*
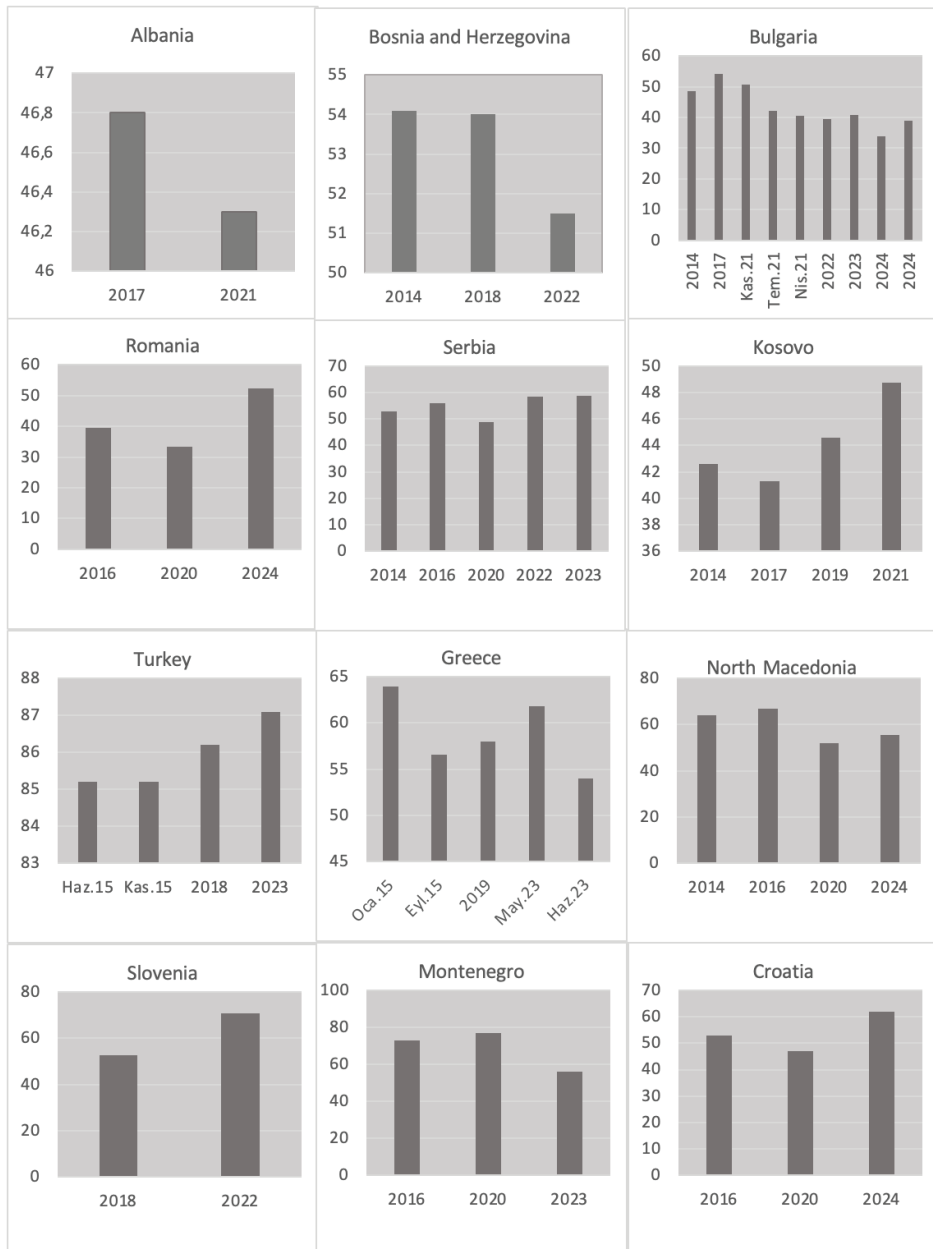
Relationship Between Party Fragmentation and Political Participation in The Balkans: An Explanatory Account

The previous findings showed that there is a huge variation among ENP scores across countries, but also across same countries in different elections. This could be due to the role of ethnic parties, varying levels of political stability over time, and the lack of structure in political parties (Mueller, 1992; Lewis, 2007).

Figure 4. *The relationship between turnout and ENP across the period 2014-2014*
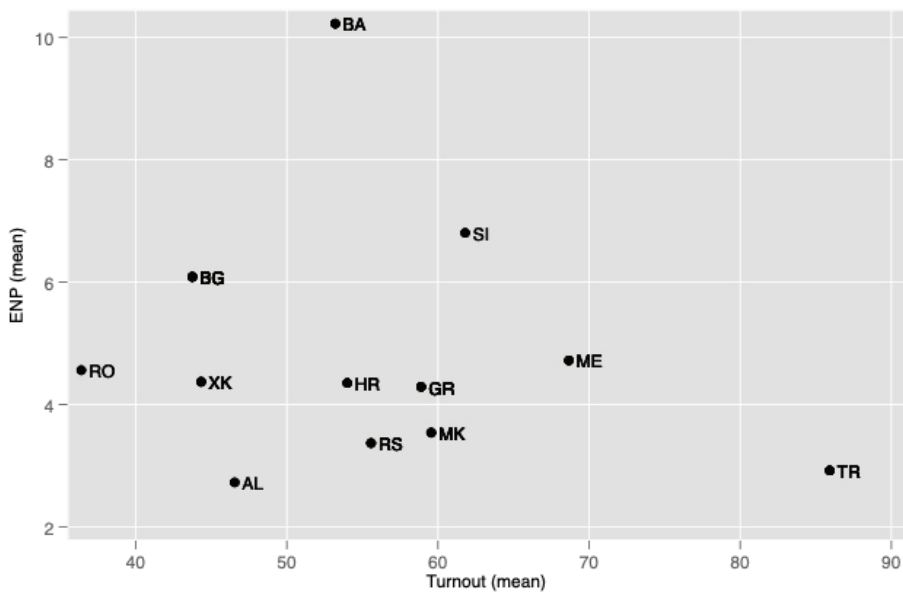
First, Figure 4 presents a descriptively analysis of the relationship between turnout and ENP between the period 2014-2014 in 12 Balkan countries. The x-axis of the graph shows the mean of turnout for each country, and the y-axis shows the mean of ENP for each country. As seen below, the lowest mean of turnout is in Romania where the ENP is also relatively low. This shows a potential positive relationship between ENP and turnout in Romania suggesting that a consolidated party system not necessary motivates the electorate to vote. This result could be a reflection of the limited choices of political alternatives and the dominants parties have failed to gather the interests of the voters, leading to higher apathy and disengagement. This descriptive single-cased result is tested further in this chapter for significance. The country with the highest ENP score has a relatively moderate turnout. The graph shows big variations in the average levels of

turnout and ENP scores across countries. The graph's results indicate a further need for statistical analysis in order to explore the relationship between ENP and turnout in the Balkan countries.

Of particular interest are Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia as ethnic parties are present in those countries, playing significant roles in their political landscapes: Bosnia and Herzegovina with the main political parties representing Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs; North Macedonia with influential parties among the Albanian minority (Democratic Union for Integration; Alliance for Albanians); Kosovo with ethnic politics dominated between Albanians and Serbs (Vetevendosje and Serb List); Montenegro with parties representing Albanians (Albanian Alternative), Bosniak minority (Bosniak Party); Serbia with ethnic minority parties that are influential in specific regions e.g. Albanian parties in the Prasevo Valley. The presence of ethnic parties across countries might ensure representation, however, it can also lead to stagnation, disillusionment, and lower turnout due to the inefficiency of fragmented governance. On one hand, such parties mobilise voters effectively by appealing to ethnic solidarity; on another hand, these parties create societal divisions leading to apathy. The presence of ethnic cleavages in many Balkan countries advances the emergence of parties tailored to specific groups. Such dynamics can vary across parliamentary elections depending on shifts in political alliances and the salience of ethnic/nationalist issues during the given period. These findings are echo the observations made in the literature on the influence of ethnic parties on party fragmentation in the Balkans (Mueller, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Kostovicova, 2005; Prorokovic, 2008).

The descriptive analysis showed differences in ENP scores and levels of electoral engagement across countries and within countries over time. These observations lead to follow-up questions: How does a fragmented party system in a country influences variation in its levels of turnout? Does a higher number of political parties in a country increase or decrease voter turnout? For this purpose, I employ a multilevel linear regression analysis that takes a closer look at the data and explores the hypotheses introduced in this chapter.

Second, Table 3 shows the results of the multilevel linear regression analysis examining the relationship between the effective number of parties and voter turnout across Balkan countries over time.

Table 3. *Results from the multilevel analyses (2014-2025)*

	Model 1	Model 2
ENP	-3.181***	-2.865***
	(0.992)	(0.988)
GDP		0.004
		(0.004)
Log Likelihood	-153.497	-152.980
ICC	0.852	0.814
Number of elections	44	44
Number of countries	12	12

Note: Multilevel model: coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and P value showed with stars: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

The results from Model 1 show a negative relationship between ENP and voter turnout. The ENP coefficient of -3.18 indicates that an increase in the ENP is associated with a decrease in voter turnout. To be more specific, for each one-unit increase in the number of effective parties in a Balkan country, voter turnout decreases by 3.18 percentage points. This result confirms H1 that as the effective number of parties increases, voter turnout decreases in Balkan countries. This result is statistically significant (p=0.001) indicating a robust inverse association between party system fragmentation and participation in parliamentary elections across Balkan countries over a period of 10 years. This result corroborates the work of Jackman (1987) who suggested that a highly fragmented system can lead to lower turnout. The statistically significant result reinforces the argument made by Lijphart (1999) that very high fragmentation might lead to political instability and voter disillusionment.

Another interpretation of the multilevel model is that voter turnout decreases in Balkan countries as the ENP scores increase due to the fact that high ENP leads to frequent, unstable coalitions, which demotivates citizens to vote as suggested in the literature (Jackman, 1987; Lijphart, 1999). As outlined in the literature, these patterns suggest the inability to perceive the efficiency of votes in coalition governments leading to low turnout (Tsebelis, 2002; Van der Eijk and Van der Burg, 2004; Schneider and Schmitter (2004).

This finding emphasises that the Balkan context has a unique political dynamic which challenges the prevailing assumptions by scholars on the dominant

positive relationship between effective number of parties and voter turnout, as reported by numerous studies (Powell, 1986; Blais and Carty, 1990; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Koopmans and Kriesi, 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais and Massicotte, 2002).

The Interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.852 in Model 1 suggests that 85% of the total variance in turnout is explained by country-level differences. The high ICC value justifies the use of a multilevel analysis indicating large between-countries variations that need to be accounted for by random effects. Model 2 in Table 3 reveals that once adding GDP per capita (PPP) in the analysis, the significance of ENP remain the same. For every one-unit increase in the GDP per capita, turnout increases by 0.004 percentage points. This result is not statistically significant (p=0.251). This result shed light on the discussion that once including ENP in the model, GDP in a non-significant predictor of voter turnout, suggesting that ENP is much stronger predictor. For robustness check, I run additional multilevel analysis including only GDP per capita as an independent variable. The results are presented in Model 3, Table 4 and indicate that once excluding ENP from the analysis, GDP becomes a significant predictor of voter turnout. This result is consistent with the existing literature that the wealthier the country, the higher the voter turnout it (Norris, 2002; Teorell et al, 2007).

Table 4. *Robustness check, multilevel linear regression including GDP per capita only*

	Model 3
GDP	0.007**
	(0.003)
Log Likelihood	-156.248
ICC	0.693
Number of elections	44
Number of countries	12

Note: Multilevel model: coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and P value showed with stars: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Finally, in Figure 5, I plot the marginal effect of ENP based on Model 1, Table 3, on voter turnout. Figure 5 graphically presents the results and findings discussed and shows that as ENP decreases, the likelihood of electoral participation among Balkan countries increases. In other words, the more fragmented a party system is, the less likely are its citizens to vote. This finding supports the argument that excessive party fragmentation can dilute the perceived effectiveness

of voting and people fail to see the clear pattern to influencing policy outcomes (Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Kostadinova, 2003; Geys, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008). When there are numerous parties competing for power, this can lead to a feeling of instability as no single party can have a dominant position. This is specifically the case among the Balkan region as many parties complicate the coalition-formation process, which results in unstable government and inability to create policy. Citizens experiencing this, might feel disappointed, resulting in abstaining from voting.

Figure 5. *Marginal effect of ENP on turnou*
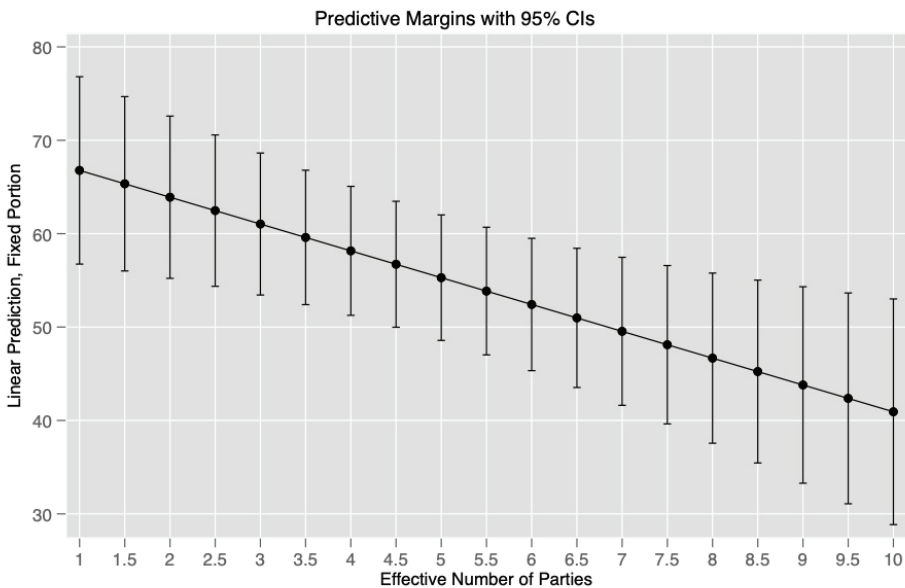
The analyses raise crucial questions about the role of contextual factors in influencing participation and shaping the relationship between party systems and voter turnout. In the Balkans, historical legacies of ethnic conflicts, economic challenges, external influence could play an important role in affecting voter turnout. Fragmentation in the case of the Balkan countries is driven not so much by ideological differences across parties. Party system as a determinant of voter turnout, is related to the political framework that shapes electoral behaviour. Understanding its relationship is essential for developing strategies to strengthen the democratic presentations in Balkan countries.

Conclusion

Historically, the party systems in the Balkan region have been shaped by different historical, ethnic and political factors. The aim of this chapter was to provide an empirical analysis employing quantitative research to investigate how the structure and functioning of party systems influence voter turnout, providing new insights into the complex relationship between political institutions and participation in this politically diverse and historically rich region, the Balkans.

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter shows strong negative relationship between the effective number of parties and voter turnout across Balkan countries. The results imply that as the party system in a country becomes more fragmented, the electoral participation declines. These findings generally confirm what the existing literature has argued that high fragmentation in a country leads to voters feeling disconnected from the decision-making process, leading to voter apathy and low engagement (Powell, 2000; Tsebelis, 2002; Van der Eijk and Van der Burg, 2004). It was expected form the literature review that in a highly fragmented party system, the extreme party competition could result in voter disillusionment, frustration with coalition formation, hence resulting in lower turnout (Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Kostadinova, 2003; Geys, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008).

The findings of this chapter, demonstrating that high fragmentation can demobilise voters, contribute to the understanding of how party systems influence the democratic process in the Balkan region showing vast differences between the Balkans and the rest of the democratic societies across the globe.

Policy Implications and Future Research

The continued fragmentation of party systems in the Balkans echoes not only historical and social divisions but also the difficulties inherent in transforming authoritarian regimes into functioning democracies. To move forward, the Balkans will need to strengthen democratic institutions, reduce ethnic divisions in political competition, and encourage cross-party cooperation, a process that will likely require both internal reform and external support.

The result from the empirical analysis, reporting the clear negative relationship between party fragmentation and electoral participation, emphasises the potential challenges of fragmented political systems in engaging the electorate, highlighting the importance for discussion on electoral reforms or political stability strategies across Balkan governments. Political institutions should promote

mechanisms that reward stable coalitions among parties e.g. the funding towards party in parliaments could be allocated in proportion to the ability of parties to work collaboratively to deliver results.

As populist movements rise in the Balkan region, future research could investigate the long-term effects on voter turnout, voter trust and party systems, by identifying patterns leading potentially to destabilising trends.

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DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS AND CONTRADICTIONS: POLITICAL PARTIES, TRANSFORMATIONS AND ATTITUDES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Introduction:
Political Life and Trends in North Macedonia

Since its establishment as an independent state, North Macedonia has faced four fundamental issues arising from its multi-ethnic and multi-religious structure. The presence of various social groups and their ascendance to power have shaped the country's internal and external political preferences within this structural context. The heterogeneous nature of the state and society, particularly regarding issues related to the Albanian population; the overlap and disputes between Macedonian and Bulgarian identities; the international uproar generated by the assertion of Macedonian identity rooted in Ancient Greece by Greece; and the refusal of the Serbian Orthodox Church to recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church have all contributed to the country's ongoing concerns about unity and security versus division.

These four issues have resulted in the inability to stabilize the Macedonian national identity in ethnic, religious, and historical contexts, leading to an incomplete process of "invention" or acceptance by regional states/societies. This process has caused the political fragmentation of Macedonians into nationalist/

conservative and socialist/social democratic blocs, while the involvement of various factions of Albanians in the political arena has often resulted in deep fragmentation. Similarly, these four issues have created obstacles to the country's integration with NATO and the EU, while simultaneously presenting opportunities for major powers such as Russia and China.

The period from North Macedonia's independence in 1991 until the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 is characterized as a time of democratization and constitutionalization (Bértoa & Dane Taleski, 2015:5). However, this period also witnessed the suppression of groups outside the Macedonian population, issues of representation, and the failure to reflect democratic rights and freedoms across all segments of society, leading to internal conflict. Throughout the 1990s, influenced by the Bosnian War and particularly the Kosovo War in 1999, Albanians began to voice their demands for equality in status. The demand for an Albanian University in Tetovo, the flag crisis in Gostivar, and the banking crisis in Albania deeply affected Albanians and contributed to the escalation of armed conflict in 2001. The devastating outcomes of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo prompted the international community to adopt a more diligent approach to the issue, leading to the involvement of EU and US diplomats in the negotiation processes and ultimately resolving the conflict. Throughout 2001, clashes between the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) and Macedonian security forces ended with the acceptance of proposed recommendations by Albanian leader Ali Ahmeti, who subsequently returned to politics. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, which granted many rights to ethnic groups living in the country outside of the Macedonians, played a crucial role in ensuring the internal political integrity and stability of the country through the recognition of democratic rights, equal citizenship, minority rights, and the strengthening of local governance (Ilievski, Z. & D. Taleski, 2009:355-367). From 2001 to 2006, North Macedonia made progress on its path toward EU and NATO integration, successfully addressing the Albanian issue, one of the four fundamental problems it faced structurally during this period.

Even after gaining independence, the country faced numerous challenges and processes of reconstitution. It managed to navigate significant historical ruptures, such as those in 1991, 2001, and 2017, while "somehow operating its democracy" amid international pressures. Although the fault lines of fragmentation in national, historical, and religious identity continue to exist, significant repairs have also been made. Issues that have persisted for over 30 years, such as the Macedonian-Albanian, Macedonia-Greece, Macedonian Orthodox Church-Serbian Orthodox Church, NATO membership, and EU negotiation processes, have

largely been resolved, achieving a degree of balance, except for the Macedonian-Bulgarian issue.

As a natural consequence of all these processes and the country's heterogeneous structure, it is possible to identify three distinct ideologies, dominant parties, or regime visions in the political landscape. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Macedonian National Democratic Union (VMRO-DPMNE) has established a vision of North Macedonia centered on conservative-nationalist Macedonians, particularly designating the periods before 2000 and from 2008 to 2016 as foundational eras. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which unites social democrats, has emphasized common citizenship, social justice, and EU processes, asserting that the period from 2017 to 2023 represents their golden age. The Democratic Union for Integration (BDI), one of the most significant anchors of the regime established after 2001, has played a crucial role in framing Albanian identity as the second element of the state, serving as the flagship of Albanian nationalism and secularism. As a party with a founding leader from the 2001 internal conflict, the BDI continuously positioned itself as a representative of Albanian rights and representation, equal citizenship, and secular nationalism, and as a significant representative of the Western bloc. Over the last 20 years, North Macedonian politics has defined the boundaries of political struggle by producing these three foundational traditions and visions. As these three political traditions have approached the center of politics, they have attained power. Although the VMRO period from 2008 to 2016 shifted toward authoritarianism and extreme nationalism in its second term, it managed to secure power by forming ideological, ethnic, and political alliances. In the sociology of Macedonia, where Macedonian and Albanian nationalism serve as the main axis, the Social Democrats were able to seize and maintain power during the 2017-2023 period only by including a portion of Albanians, Turks, Roma, Bosniaks, and Serbs in their coalition. As these three foundational parties and their political agendas drifted away from central political issues such as human rights, the rule of law, common citizenship, accountability, effective bureaucracy, economic development, and equitable income distribution, voters also tended to distance themselves from them. It is also possible to add the "Albanian opposition bloc" to these three foundational parties and the regime. Particularly since 2016, the Albanian opposition, which consisted of multiple parties and later fragmented into several others, has operated within the framework of the BDI party. This opposition, which has loudly developed its critique based on political, legal, and economic corruption and decay, has been part of all governments from 2001 to 2023 (excluding 2008). Although the opposition reached 120,000 votes in 2016

and 95,000 votes in 2020, the BDI's relationships within the regime and on the international stage, its agility, and its expertise in tactics that would divide the opposition bloc and in electoral politics enabled it to overcome these challenges consistently. However, in the 2024 parliamentary elections, although the BDI established a broad coalition and reached 137,000 votes, the opposition, united under the name VLEN, managed to become a partner in the government with 107,000 votes, thus successfully sidelining the BDI's more than 20-year-long rule (Parlamentarni Izbori, 2020). In summary, this section focuses on the historical process of political periodization in North Macedonia. This periodization relates to the fundamental dynamics of political life, the trajectories of political parties, the framework of power and opposition, political ideologies, and the parliamentary election results and electoral districts of the selected periods.

Voter Behavior, Election Results, and Patterns

The political, historical, and sociological framework of North Macedonia has had a direct impact on the political system, parties, and government formation processes. The political crisis of 2001, which escalated into internal conflict, led to a significant rupture and transformation in the country's political landscape. In this context, the structure of elections held since 2002 has been shaped accordingly. Following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, the general elections of 2002 marked the transition to an electoral system based on proportional representation, using the D'Hondt method for the allocation of votes. This system divides the country into six electoral districts, with each district electing 20 members of parliament. Furthermore, the inclusion of Albanian parties in every government has become a de facto necessity for political stability and ethnic representation (Dardan, 2016:9).

Between 1991 and 2024, North Macedonia has conducted a total of 11 parliamentary elections. In terms of the country's political history, the three elections prior to 2001 and the eight parliamentary elections held after 2001 represent significant milestones. It is possible to assert that the dates of elections and voter behavior are centered around the identity politics of the country. Voter turnout and the nationalist votes in the 3rd and 4th electoral districts, along with the approach to the Social Democratic Party (SDSM) in the 1st and 2nd districts, significantly influence election outcomes. Additionally, approximately 300,000 mobile voters have been observed to affect election decisions. These mobile voters tend to position themselves based on the political agenda of the relevant period, casting votes for social democrats in cases of increasing nationalism, authoritarianism, and corruption, or for nationalist or smaller parties when the

Makedonian identity is perceived to be under threat. It is also essential to note that issues related to the European Union, NATO, and relationships with Russia, as well as international relations with Greece, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Serbia, play a significant role in the electoral politics of the country.

When we examine the elections from 2001 to 2024 in broad terms, it is evident that the nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE has won elections and formed strong governments in years when it surpassed 400,000 votes. With the exception of the 2002 elections, the SDSM has managed to seize power through coalitions in the 2016 and 2020 elections, receiving votes close to those of VMRO-DPMNE. In the Albanian bloc, it is noteworthy that the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI), which transitioned from an armed organization to a political entity after the 2001 crisis, has emerged as the leading party in all elections except for 2016, consistently receiving between 120,000 and 150,000 votes. Although the Albanian opposition parties received more votes than BDI in the 2016 elections, they were unable to participate in the government; however, in the 2024 elections, they managed to become coalition partners with VMRO-DPMNE despite receiving fewer votes than BDI, thus sending BDI into opposition for the first time.

Given that the country is divided into six electoral districts, it is important to evaluate the election results while considering the strong political positions of each district. In the first electoral district, which includes Skopje and its surroundings, an analysis of the eight parliamentary elections held between 2002 and 2024 reveals that VMRO-DPMNE's votes have ranged between 50,000 and 80,000, with an average of approximately 70,000 votes. In contrast, the SDSM's votes have shown significant volatility, ranging from 27,000 to 100,000. During its periods in power, the SDSM has approached 100,000 votes, yet in the 2024 elections, it experienced a substantial defeat, falling below 30,000 votes. Voters in this district have shown a tendency to punish the social democratic party. In the case of Albanian parties, achieving over 20,000 votes in this district is a crucial threshold; surpassing this threshold provides a significant advantage. The opposition has outperformed BDI in the 2016 and 2024 elections. In the second electoral district, the clear dominance of VMRO-DPMNE has emerged, as the party has maintained superiority over SDSM in all elections except for the 2002 election. The BDI has also solidified its position as the leading party in this electoral district throughout all elections from 2002 to 2024.

The 3rd and 4th electoral districts, along with the regions of Štip, Kumanovo, Strumica, Prilep, Kavadarci, and Bitola, are critical in determining the outcomes of elections in North Macedonia and the formation of the new government. Except for the 2002 elections, the primary question in these districts has been the

margin of votes between the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM parties. VMRO-DPMNE has consistently emerged as the leading party in North Macedonia when it secures approximately 100,000 votes or more in any given election, thus enabling the party to establish a robust government. The results of the elections in 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2024 have reaffirmed its status as the dominant party. Due to the sociological dynamics of North Macedonia, Albanian parties have found it challenging to establish a significant presence in the 3rd and 4th electoral districts. In the 5th electoral district, the votes for VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM have shown a close trajectory, with the elections of 2024, 2014, and 2008 indicating that VMRO-DPMNE's votes have doubled those of SDSM during these periods, which correspond to times when VMRO-DPMNE established strong governments. In this district, the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) has emerged victorious by securing the highest number of votes in all elections, except for the 2016 elections.

The 6th electoral district is characterized by a predominantly Albanian population. While SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE have received similar levels of support, SDSM achieved a significant advantage in 2002. In the 2016 and 2020 elections, SDSM was only able to level the playing field and regain power, while in all other elections, VMRO-DPMNE garnered a higher number of votes. This pattern illustrates the complexities and shifting dynamics within North Macedonia's electoral landscape, where ethnic and party affiliations play a crucial role in determining political outcomes.(Parlamentarni Izbori, 2012; Parlamentarni Izbori, 2020; Parlamentarni Izbori, 2024; Dardan, 2016:9-20)

Macedonian Political Parties, Hegemony, and Ideologies

Nationalist, Security-oriented, and Authoritarian Political Understanding: VMRO, 2006-2016, 2024

VMRO-DPMNE, also known as the Macedonian Internal Revolutionary Organization-Macedonian National Democratic Union, has historically been one of the most significant political institutions in Macedonia. With its conservative-nationalist discourse and policies centered around Macedonian identity, it shaped the political history of Macedonia between 2006 and 2016. The internal political repercussions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement led to the country's subjugation to Macedonian nationalist party rule during this period. Between 2006 and 2011, the party initially prioritized the economy and development, but later shifted

towards identity politics with the Skopje 2014 project, adopting a security-oriented and authoritarian stance (Aliu, 2023). The opposition responded vehemently by boycotting the parliament. The party can be characterized as the dominant party in Macedonia, having received 32% of the vote in 2006, 48% in 2008, 39% in 2011, 42% in 2014, 38% in 2016, 34% in 2020, and 44% in 2024. It particularly transformed the rural areas of Eastern and Southeastern North Macedonia into its electoral base, achieving victories in elections. During periods when its vote share fell below 40%, it raised the level of nationalist discourse and policies, reaching a 45% share in elections.

The government's post-2011 policy attempts to base Macedonian identity on Ancient Greece and Alexander the Great, which became evident through the Skopje 2014 project, exemplified VMRO-DPMNE's divisive, exclusionary, and othering policies. The identity policies aimed at separating ethnic Macedonians, backed by VMRO-DPMNE nationalists, from their Slavic identity in an attempt to establish continuity with the ancient Macedonians of Alexander the Great's era inflamed chauvinism among radical Macedonians, while also leading to polarization among ethnic groups within the country (Gjuzelov-Ivanovska, 2021:141).

On the other hand, scandalous incidents such as the Monstrum case (2012) and the Kumanovo events (2015)—which have been loudly claimed to have been orchestrated by the government—produced a discourse and policy associating the Albanian population with security-oriented measures. The period from 2011 to 2015 saw VMRO consolidating its power in both domestic and foreign policy, creating a governing profile that securitized other identities while placing Macedonian identity at its center in the pursuit of NATO membership. In other words, it escalated the Albanian issue in domestic politics while adopting a foreign policy that increased tensions with Greece and brought it closer to the Russia-Serbia axis (Abdula, 2017: 3).

Although VMRO-DPMNE portrayed itself as the dominant party between 2006 and 2016, it faced significant opposition from the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) during its second five-year term. The political crisis that began in 2011 and intensified in 2015 was evidenced in the 2016 parliamentary and 2017 local elections, showing that both VMRO-DPMNE and the BDI parties lost their standing among Macedonian and Albanian voters. The processes of statehood, authoritarianism, corruption, arrogance, and the shift of the opposition outside of parliament are challenges faced by long-standing ruling parties. The situation that crystallized in the 2017 local elections indicated that voters in Macedonia had distanced themselves to a certain extent from the VMRO-DPMNE party, leading to a transition of power to the social democrats.

The period of constitutional changes from 2017 to 2023 resulted in a significant perception among the Macedonian populace that the unity and integrity of the state and national identity had severely eroded. Despite all the pressures from nationalists, various factors, such as the name change resulting from constitutional amendments, negotiations with Bulgaria over Macedonian identity, and the unprecedented allocation of the positions of Speaker of the Parliament and Prime Minister to Albanians, were reflected in the polls ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

In the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, VMRO-DPMNE emerged victorious, securing both the presidency and a significant power with 58 parliamentary seats, which would largely shape the country for the next decade. The decisions made by SDSM during the 2017-2023 period, which were pivotal in Macedonian history, the leadership crisis within SDSM, the economic challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, corruption, doubts and rumors regarding the rule of law, and the prominence of Albanian identity in public life to a level that unsettled Macedonians created a fertile ground for VMRO-DPMNE. Consequently, Macedonian voters opted to punish SDSM.

VMRO-DPMNE achieved a significant victory in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Compared to the 2016 election results, the party increased its votes in all electoral districts except for the 6th district, paving the way for a new era in Macedonian politics. VMRO-DPMNE received substantial support from the electorate, with 426,000 votes and 58 parliamentary seats. Additionally, the party's candidate for the 2024 presidential election, Gordana Siljanovski, won with 70% of the vote, totaling 561,000 votes, thereby laying the groundwork for a strong, long-lasting nationalist government in the country's political landscape (Parliamentary Elections, 2024).

Coexistence, Citizenship, and Equality Policies: The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)

Macedonian political life is primarily shaped by the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM parties, which have emerged as two blocks through the alliance of various parties representing Macedonian interests. The ideology of hard nationalism, particularly during the early years of the VMRO-DPMNE government, expanded its national and international legitimacy through economic development narratives. Since 2011, the party has faced criticism for shifting the country's agenda towards identity politics and security policies while claiming that the opposition was constructing a new regime. The increased relationship between the opposition,

led by the social democrats, and the EU and the USA has pushed VMRO-DPMNE towards Russia and Slavic nationalism. Despite undergoing leadership, personnel, and narrative changes after numerous electoral defeats, SDSM has struggled to regain power. The controversial publication of wiretaps belonging to the ruling party in 2015 and support for street protests backed by the Open Society Foundation intensified its opposition stance (Ramet, S., 2017: 287-320).

In the 2016 elections, SDSM incorporated Albanians into its party leadership through citizenship discourse and vision, gaining significant support from Albanian voters by nominating them as candidates. The election of an Albanian as the Speaker of Parliament for the first time and the victory of an Albanian female candidate in Haraçinova, a symbol of the 2001 internal conflict, indicated that SDSM would pursue policies that transcend identity. However, opposing Albanian parties claimed that SDSM viewed this as a temporary tactical maneuver to escape VMRO-DPMNE's rule.

SDSM experienced a significant electoral victory in the 2013 local elections, winning 57 out of 81 municipalities and thereby strengthening its success in the parliamentary elections. The party established a strong advantage over VMRO-DPMNE in regions densely populated by Macedonian voters, particularly in eastern and southeastern Macedonia as well as the Skopje area. Compared to the 2013 municipal council elections, SDSM increased its vote share from 28.1% to 38.6%, gaining approximately 90,000 additional votes. The majority of the votes gained 60% came from municipalities in the Skopje region and surrounding areas (Karpoš, Center, Aerodrom, Gazibaba, Kisela Voda), while 40% came from municipalities in eastern and southeastern Macedonia (Kavadarci, Prilep, Negotino, Shtip, Sveti Nikole) (Abdula, 2017: 2).

The process that began with the opposition's refusal to accept the results of the 2014 parliamentary elections escalated into mass protests in 2015 and 2016, leading to one of the greatest crises in Macedonian political history. The opposition leader, Zoran Zaev, caused a significant public uproar on February 9, 2015, by sharing "real bombshells about Macedonia" derived from wiretaps he received from foreign intelligence services. The exposure of corrupt practices, including bribery and extortion, by various ministers and the intelligence director generated immense backlash from both the opposition and the public. On May 12, as the Interior Minister and other ministers resigned, large-scale protests funded by the Open Society Foundation began in front of the Prime Minister's office. As political relations deteriorated, the resignation of ministers and international pressure led to a political stalemate in the country. Amid this chaos, the EU representative Johannes Hahn mediated an agreement on June 2, known as the

Pržino Agreement, which included provisions for organizing elections on April 24, 2016, the resignation of the current government, the establishment of a caretaker government, media reforms, and the investigation of the coup attempt through wiretaps by a "Special Prosecutor's Office." Although Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski resigned on January 18, 2016, due to difficulties in implementing many of the agreement's provisions, the parliamentary elections were postponed and ultimately took place in December 2016 (Abdula, 2020).

The parliamentary elections held in December 2016 heralded a significant change in Macedonian political life. The ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, faced the prospect of being ousted from power as the Social Democrats (SDSM) promised to develop policies based on coexistence, equal citizenship, and multiculturalism, positioning themselves against ethnic nationalism. Among their pledges was the recognition of Albanian as the second official language. SDSM aimed to usher in a new era in both domestic and foreign policy, believing that they could secure support from Albanian voters.

In the 2016 elections, although VMRO-DPMNE emerged as the leading party, its number of seats dropped from 61 to 51, while SDSM increased its representation from 34 to 49 seats. The failure of VMRO-DPMNE to reach an agreement with the largest Albanian party, BDI, during government formation negotiations worked in favor of SDSM. However, due to President Ivanov's refusal to grant SDSM the authority to form a government—citing concerns over the potential for Albanian to be recognized as an official language and the securitization of the alliance formed by Albanian parties under Tirana's leadership—new crises emerged.

The situation escalated dramatically on April 27, 2017, when Talat Xhaferi was elected as the first Albanian Speaker of Parliament in Macedonia's history. This event provoked a fierce backlash from VMRO-DPMNE's MPs and the public, culminating in protests that resulted in violence against SDSM leaders and the Albanian opposition leader (Abdula, 2020).

These events increased international pressure on VMRO-DPMNE and President Ivanov, leading to the eventual formation of a government coalition around SDSM and BDI. Under the leadership of Zoran Zaev, SDSM quickly shifted its focus towards resolving regional issues with Bulgaria and Greece. Aiming to address the name issue with Greece, Zaev leveraged the momentum gained from the municipal elections held on October 14-29, 2017, where SDSM secured significant victories. This culminated in the signing of an agreement with Greece on June 17, 2018, in Prespa, which stipulated that Macedonia's name would be changed to North Macedonia. The agreement, which required ratification by both countries' parliaments, also included provisions for definitive NATO membership.

Zaev was obligated to take the agreement through a constitutional process via a referendum. On September 30, 2018, citizens were asked whether they accepted the agreement between Macedonia and Greece to facilitate EU and NATO membership. Despite a 91% approval rate, the referendum suffered from a legitimacy issue due to only a 36% voter turnout, largely because VMRO-DPMNE urged a boycott (Abdula, 2020).

While the name change process unfolded, the Special Prosecutor's Office continued to announce decisions regarding investigations into VMRO-DPMNE officials from the previous administration. The former Prime Minister was convicted to two years in prison for the illegal purchase of an armored Mercedes vehicle worth approximately 600,000 euros during his tenure, a conviction upheld by higher courts. This sentencing increased pressure on the party and its MPs just ahead of the parliamentary ratification of the Prespa Agreement. On November 13, 2018, former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski announced via social media that he had sought asylum in Hungary due to death threats, further complicating the situation.

On January 10, 2019, the Parliament passed constitutional changes, including the implementation of the Prespa Agreement and the recognition of Albanian as an official language, achieving the required two-thirds majority through negotiations with several VMRO-DPMNE MPs involved in dubious activities.

The Prespa Agreement was officially enacted on February 12, 2019, despite President Ivanov's opposition. A significant milestone in the political transformation of Macedonia had been reached. The presidential elections held from April 21-05 saw the election of Stevo Pendarovski, supported by SDSM, Albanian parties, and the international community, marking the closure of an era. The country embarked on a path that emphasized two official languages, demanded equal citizenship, resolved the naming dispute with Greece, and anticipated NATO membership to be declared by the end of 2019. However, the political improvements were not matched by corresponding economic advancements, and the EU's failure to deliver on its promise regarding the negotiation date weakened SDSM's government (Abdula, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of the early parliamentary elections initially scheduled for 2020 until July 15, forcing the country to be governed by a technical government from January onward during both the election and pandemic periods. Discussions regarding the election date, trust in institutions, failures in combating the pandemic, and the significant increase in cases and deaths following the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions directly influenced the electoral process. All research indicated the presence of a

low-participation election and a significant segment of the population (over 35%) that would abstain from voting for various reasons. The majority of the public perceived institutions, the economy, and the legal system as problematic, particularly due to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis (Abdula, 2020).

In the pre-pandemic period, the ruling coalition led by the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) enjoyed a more favorable image due to the political reforms undertaken between 2017 and 2019. The international and regional agreements, domestic political trials, constitutional changes, the election of an Albanian Speaker of Parliament, the official recognition of the Albanian language, and the political transformation resulting from the name change led to NATO membership and the initiation of EU accession negotiations. It was anticipated that the security and internal peace/integrity issues faced over the 30-year history of the Republic would be addressed through alignment with NATO and European culture/ institutional structures. In this context, the current ruling bloc claimed to meet demands for a strong state, legal system, and economy by positioning EU and NATO membership at the center of their future perspective, while the opposition bloc, referencing the pandemic, criticized the sluggish and untrustworthy state, corruption, and failed economic policies to solicit votes from the electorate.

Regarding the parliamentary elections, participation in the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local elections was affected by COVID-19, resulting in turnout around 50% and valid votes dropping to approximately 900,000. The implications of whether voters would go to the polls played a decisive role in the outcomes. For the 2024 parliamentary elections, doubts arose over the effectiveness of the SDSM's election strategy, which was built on the principles of shared citizenship, reforms, and the EU vision, emphasizing that these values should not be jeopardized between 2017 and 2023. Additionally, it was evident that the leadership vacuum created by the resignation of Zoran Zaev, the main architect of the SDSM government, following failures in local elections, was not adequately filled by the current Prime Minister and party leader, Dimitar Kovačevski (Abdula, 2024:3).

The "erosion" experienced by the social democratic government concerning national identity, along with economic issues, had a significant impact on Macedonian voters. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a period of severe contraction, borrowing, and inflation. The economy contracted by 6.1% in 2020, and from 2020 to 2023, it recorded an average growth of only 0.25%. While inflation was around 1% during the 2010s, it peaked at 14.2% in 2022. Increases in food and energy prices greatly affected the daily expenses of the populace. Borrowing became one of the most significant issues in the country over the last four years. Public debt reached 60% of GDP, while external debt reached 82% of GDP in 2022,

the highest level in the country's history. Key indicators for a social democratic government, such as income distribution, minimum wage, average salary, and unemployment rates, showed at least some improvement, with no significant regression. The average salary rose to 49,397 denars in 2023, the highest level in the country's history, while the minimum wage reached 20,000 denars (Abdula, 2024:3).

In a global context marked by the rise of far-right and far-left parties, it would be surprising for North Macedonia to remain unaffected. The popularity of Dimitar Apasiev's LEVICA and Maksim Dimitrievski's ZNAM parties has increased. In the 2024 elections, a significant segment of the electorate, which distanced itself from both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM and expressed dissatisfaction with both parties, clearly gravitated towards these new formations. The 2024 elections represented the most challenging contest in the history of the SDSM. In 2024, SDSM experienced a loss of 180,000 votes compared to the 2020 elections and 280,000 votes compared to the 2016 elections. While they secured 49 seats in 2016 and 46 seats in 2020, they managed to obtain only 18 seats with 154,000 votes in 2024. Half of the votes lost in this election went to VMRO-DPMNE, while the other half was distributed between LEVICA and ZNAM (Waters, 2024:147-148).

Albanian Politics: Identity, Integration into the System, and Opposition

The Founding and Dominant Party of Albanians: BDI, 2002-2024

Since the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) has become an indispensable element of political life in Macedonia. In the elections of 2024, BDI received 14.1% of the votes, following 11% in 2020, 7.5% in 2016, 14.2% in 2014, 10.24% in 2011, 12.8% in 2008, and 12.1% in 2006, thus institutionalizing itself as the central party for Albanians over a span of 23 years. Although it has a left-leaning political program, it has transformed into a mass party that attracts votes from nationalistic, secular, conservative, educated, urban, and rural Albanian voters. The major factors triggering this transformation include its militaristic past, its position as a founding party in the Republic of North Macedonia post-2002, and the deep loyalty felt by the tens of thousands of Albanians it has embedded within the bureaucracy. The Albanian electorate, concentrated in Northern and Western Macedonia, has consistently made BDI their first political preference during the 2002-2023 period. However, in 2015, the sharing of surveillance information with the media by the Social Democratic

Union of Macedonia (SDSM) led to a decline in trust towards BDI. Public discussions about corruption in local governments, visible intra-party conflicts, and the party's indifferent stance towards religious sensitivities have raised concerns regarding its status as a mass party. This situation began to reflect in the preferences of Albanian voters during the 2016 parliamentary and 2017 local elections (Abdula, 2017: 2).

Compared to the 2014 parliamentary elections, BDI's vote decreased from 13.71% to 7.28% in 2016 (losing approximately 65,000 votes). Despite forming a pre-election alliance with SDSM, its votes fell from approximately 12.3% to 8.8% in 2017, a decrease of around 41,000 votes compared to the 2013 local elections. While maintaining its position as the leading party among Albanian voters, its share of the Albanian vote decreased by 18% in local elections and by 24% in parliamentary elections. In the Skopje region and Northern Macedonia (Çair, Studeničan, Butel, Kumanovo), BDI lost approximately 17,000 votes, translating to around 35% compared to the 2013 local elections, while in Western and Southwestern Macedonia (Tetovo, Gostivar, Kičevo , Struga), it lost about 24,000 votes, amounting to around 29%.

Although there were significant declines in the proportion of members elected to municipal councils, the pre-election alliance with SDSM prevented BDI from losing municipalities. While it won the fewest municipalities since its establishment (Plasnitsa, Kičevo , Čair , Tetovo, Saraj, Teartse, Dolneni, Debrar, Lipkovo, and Struga), it managed to retain municipalities of great importance. In municipalities like Čair, Struga, Tetovo, and Debar, BDI achieved significant victories against the Albanian opposition with the help of SDSM votes, albeit by narrow margins.

The reality that central parties are composed of internal coalitions and accommodate various political inclinations is also easily observable within the BDI party. The fact that ethnic nationalism serves as a common denominator for all political tendencies has triggered Albanian coalition-building through BDI. While factionalism does not arise due to strong leadership, it can be noted that external structures, which have transformed Albanian and religious values into an institutional movement, have created fault lines and fractures within BDI. The BESA Movement has emerged as a primary instrument contributing to BDI's vote loss in the 2016 and 2017 elections by influencing the current BDI electorate with themes of locality, autonomy, and authenticity. The Alliance of Albanians (AA), which combines traditional Albanian values with leadership, has also succeeded in influencing other dissenting groups dissatisfied with BDI but incompatible with BESA. Through a correct reading of the situation, BDI's pre-election alliance

with SDSM has prevented its vote loss from translating into a loss of municipalities; however, the sustainability of this situation will become clearer in future elections. Unless BDI undertakes internal reforms and changes its political discourse and actions, there is a high likelihood that it will transform into a core party of secular ethnic nationalists in the medium term (Abdula, 2017: 3).

In the 2024 elections, the Albanian front is experiencing significant excitement regarding the potential outcomes. The BDI's strategy of forming alliances with Turkish, Romani, and Bosniak parties for the first time is noteworthy, drawing parallels to the electoral success strategies employed by SDSM in 2016 and 2020 through centrist political policies and alliances. Additionally, BDI has made efforts to balance the opposition by bringing in many former opposition leaders and NGO leaders who had previously separated from opposition parties and established new ones. During SDSM's time in power, BDI successfully positioned itself as the most crucial element supporting the government, leading to the historic moment of having an Albanian (Talat Xhaferi) occupy the Speaker of Parliament's chair for the first time in North Macedonia. In 2024, the same individual was selected as the Prime Minister of the technical government, marking a significant achievement in the 30-year political struggle of Albanians. However, despite these successes, accumulated corruption allegations, accusations of nepotism within the state, criticisms of designing the opposition, and internal political struggles within the party have contributed to the formation of the largest opposition bloc among Albanians. With the support of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje from Kosovo, four political parties (the Alliance of Albanians, BESA, Alternativa, and Levizja Demokratike) formed an electoral alliance, creating a structure that will significantly challenge BDI in the first, second, fifth, and sixth electoral districts (Abdula, 2024: 4).

Albanian Opposition: Defeats, Divisions, and Power- PDSH, BESA Movement, Alliance of Albanians, and VLEN

Between 2002 and 2016, the PDSH party, which was central to the opposition, underwent numerous unsuccessful electoral campaigns. While various small parties emerged during this period, they failed to diminish PDSH's role as the primary opposition party. The 2016-2017 elections marked a significant shift, characterized by the emergence of a new opposition language and electorate as the VMRO-DPMNE-BDI governments lost substantial ground. The BESA Movement made a significant impact in these elections, and although the opposition collectively received more votes than BDI, their inability to unite and SDSM's preference for BDI as a government partner led to disappointment within the opposition.

BESA and the Alliance of Albanians managed to convince some of BDI's electorate, with BESA rising to become the second Albanian party competing with BDI around Skopje, while the Alliance of Albanians emerged as the most significant party attracting votes away from BDI in Western and Southwestern Macedonia. This situation was further exacerbated by the significant decline of PDSH, traditionally positioned as an opposition party to BDI, and the National Democratic Renaissance Party (RDK) in the 2016 and 2017 elections, indicating a shift of Albanian voters toward new political avenues.

In the second round of local elections, BESA and the Alliance of Albanians formed an electoral alliance, deciding to support each other under the slogan "the new will defeat the old." However, the expected positive outcomes of this alliance in 12 municipalities were not fully realized, resulting in success only in four municipalities (Gostivar, Vrapchishte , Zhelino , and Bogovinje). One of the primary reasons for this was BDI's ability to counter the pressure from this alliance with Macedonian votes.

In the 2016 elections, the BESA Movement garnered 57,868 votes (4.86%), securing five parliamentary seats. Despite being a new party, the results of the 2016 elections propelled BESA into a significant position. By appealing to young, religious, and reform-minded voters, BESA established a political consciousness and opted to remain in opposition with a firm stance against BDI and VMRO-DPMNE. However, in the 2017 local elections, it lost approximately 12,000 votes, reducing its share to 4.2%. The Alliance of Albanians, positioned as a derivative of PDSH, emerged as a conservative-nationalist party that preserves traditional Albanian values, gradually establishing itself as a strong political movement among Albanian voters, particularly in Western and Southwestern Macedonia. In the 2016 elections, it received 35,212 votes (2.95%) and secured two parliamentary seats, agreeing to become a key partner in the government with SDSM. The incident in which VMRO-DPMNE supporters stormed the parliament and attacked the leader of the Alliance of Albanians increased interest among Albanian voters in the party and its leader, reflecting in the 2017 local elections. In those elections, the party increased its votes by 35%, raising its overall share to 4.5% compared to the 2016 elections, gaining approximately 13,000 additional votes, with 70% of those coming from Western and Southwestern Macedonia, particularly Struga, Gostivar, and Kičevo municipalities. In the Skopje region and Northern Macedonia, it demonstrated the potential to become a significant electoral force by increasing its votes by 56% compared to the 2016 elections (Abdula, 2017: 3).

The BESA Movement viewed the traditionally religious Albanian values, particularly among rural populations and those newly migrated to urban areas, as its

voter base. While it expressed respect for Islamic values, it was cautious about associating with the Islamic thought that has developed since the 19th century, wary of nationalist and anti-Islamic elites.

The seven-year experience from 2015 to 2022 saw BESA face significant challenges alongside its internal conflicts, leading to inevitable disintegration within the movement. This resulted in the emergence of the Alternativa party just four years after its establishment, highlighting the inability to reach consensus on values, management, future perspectives, and threats during its formative stage. Throughout this seven-year period, both parties failed to develop narratives and policies that transcended Albanian conservatism, national secularism, and regionalism, often succumbing to the very three main axes/streams/ideologies they criticized, ultimately finding themselves integrated into the government of the regime they opposed.

Before the 2024 parliamentary elections, a notable figure emerged in Izzet Mexhiti, the former mayor of Çayır, who left BDI after a significant conflict with Artan Grubi, a deputy prime minister and key figure within BDI, to establish the Lëvizja Demokratike party. Alongside BESA Movement leader Bilal Kasami, Alternativa leader Afrim Gashi, and Alliance për Shqiptarët leader Arben Taravari, they formed the VLEN coalition, achieving significant success in the elections. The BDI's goal of becoming a central party, forming electoral alliances with various ethnic groups, led the Albanian opposition under the VLEN banner to conduct their electoral campaign along more nationalist lines. Coupled with VMRO-DPMNE's longstanding rhetoric and stance against the ruling BDI, VLEN secured 107,000 votes, achieving a 10.7% share and 14 parliamentary seats, marking the first time they entered the government and ending BDI's dominance (Waters, 2024: 148-150).

Conclusion

The political structure of North Macedonia is influenced by various variables, including social dynamics, inter-identity struggles, reflections of international politics, the quality of public administration, electoral strategies, and regional differences. Particularly, the political history after 2001 can be analyzed through three dominant ideologies and parties. The strong rule of these ideologies and parties has played a decisive role in shaping the opposition expressed in the streets, deep discussions with neighboring countries, and the relationships with international politics and institutions.

The electoral politics of the country are shaped significantly by the behavior of voters, especially in the first, third, and fourth electoral districts. The preferences of the volatile electorate directly affect the strategies of political parties and determine election outcomes. This section aims to reveal the necessary processes, developments, and pathways to understand the political dynamics of North Macedonia and provides a framework for this complex structure.

In conclusion, the political environment of North Macedonia is characterized by a multi-layered structure that is shaped not only by internal dynamics but also by international relations. In this context, the strategies of political actors and parties evolve in interaction with social change and transformation processes, playing a decisive role in the future of the country.

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CHAPTER III

TALKING 'PACIFIST' BUT HEARING 'ETHNICIST': THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF FEP PARTY IN GREECE[1]

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Introduction

The Western Thrace Turks, a national minority[2] in Greece, face significant challenges arising from the nation-state ideology. Excluded from the 1923 Population Exchange, they avoided the trauma of migration but were nonetheless compelled to preserve their cultural identity in a minority context (Dilaver & Redclift, 2023:

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1   The title of this study is inspired by Kendhammer, B. (2010). 'Talking Ethnic but Hearing Multi-Ethnic: The Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria and Durable Multi-Ethnic in The Midst of Violence.' *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 48(1), 48-71.

2   The debate over whether Western Thrace Turks are a religious minority (as Greece claims) or an ethnic minority (as Türkiye argues) remains unresolved. However, I prefer to use Will Kymlicka's term "national minority" (Kymlicka, 2007). The Treaty of Lausanne defined the minority based on religion rather than ethnicity. Yet, such definitions often reflect the political needs of the time, like the push for homogeneity in Türkiye and Greece, rather than the actual situation. Since the Turkish nation emerged as a continuation of the Ottoman Muslim Millet system (Aktürk, 2009), and because Western Thrace Turks were excluded from the 1923 Population Exchange, I see them as a national minority. Kymlicka's framework identifies three types of minorities: national minorities (groups with nation-like characteristics), ethnic minorities (recent migrant communities), and indigenous peoples (historical local populations). This categorization better reflects the sociological reality of minorities like the Western Thrace Turks.

548). Over the past century, their efforts to maintain their existence have fluctuated, with periods of heightened tension. One such period is the post-Junta Era starting in 1974, including the Junta regime itself, when state oppression towards minorities intensified (Huseyinoglu, 2012: 43).

Prior to this time, Greece had not overtly challenged the ethnic identity of minorities; however, from the 1970s onward, there was a marked shift. The Greek state began denying the ethnic identity of the Western Thrace Turks. For instance, the term 'Turkish' had previously been used in various institutions, but this changed when the Xanthi Turkish Union, a prominent NGO, was forcibly closed due to the inclusion of 'Turkish' in its name (Derin, 2023: 133). This denial of ethnic identity culminated in the imprisonment of Sadık Ahmet, a popular leader of the Western Thrace Turks, for distributing leaflets advocating human rights and using the term 'Turkish' in his speeches (Taşkın, 2014: 261).

The core issue lies in the state's portrayal of Turkish identity as a "national threat," labeling it as "ethnicism," "separatism," and other negative terms. Meanwhile, the minority insists that their claims are rooted in human rights, not separatism. Given this denial and misrepresentation of their identity, it is essential to examine how the FEP Party, established by Sadık Ahmet, constructs its political discourse in response to these state actions.

This study will focus on how the Greek media portrayed the FEP Party's territorial victories in the European Parliament elections as a threat and will analyze qualitative data from interviews with FEP Party members. By exploring their discourse and perspectives, the research will contribute to the fields of political and ethnic sociology, shedding light on the ways minority groups negotiate their identities within a state framework that actively seeks to deny them.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore how the FEP Party's political discourse is framed as ethnicist by Greek state and media narratives, using a phenomenological approach to deeply examine participants' subjective experiences, in other words to "understand of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation" (Moustakas, 2010: 19). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with active FEP Party members, ensuring coverage of themes such as ethnic identity rights, EU regulations, and generational differences, while also allowing participants the flexibility to express their perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2016: 250). News articles about the party were thematically analyzed to contextualize

interview findings within dominant media narratives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the discourse. This approach also serves as a triangulation technique, enhancing the validity of the study by cross-verifying insights from multiple data sources, including conceptual discussions (Creswell, 2013: 202).

Table 1. *Participants list.*

Nickname	Age	Profession	Role	Gender	Education Level
P1	29	Psychologist	Vice President	Male	Bachelor's Degree
P2	28	Electrical-Electronics Engineer	Public Relations and Analysis Unit Head	Male	Bachelor's Degree
P3	65	Politician	Economics Unit Head	Female	Bachelor's Degree
P4	43	Journalist	Candidate for AP Member of Parliament	Male	Bachelor's Degree
P5	52	Politician	Vice President	Male	Bachelor's Degree

Participants were purposively selected to include diverse age, gender, and professional backgrounds, enabling the study to examine generational differences in perceptions of ethnic identity and political participation. A homogeneous sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of participants sharing relevant characteristics for in-depth exploration. In line with phenomenological research, which often employs smaller sample sizes to capture the essence of a shared experience, the study includes 5 participants. This approach is consistent with Dukes' recommendation of studying 3 to 10 subjects as Creswell (2013: 126) refers to and notes that smaller sample sizes, such as 5 participants, are adequate for phenomenological research, further supporting the methodological rigor of this study. In another instance, referring to Polkinghorne, it is mentioned that the number of participants in phenomenological studies can range from 5 to 25, and that data can also be collected from other materials, as we have done in this study with newspaper articles (Creswell, 2013: 61). As the sample was a very homogeneous group, the saturation point was reached early as everyone described the same patterns, except for individual life examples. Interviews lasted 1–2 hours, with an average of 70 minutes. Thematic analysis, supported by MAXQDA 2020 software, was used to analyze both interview and media data. Themes

were derived inductively from participant narratives and deductively from existing literature, revealing interactions between external narratives and personal experiences. It is important to note that, since the interviews were conducted in Turkish, they were translated into English during the analysis phase.

Ethical approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee of Sakarya University on December 6, 2024, under the approval letter E--050.99-0, and informed consent was collected from all participants. Data were anonymized, and care was taken to ensure participants felt comfortable discussing sensitive topics, with the right to withdraw at any time emphasized.

Covering The Minority as A Threat: Framing Ethnic Identity amid Nationalistic Discourses

This study is fundamentally concerned with the field of political sociology, yet it also encompasses elements of ethnic sociology. Consequently, the study will be primarily focused on the concepts and theories pertinent to ethnic sociology. The analysis of the findings will be informed by the extant literature in the field of ethnic sociology. However, prior to delving into the analysis, it is imperative to provide a context for understanding the participants' statements by examining the news coverage in Greek newspapers following the European Parliament elections.

The analysis of media coverage surrounding the European Parliament elections reveals a significant interplay between source outlets and the thematic framing of news related to ethnic minorities. This visualization, created using MAXQDA 2020, highlights the co-occurrence of specific themes and sources, reflecting a broader narrative of exclusion, stereotyping, and nationalistic discourse.

The left side of the visualization maps a variety of Greek media outlets, including both mainstream and regional newspapers, while the right side identifies recurring themes, such as "provocation," "dissatisfaction with the word 'Turkish,'" "threat," and "deep state." These themes are connected through a dense web of associations, which indicates a concerted framing of ethnic minority issues within the context of perceived threats to national unity.

Figure 1. *Code Co-occurrence Model showing FEP Party' coverage in the Greek media after the European Parliament elections (Created in MAXQDA 2020).*
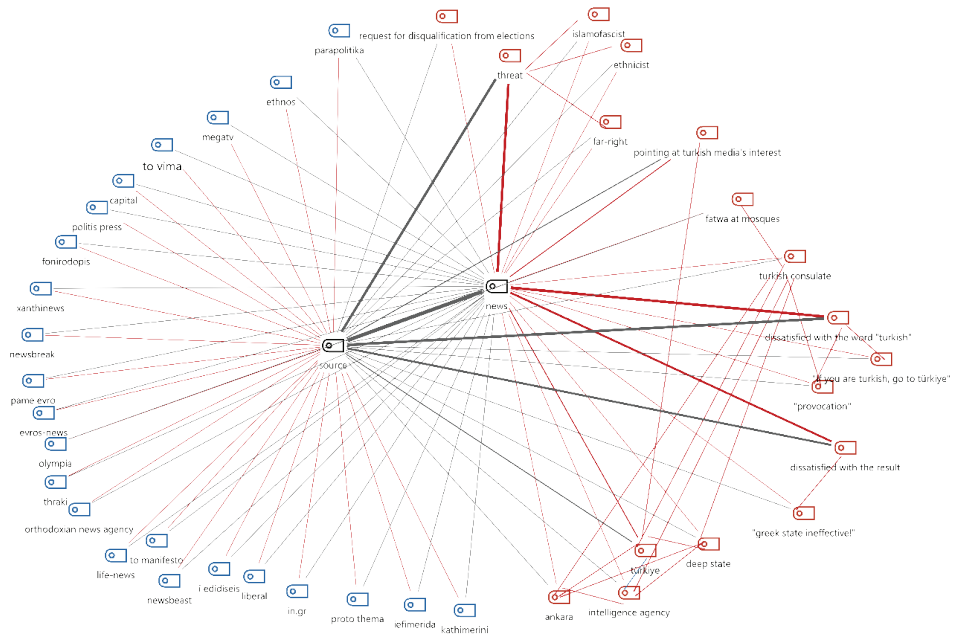
Drawing from this analysis, the findings of interviews with FEP Party members can be anchored in ethnic studies literature to further contextualize the media's framing practices. Concepts such as symbolic boundaries, ethnic resilience, and the politics of recognition are crucial for understanding how the minority perceives and responds to exclusionary narratives. For instance, theories of ethnic boundary-making by scholars such as Andreas Wimmer (2013) provide a lens to examine how members of the minority navigate the imposed dichotomy between their self-identification and the labels constructed by nationalistic discourses.

The recurring theme of "provocation" in media narratives offers an entry point to discuss the concept of "stereotype threat," where minority groups may internalize the prejudices leveled against them, impacting their political participation and civic engagement. In his seminal work, Allport (1954) emphasises the role of social categorisation in the formation of prejudice. As part of this categorisation, individuals often simplify complex social realities in a cognitive sense by categorising others as in-groups and out-groups, Zagefka et al. (2014) also found that when minorities fail to meet majority expectations, majority prejudice against the minority is increased. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, which Wimmer (2013: 4-5) also refers to in constructing his theory which

highlights how dominant groups leverage cultural capital to reinforce existing power dynamics and marginalize dissenting voices.

Moreover, the interviews can illuminate how the minority interprets and counters the securitization of their identity. Borrowing from securitization theory, particularly the works of Ole Wæver et al. (2022), the analysis can explore how framing minority issues as threats legitimizes extraordinary measures that curtail minority rights. The responses of FEP Party members can thus shed light on resistance strategies, such as emphasizing human rights frameworks or leveraging international institutions like the European Union to contest nationalistic narratives.

The interview findings can also contribute to the literature on collective identity formation. By analyzing the minority's reaction to exclusionary discourses, the study can draw on Charles Tilly's (1998) work on durable inequalities to examine how collective action and identity politics emerge in response to systemic marginalization. Furthermore, the generational differences in identity-related demands, as highlighted in the interviews, can be contextualized using intergenerational transmission theories, which explore how historical grievances and cultural heritage shape contemporary identity politics.

At the heart of this discourse lies the concept of "othering," a process by which ethnic minorities are depicted as external to the national identity, perpetuating stereotypes and prejudice. The frequent use of terms like "threat," "Islamofascist," and references to the "Turkish consulate" underscores a securitization of minority issues, framing them within a narrative of national danger. Such framing aligns with theories of scapegoating and exclusion, where minority groups are portrayed as the root causes of broader societal or political insecurities.

Moreover, the framing reflects the dual nature of nationalism in the media. On one hand, it reinforces a collective Greek identity by juxtaposing it against an externalized "Turkish" minority. On the other hand, it mobilizes public opinion by constructing a narrative of victimization and existential threat. This aligns with Benedict Anderson's (2006) notion of "imagined communities," where media acts as a tool for constructing and reinforcing national identity through shared stories and collective anxieties. Nevertheless, the notion of collaborating with a minority community in opposition to an imagined community is intrinsic to the concept of ethnic boundaries, as demonstrated by Wimmer. The acknowledgement of ethnic boundaries necessitates the interrogation of Anderson's theoretical framework (Wimmer, 2013: 4).

The inclusion of themes such as "if you are Turkish, go to Türkiye" and dissatisfaction with the term "Turkish" illustrates how linguistic choices serve as a battleground for identity politics. By rejecting self-identification claims, these discourses not only marginalize the minority community but also delegitimize their cultural and political agency. This reflects broader theories of linguistic domination and symbolic violence, where language becomes a tool of power used to enforce conformity to dominant narratives.

The visualization also exposes the role of media in reproducing far-right ideologies. Terms such as "Islamofascist" and "provocation" are frequently employed to delegitimize minority claims and align them with extremist ideologies. This tactic mirrors strategies of exclusion observed in other nationalist movements, where minority groups are vilified to justify restrictive policies and consolidate majority power.

Furthermore, the framing of the minority as a threat operates within a broader context of European politics, where issues of migration, integration, and identity remain highly contentious. The Greek media's portrayal of the minority intersects with larger discourses of Islamophobia and xenophobia, reflecting a transnational pattern of fear-based politics. The emphasis on "Turkish consulate" and "deep state" narratives not only anchors the minority within a geopolitical framework but also reinforces existing prejudices against Türkiye, leveraging historical tensions for political gain.

In conclusion, the visualization underscores the systemic nature of exclusionary and prejudiced narratives within Greek media. By framing ethnic minorities as a threat, these outlets contribute to a climate of distrust and division, perpetuating stereotypes and hindering meaningful integration. This analysis highlights the urgent need for a critical examination of media practices and their implications for minority rights and social cohesion in Greece and beyond.

Findings

Constructing Ethnic Identity

All participants self-identified as Muslim Turks, with this dual identification emerging within two primary contexts: individual and social identity. On an individual level, participants frequently referenced categories such as family, selfhood, essence, struggle, culture, worship, ritual, and religion when articulating their sense of identity. Notably, the theme of 'struggle' was particularly salient in shaping identity formation. This is exemplified in P5's reflection: *"I particularly*

remember those years of Sadık Ahmet … his political activities, his election, and the years he spent campaigning. At that time, my late father and I would always attend these rallies [and] even form car convoys to participate." Such recollections emphasize the intergenerational transmission of identity, underscored by a primordial attachment rooted in familial and historical experiences. Similarly, P4 offered a comprehensive perspective on identity by stating:

> *"I, as an individual who has adopted Turkish identity along with … Islam, and as someone struggling in Western Thrace, continue to resist all pressures … striving to preserve my essence, my tradition, and my customs. I am committed to passing on my identity to my children and to our community's future."*

This declaration encapsulates a multifaceted identity shaped by struggle, culture, and religion, with a forward-looking commitment to its preservation and intergenerational continuity. Collectively, the participants' narratives demonstrate the primacy of primordial emotions in the articulation of their identities.

Participant P2 articulated a direct connection between identity and the concept of essence, stating:

> *"The Muslim Identity and Turkish identity represent my essence because we live according to Turkish culture. We adopt the lifestyle of a Muslim, our prayers, rituals, beliefs, and customs align with both Turkish and Muslim traditions. It becomes an inseparable part of who I am."*

This explicit invocation of essence imbues identity with an essentialist quality, emphasizing its integration into daily life and personal being. However, the presence of such primordial emotions does not necessitate the adoption of a strictly primordialist analytical framework. While Shils (1957) and Geertz (1973), among others, argue that primordial attachments persist unchanged across generations, modernist scholars such as Anderson (2006), Hobsbawm (2000), and Gellner (1993) critique this view, asserting that identity formation is subject to rupture and reconstitution.

Nonetheless, the modernist emphasis on rupture often overlooks the continuity of symbols and practices that endure over time, a critique later advanced by scholars like Hoben and Hefner (1991). This perspective highlights that the primordiality of ethnicity is not innate but culturally and historically constructed, allowing for both continuity and transformation within identity frameworks.

Making of Ethnic Boundaries

The case of the Western Thrace Turks demonstrates a strong attachment to identity, particularly when examined from a primordial perspective. However, this attachment is better understood as a constructed phenomenon, emerging and solidifying under specific historical conditions. While a direct comparison with the pre-1970s period is not feasible, Participant P4 draws attention to the intensifying pressures on identity since that era, stating: *"But in general, especially when looking at the period after the 1970s, there has always been an issue."* This remark highlights the pivotal role of the post-1970s context in shaping identity perceptions among the Western Thrace Turks. The increasing challenges faced during this period appear to have catalyzed the construction of a stronger, more cohesive sense of identity.

In light of Barth's (1969) revised theory of ethnicity, such identity construction must be understood as a dynamic process involving not only shared ancestry but also the negotiation of boundaries. Barth's assertion that identity is shaped as much by what a group is not as by what it is underscores the relational nature of identity formation. In this context, the pressures and challenges of the post-1970s period may be seen as pivotal in constructing the "Other," against which the Western Thrace Turks' identity has been defined and reinforced.

Three key factors emerge from participants' accounts as central to shaping Turkish identity in Greece. The first factor pertains to the denial of Turkish identity. P3 describes the difficulties faced in self-identifying as Turkish, stating: *"In Greece, being Turkish is quite a challenging matter. Once you say you're Turkish, all doors close."* Similarly, P2 underscores the prevalence of discriminatory language in everyday expressions, noting: *"Even in expressions like 'egines tourkos, min pineis san tourkos [You became Turkish, don't drink like a Turk],' there are phrases like this, even when using insults."* These observations suggest that such expressions are embedded within the collective memory of Greek society, reflecting internalized stereotypes and biases. In response to this denial, P3 highlights the paradox inherent in the use of slurs: *"Excuse me, they say 'tourko' when they swear and then deny your identity. They contradict themselves."* This remark underscores an implicit acknowledgment of the minority's Turkish identity by the majority, even as it is outwardly denied. The internal contradiction in these dynamics reveals a complex interplay between recognition and rejection, underscoring the challenges faced by the Turkish minority in asserting their identity within a hostile sociopolitical environment.

Following the denial of Turkish identity, participants emphasized the imposition of three distinct sub-identities: Turkish-origins, Pomaks, and Roma. Participant

P1 explained: *"The minority is typically written as Tourkogenis (Turkish-origins), Pomaks, and Tsiggani, which is also used interchangeably with Roma."* This categorization reflects an external attempt to fragment the minority into separate groups, a process that aligns with Charles Tilly's analysis of social boundaries and group identification. Tilly's (1998) work suggests that the process of labeling and categorizing groups plays a crucial role in reinforcing social exclusion and inequality. In this case, the categorization serves not only to fragment the minority but also to maintain a hierarchy of acceptance, with Pomak identity being more widely acknowledged by the majority population, despite still experiencing exclusionary attitudes. P2 noted: *"For example, in our village, they say, 'You can be Muslim, but you're different from us.' For example, the identity of Pomaks is more accepted, but still, there's a collective exclusion."* An example of such exclusion was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the first Turkish village placed under quarantine was labeled as a "Muslim village": *"'The Muslim village went into quarantine.' Why are you specifically mentioning the Muslim village? There was another village that went into quarantine too, but they didn't say Christian village."* This stigmatization, as participants suggested, is perpetuated through media narratives, reinforcing discriminatory attitudes and exacerbating the marginalization of the Turkish minority in Greece.

Participants highlighted significant criticisms regarding the framing of minority rights under the Lausanne Treaty, which recognizes the Turkish minority in Greece as a religious minority rather than an ethnic one. This distinction, they argued, undermines their right to ethnic identity. Within this context, participants also drew attention to the prevalence of Islamophobia in media narratives. Participant P1 noted the use of terms like *"Islamofascist"* to describe Muslims, stating: *"Especially mainstream media, they portrayed them as Islamofascists, as if it's a Kosovo-like situation where they would separate. It created a perception that there's a large, unaware group in general."* This portrayal not only stigmatizes the minority but also fosters a climate of fear and suspicion, framing them as a potential threat to national unity. Furthermore, P1 highlighted the inherent contradiction in this discourse: *"They call us Islamofascist, but at the same time, they are using the religious identity of this community to implement their politics."* This paradox reflects a dual strategy, where religious identity is both weaponized as a means of marginalization and instrumentalized for political purposes. Such contradictory approaches exacerbate the challenges faced by the minority in asserting their ethnic identity within a framework that systematically denies its recognition.

Wimmer's (2013) detailed analysis of ethnic boundaries, grounded in Barth's seminal work, provides valuable insights into the dynamics of identity formation

and resistance. Wimmer argues that while primordial attachments are often historically constructed, scholars must remain cautious of the pitfalls of postmodern discourse. He asserts that identity should be examined within the framework of intricate power relations (2013: 4). This perspective aligns with Weber's concept of status, which posits that conflicts emerge when the value elements of a community fail to align with each other's rationalization (Brubaker, 2006: 62).

Further, Wimmer draws on Tilly's framework to explore the mechanisms through which ethnic resistance is sustained, although he distances his perspective from Benedict Anderson's notion of *Imagined Communities* (2013: 4). Anderson (2006) primarily conceptualizes community within the context of nation-states, arguing that national identity is forged through a shared "we" sentiment, facilitated by print capitalism and the strategic selection of publication languages. In contemporary contexts, similar processes are mediated by modern forms of media, underscoring the evolving mechanisms of identity construction and dissemination[3].

The participants' observations on the portrayal of Turkish Muslims in Greece and the broader West highlight the problematic use of the term *Islamofascism*, which they argue serves to demonize their community. This label, often perpetuated through media narratives, reflects a broader attempt to delegitimize the Turkish Muslim identity. Such portrayals, participants noted, disrupt the potential for consensus-building, a process fundamental to the development of cohesive national identity. By framing the minority as a threat, these narratives not only marginalize the community but also hinder opportunities for fostering inclusivity and mutual understanding within the national framework.

Talking 'Pacifist' but Hearing 'Ethnicist': Project Identity or Resistance Identity?

Castells (2010) emphasizes the central role of media and emerging lifestyles in shaping contemporary identity, referring to this transformation as the *"New World (brave or not)"* (2010: 2). In this new era, ethnic and national relations cannot be fully understood without considering the dynamics of networked relations. Building upon Benedict Anderson's concept of *Imagined Communities*, Castells introduces the idea of *Communal Images* to describe the formation of modern ethnic and national identities (2010: 30-35). While Anderson argues that

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3   See: Castelló, E. (2016). Anderson and the Media: The Strength of "Imagined Communities." *Debats: Revista de Cultura, Poder i Societat,* Extra(1), 59–63.

national identity is constructed by individuals through a shared sense of belonging, Castells shifts the focus to the power dynamics and cultural relationships that underlie this process. He highlights the role of media and technological networks in facilitating and manipulating the construction of identity in a highly interconnected world.

In this context, Castells (2010: 8) identifies three critical processes in the formation of identity. The first, *legitimizing identity*, corresponds to the hegemonic dimension of national identity, in a Gramscian sense, where the dominant narrative is established and maintained. Those who reject this hegemonic identity either form a *resistance identity*, which directly challenges the dominant identity, or a *project identity*, which seeks transformation within the parameters permitted by the legitimizing identity. The distinction between resistance and project identities is crucial: the former adopts an openly oppositional stance, while the latter, although operating within the hegemonic structure, aims for change or reform from within.

The study's title—"Talking 'Pacifist'" and "Hearing 'Ethnicist'"—aptly captures the complex interplay between project and resistance identities within the discourse of the FEP Party. The central conceptual question revolves around whether the party's rhetoric aligns more with a resistance identity or a project identity. On one hand, the FEP Party undoubtedly embodies elements of resistance identity, as it directly challenges the hegemonic Greek identity by promoting a Turkish identity. This opposition reflects a stance of defiance against the dominant narrative. On the other hand, the party's emphasis on peace and non-confrontational methods suggests a project identity, aiming to transform the existing political landscape rather than engage in outright conflict. The dual nature of the FEP Party's discourse exemplifies the dynamic tension between these two identity categories, underscoring the party's complex position in relation to both the state and its community.

While the Greek mainstream typically interprets the FEP Party's identity as a resistance identity, the party itself seeks to frame its identity as a project, aiming for transformation rather than confrontation. As discussed in the previous section, the media's portrayal of the party following the European Parliamentary elections underscores the tension between these two opposing perspectives. The media's focus on labeling the party and its members as "Islamofascists" further complicates the party's efforts to present itself as a peaceful, reformist movement. Participants in the study noted that these derogatory labels serve to delegitimize the party's discourse, casting it as extreme and oppositional. This media framing contrasts sharply with the party's self-image, which emphasizes

its peaceful intentions and commitment to achieving change through non-confrontational means. The contrasting interpretations of the FEP Party's identity highlight the complex dynamics at play between its public perception and its internal narrative.

Participants also highlighted efforts by the state to fragment the FEP Party's support base. P4 pointed out that *"some individuals are encouraged within the community to run for other parties,"* a tactic aimed at diluting the party's electoral strength. P1 further elaborated, saying, *"In villages, traffic fines may increase … There were people intentionally spreading fear, saying if you vote for the party, there will be no problems, but you won't get a favorable outcome. Worse things could happen."* These actions, often executed by individuals in positions of power, were strategically designed to influence the community's political choices. The participants observed that such intimidation tactics were effective in swaying public opinion, particularly in smaller, more tightly-knit communities where personal relationships and local authority figures hold significant sway. The state's efforts to undermine the party's electoral support underscore the challenges faced by minority political movements in navigating both external pressures and internal divisions.

The participants emphasized that the FEP Party explicitly rejects violence and illegal acts, highlighting its commitment to peaceful means of resistance. P1 stated, *"We have never resorted to violence or illegal means. Despite all the policies aimed at assimilation, despite the failure to address our demands, the Turkish community has remained peaceful, sincere, and committed to its identity."* This assertion underscores the party's resistance to coercive state policies while maintaining a non-confrontational stance. Similarly, P1 added, *"We are Greek citizens, but we are not against Greece. We only oppose the fact that Greece and its governments have failed to recognize us."* These statements align with the characteristics of a project identity, focusing on integration and reform within the existing national framework rather than seeking to dismantle it. By stressing their peaceful intentions and their desire for recognition rather than separation, the FEP Party emphasizes its goal of transformation within the boundaries of Greek citizenship, further reinforcing its project identity. In addition to the peaceful rhetoric, P5 spoke about the compliant nature of the minority, stating, *"We've been constructed to be a compliant minority, and there is no such minority anywhere in the world. We've never taken up arms or violence. We've just lived quietly."* This perspective emphasizes the minority's long-standing adherence to a non-confrontational stance, yet it also reflects a sense of resignation to the imposed identity of compliance. On the other hand, P2 stressed the importance of political struggle, noting, *"Struggles,*

whether political or civil, cannot be separated. As P1 mentioned, the political struggle is absolutely necessary." This remark highlights the political dimension of the FEP Party's discourse, illustrating the need for active resistance within the political sphere despite the party's avoidance of violence. The distinction between the peaceful, compliant approach and the necessity of political engagement in the face of state repression reveals the complex identity dynamics at play in the party's efforts to navigate its position within Greek society.

Participants also highlighted that the FEP Party's message resonated beyond their immediate group, with certain segments of the wider Greek public reflecting similar ideas. P2 noted that the general Greek opposition to Turks is primarily driven by media influence, but there are individuals who are less influenced by these narratives. *"There are conscious individuals who are aware of the media manipulation, and I've encountered many who have openly expressed their views about being Turkish,"* said P2. This statement reveals a nuanced perspective, acknowledging that while the mainstream Greek public may be swayed by negative portrayals, there exists a segment of the population that critically engages with media narratives and is open to alternative views about Turkish identity in Greece.

One of the key reasons for the FEP Party's success, especially in the recent European elections, is its ability to advocate for oppressed groups. According to Bourdieu (2015), a field is a network of social positions that are defined by the power struggles among individuals or groups striving to accumulate capital (such as economic, cultural, social, or symbolic capital) and gain control over the resources within that field. In this case, the FEP Party's success can be seen as its ability to navigate and gain capital within the Greek political field, which is structured around the dominant national narrative. The party positions itself as a voice for the oppressed, leveraging its understanding of marginalization to access the cultural and symbolic capital necessary to build a broader support base. The quote from P2, *"We gained support from all over Greece because we represented the voice of the oppressed,"* suggests that the party is tapping into the cultural capital of marginalized communities, using their experiences and struggles as a form of legitimacy and political leverage. This aligns with Bourdieu's idea that power is not just about material resources but also about the ability to define the dominant discourse and shape social perceptions. Additionally, P1's statement about the role of social media in expanding the party's reach indicates how the FEP Party is utilizing social capital—connections and networks—to widen its influence beyond traditional political structures. Social media platforms serve as an alternative space within the political field, enabling the party to bypass the constraints imposed by more traditional, mainstream forms of media and gain

access to new audiences. By presenting itself as an advocate for various marginalized communities, the FEP Party is reshaping the political field by adding new players (Macedonian candidates, for example) and redefining what is considered politically and socially relevant. In essence, the FEP Party is engaging in a battle for symbolic capital within the political field, challenging the dominant national discourse and advocating for the recognition of marginalized voices. By successfully navigating this field and aligning itself with the oppressed, the FEP Party has managed to expand its reach and strengthen its position within Greek politics. P1 further emphasized the role of social media in expanding the party's reach, stating, *"We used social media to reach out to the entirety of Greece. We spoke for all marginalized groups, not just the Turkish minority. We also had a Macedonian candidate, and that made an impact."* This underscores how social media has become a powerful tool for the FEP Party in representing diverse minority identities and promoting these voices within the broader national discourse, that is gaining symbolic power challenging the mainstream narrative and advocating for the recognition of marginalized communities.

Wimmer's (2013: 4) analysis complements this view by suggesting that Bourdieu's perspective on the field also contributes to the formation of boundaries in social life. He argues that through such struggles for capital and legitimacy, groups and individuals define their social positions, shaping the construction of ethnic, national, and political identities. In the case of the FEP Party, its challenge to the mainstream narrative and its ability to represent marginalized communities can be seen as a process of boundary-making within the broader political field, where the party not only contests dominant views but also constructs new identities and affiliations in response to exclusion.

In conclusion, P3 encapsulates the FEP Party's core appeal by describing the motivation behind voting for the party as a "silent outcry." P3 stated, *"I am going to the polls to speak out, even though I can't say it aloud elsewhere. My vote represents the voice of those who can't express themselves, and we represent them."* This statement reflects Goffman's (1956) concept of *facework*, wherein individuals navigate their social identities and maintain a desired presentation within the public sphere. In this context, the act of voting becomes a subtle performance of identity, a *role performance* that allows individuals to express grievances and assert a marginalized identity in a society where direct vocalization of such concerns is often repressed or stigmatized.

By utilizing the voting process, these individuals are engaging in what Goffman (1961) terms a "backstage" performance, in which their true sentiments are expressed covertly, away from the watchful eyes of societal judgment. In this

"backstage" moment, P3's voting choice serves as an embodied declaration of dissent, providing a means for those who feel silenced to express their political will. This *silent outcry* signifies more than just a political act; it is a form of identity construction that challenges the hegemonic discourse that seeks to marginalize and silence these voices.

Moreover, the FEP Party serves as a platform for these "backstage" performances, transforming individual acts of resistance into collective expressions of identity. By positioning themselves as advocates for the oppressed, the party provides a means for these individuals to publicly perform their identity and align themselves with a broader resistance narrative, thus fostering a sense of solidarity among those previously excluded from the national discourse.

Conclusion

This study has explored the complex interplay between identity construction, marginalization, and resistance within the context of the FEP Party and its members' experiences in Greece. Through participants' narratives, we have illuminated how state and societal mechanisms work to fragment minority identities into subcategories, reinforcing structural inequalities and perpetuating exclusion.

At its core, this research aimed to uncover the political discourse of the FEP Party, which represents the Turkish minority in Greece. Despite the party's peaceful rhetoric (as party members claim), it is often framed as a national threat by mainstream ideologies (especially, on media). To establish context, a review of Greek media coverage following the recent European Parliament elections revealed narratives portraying the FEP Party as a source of national insecurity. This framing perpetuates the perception of ethnic boundaries, as evidenced by participants expressing their identities through what appear to be primordial sentiments. However, this study aligns with the view that such emotions are historically and socially constructed rather than timeless and unchanging. The constructed nature of these boundaries has been instrumental in shaping the FEP Party's emergence, as it provides a platform to challenge exclusion and assert collective identity.

Participants consistently emphasized the FEP Party's peaceful mission, aligning with what Castells terms (2010) a "project identity." This identity is contrasted by the mainstream ideology's inclination to view it as a "resistance identity," thus reinforcing exclusionary practices. Such dynamics are central to understanding the perpetual reformation of ethnic boundaries and the cyclical challenges faced by minorities. The media's role in stigmatizing identities, such as labeling

a quarantined Turkish village during the COVID-19 pandemic as a "Muslim village," further exacerbates this exclusion.

The concept of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 2006) is crucial in this discourse. Traditionally legitimizing national identity through media narratives, this framework is increasingly challenged by *communal images* (Castells, 2010) in the network society. Social media has provided Western Thrace Turks with a platform to redefine their representation and expand their visibility. For instance, the FEP Party's success in garnering votes from across Greece in the European Parliament elections exemplifies how minority voices can transcend regional boundaries, challenging the dominant ideological narratives.

Figure 2. *Ethnic Boundaries Reimagined – From Resistance to Sustainable Solutions (Created using the DiagrammeR package in RStudio).*
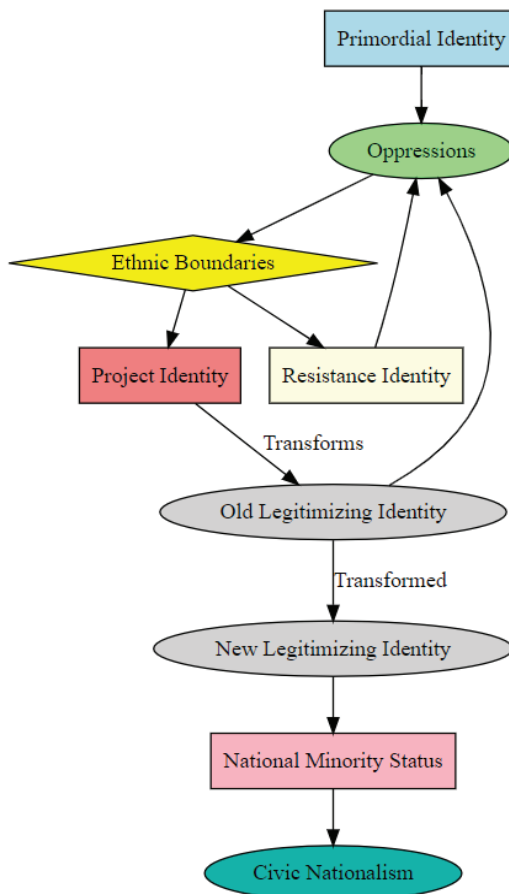
As shown in the accompanying diagram, the legitimizing ideology's tendency to frame the FEP Party as a "resistance identity" risks reinforcing ethnic boundaries in a self-perpetuating cycle. This approach undermines the potential for meaningful integration. Instead, recognizing the FEP Party as a "project identity" and addressing its demands—particularly granting national minority status within the framework of civic nationalism—offers a constructive alternative. Given the following argument of Yakobson, the recognition of Western Thrace Turks as a national minority would not harm civic nationalism but rather enhance it by encouraging peaceful contributions from minorities.

> "If the Turkish-speaking community in Greece is recognized as a national minority, this would accord with cultural reality far better than the present definition, while hardly making its members any less Greek than they are today, both in their own self-perception and in the attitude of the majority. They will continue to be Greek in the sense of being citizens of the Greek Republic, but not in the sense of sharing the Greek national and cultural identity." (Yakobson, 2013: 345)

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the need for a paradigm shift in how minority identities are perceived and engaged with in Greece. Recognizing the FEP Party's peaceful mission and addressing its demands could break the cycle of exclusion, fostering a more inclusive national framework that upholds the principles of civic nationalism.

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CHAPTER IV

MONTENEGRO CASE STUDY: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF SOCIALISTS

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Introduction

The DPS[1] has been one of the most influential political forces in the country's pre/post-independence history, shaping its political, economic, and social trajectory for over three decades. From its beginnings during the Yugoslav Communist era (1945), to its rise to power as the dominant party in an independent Montenegro, the DPS has played a key role in the country's democratic transition and its complex relationship with the European Union (EU) and regional stability. The party has guided Montenegro through periods of economic reform, independence, and transition under Milo Đukanović's leadership, but it has also faced growing criticism and challenges to its power.

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1   In Montenegrin „Demokrtaska partija socijalista" (DPS). The DPS, founded in the early 1990s, has evolved with significant programmatic changes and a flexible ideological stance. Initially appearing as a center-left party due to its affiliation with the Party of European Socialists, Socialist International, and Progressive Alliance, the DPS has been shaped by three key institutional legacies. Firstly, it inherited strong membership and resources from the League of Communists of Montenegro (LCM). Secondly, the party maintained a nationalist, pro-Serbian position, with ties to the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije, SPS*) until 1997. Lastly, like many post-independence parties in former Yugoslav states, the DPS became closely tied to state-building efforts and nation-building in its new political context. (Laštro et al., 2023: 222).

There have been several controversies surrounding the party's extended dominance. The DPS, once praised for helping Montenegro gain independence and integrate into the global community, has increasingly come under fire for alleged corruption, authoritarianism, and its failure to implement critical democratic reforms. Over time, opposition movements and shifts in public sentiment have revealed deep divisions within Montenegrin society and raised concerns about how long the DPS's rule can endure. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, a coalition of opposition forces finally ended the DPS's long-standing hold on power, marking a dramatic shift in the party's previously unchallenged hegemony. This led to Đukanović's defeat in the presidential elections (2023). A new political era began on April 2, 2023, when Jakov Milatović became the President of Montenegro.

This chapter explores the rise and fall of the DPS (it can be considered that this party has stayed in power uninterrupted from 1945 to 2020, despite internal shifts in party leadership in 1989 and 1997), and its leader Milo Đukanović since 1997. It examines the party's origins, its shifting political orientations (from a Yugoslav and pro-Serbian party to a proponent of Montenegro's state independence), its role in Montenegro's independence and development, and the factors that contributed to its decline. By analyzing the political, social, and economic dynamics that shaped the DPS's trajectory, this chapter provides insight into the complexities of Montenegrin politics and the broader challenges faced by the post-Yugoslav state, in their pursuit of democratic consolidation and stability.

Historical and Theoretical Background

Montenegro provides a distinctive case for studying the socioeconomic impacts of client politics over three decades of state capture. Its uniqueness stems from being the only European country that had not undergone a change of government through elections in over a century. Since parliamentary elections were introduced in 1906, the government was changed through voting for the first time in August 2020 (Bešić and Baća, 2024:2). Therefore, the DPS maintained full control over the "state apparatus" (institutions and resources) in Montenegro, essentially acting as the owner of the country's infrastructure and assets. This dominance enabled the party to shape the national economy to serve its political agenda and the interests of its supporters. In that scenario, the ruling group was in a position to supervise the implementation of a market economy and political pluralism, allowing them to ensure that the processes worked to their benefit (Lazić 2018: 144-145).

However, the last decade of the 20th century was full of challenges. During that time, political parties began to establish themselves in Montenegro. More precisely, this process was part of the broader democratization of the Yugoslav political system, and the result was, as expected, Montenegrin multiparty politics (Andrijašević, 2021: 351). In line with this, Sigmund Neumann, argued that political parties (in the last decade of the 20th century) were perceived as the main elements and key protagonists of a democratic society, forming a solid foundation for the modern political system (1963: 15). Also, without examining the details and internal activities of ethnopolitical clientelism[2], it is the fact that client politics played a key role in shaping state-society relations even before Montenegro gained independence (Darmanović 2003).

Throughout history, these Balkan societies have often been targets of attacks by numerous invaders. However, this perspective is rooted in the past. Therefore, it is not surprising that they lack a democratic tradition and instead persist in a subservient culture with a low level of respect for basic human rights and freedoms, where political power is abused, and the state and its interests are subordinated, often being identified with the party and the ruling political elite (Šorović, 2024b: 9).

Additionally, during this period, the DPS, as the successor to the LCM[3], emerged on the political scene following the December 1990 elections. It remained in power continuously from 1945 (unofficially) or 1990 (officially) to 2020,

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2   In the final years of the DPS regime, scandals involving high-ranking officials revealed a clientelist strategy captured by the phrase "One person employed, four votes secured", meaning that offering a job to one family member would result in votes from the entire household (Milovac, 2016). This section provides historical context for analyzing the DPS regime, illustrating that clientelism was a core feature throughout both the democratization and backsliding periods. The analysis also shows that the state-sponsored populism and political delegitimization of alleged "enemies of the state" were not isolated instances, but rather fundamental to the DPS regime's three-decade rule (Bešić and Baća, 2024: 3).

3   In Montenegrin „Savez komunista Crne Gore" (SKCG). It changed its name to the DPS in 1991. It remained the predominant political party in Montenegro until 1997. This fact, its political power, was described by Darmanović (2003, p. 147) in the following way: "The DPS held the system together by assiduously using its complete control over state organs and resources in order to squelch critics and rivals and win elections. The usual range of methods was employed, including party domination of the state-owned media; the packing of offices with party favorites; the maintenance of slush funds; occasional intimidation of the adversaries; the abuse of police authority to influence the electoral process; and manipulations of the electoral system. Backed by those kinds of tactics, the DPS easily bested its dispirited opponents and retained an absolute majority of seats in the Montenegrin parliament."

representing a unique example of party dominance on the political scene over three-decade-long DPS regime, not only in Europe but also beyond, due to its mechanisms of party dominance, programmatic flexibility, and its central role in shaping statehood and ethnic identity over time. The party's rule was possible due to ethnopolitical clientelism, repression, and its complete control over the entire Montenegrin society and state: monopolizing patronage goods, including state-owned media, civil society, and all formally independent (state) institutions (Laštro et al., 2023: 210–212). In this way, the DPS, as the dominant party, reshaped state institutions and organs into instruments of control and repression against its opposition and opponents. The party maintained popular support through highly efficient patronage network, and spread effective populist rhetorics, in order to give a justification for its clientelist politics and other forms of undemocratic activities (Bešić and Baća 2024: 2). Throughout its three decades of dominance, a significant portion of the population became profoundly dependent[4] on the DPS (Laštro et al., 2023: 210–212). In accordance with that, the DPS not only established effective clientelist strategies to gain popular support but also used populist rhetoric to defend these and other undemocratic practices, framing them as essential safeguards against the "ethnonational other", which was depicted as trying to weaken Montenegro's statehood. This rhetoric intensified ethnonational divisions and deliberately hindered the formation of alliances across ethnopolitical divides that could have posed a threat to DPS rule (Bešić and Baća, 2024: 1).

All of the above was made possible by the enormous party institution inherited from the LCM, "including the party's membership base, the state media, real estate, and control over large segments of the economy" (Darmanović, 2003: 147). But that was not all. One of the main mechanisms of DPS dominance was its programmatic flexibility. Hence, the DPS experienced several shifts, evolving from a rigid communist party to a passionate promoter of Milošević's Serbian nationalist agenda, and later to an advocate of Euro-Atlantic integration and Montenegrin nation-building. Throughout this time, the DPS relied on public resources and merged with the state. As the dominant party, it skewed multiparty

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4   In the 1990s, amid declining socioeconomic security, poverty, and external challenges like international isolation and regional wars, most households became dependent on limited government welfare. With about one-third of the population living below the poverty line, people relied on clientelist networks and increasingly engaged in the gray economy and black market for survival (Đurić, 1999). The decline in industrial jobs was offset by a rise in public administration positions, with one-third of the workforce employed in this sector by the end of the decade, all of which were tightly controlled by party structures (Đurić 2003).

competition in its favor and used covert tactics to maintain control and stay in power (Laštro et al., 2023: 211).

Lastly, the DPS's perspective toward its programs has been shaped by its status as the majority party. Most research on dominant parties (Reuter, 2017; Scheiner, 2005) focuses on the non-programmatic components of their dominance. However, the party program remains crucial. A "catchall incumbent that holds the political center" is what such parties typically become (Greene, 2007: 285). In fact, the DPS's trajectory has been defined by nebulous core ideals. It is often perceived as a populist party that uses populist rhetoric to justify its clientelist control over state resources. However, it has not focused on typical populist issues, such as anti-elite sentiment, because the DPS has consistently constituted the same political elite. It has also avoided adopting ethnonationalist rhetoric (Džankić and Keil, 2017). Since the late 1990s, the party has supported minority parties and a multiethnic Montenegro, promoting a new definition of "Montenegrinness" (Džankić, 2014), where Serbs are portrayed as enemies and traitors of Montenegro.

The primary goal of the DPS's political strategy did not concern the reconstruction of Montenegrin national identity or state independence, but rather the easier abandonment of Milošević's influence - or, more precisely, the localization of political conflicts with the opposition Socialist People's Party[5] (SPP). After 1997, the ruling DPS leadership was determined to distance itself from (Serbian) Orthodox Christianity in order to attract new voting blocs and minority parties. This shift was tied to state (and party) affiliation rather than national identity. Because of this, professors Kapidžić and Komar (2022: 538) argue that in Montenegrin society, ethnicity became the basis for political mobilization. Furthermore, due to the adaptability of ethnic identity in Montenegro, in period between three population censuses (2003, 2011 and 2023), more than one-fifth (now maybe even more percents) of the population changed their ethnic identity, while remaining within the same religious group (Vuković, 2015: 127). Also, there is a clear correlation between the political consequences of the dominant party system (DPS) in Montenegro and the exploitation of ethnic diversity, which led to the country's political split. Moreover, Montenegrin society's "flexible" identity and "situational nationalism" (Kapidžić and Komar, 2022: 545) show that the division within Montenegrin society would not exist if political elites had not conceptualized the conflict and constantly reverted to the past. As a result, Southeastern European societies, including Montenegro, are often defined as ethnically divided, with

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5   In Montenegrin „Socijalistička narodna partija" (SNP).

"segmental volatility". This is reflected in the formation of Montenegrin ethnic identity, where the country's political split is "malleable" (Enyedi, 2005: 699; Šorović, 2024b: 15). Political differences/ethnical divisions are visible even within families. It is common for individuals, including siblings, to identify differently in terms of ethnonational belonging, sometimes even compared to their parents or grandparents, and for someone to change their self-identification between consecutive population censuses based on their political views at the time (Baća 2018).

Research Methodology

The research hypothesis suggests that Montenegro's communist past, combined with its strategic geopolitical position in the Balkans, has had a significant influence on its transition process, which happened without transformation, according to Burawoy (2001). The role of international organizations, regional dynamics, and domestic political actors is highlighted as crucial in shaping Montenegro's post-communist development. The study contends that Montenegro's historical and cultural context, alongside its interactions with regional and global entities, has resulted in a distinct transition trajectory marked by both challenges and opportunities in the country's pursuit of democratization and European integration.

The book chapter also points out that topics related to Montenegro's political situation are poorly researched within the country itself, with most scholarship coming from foreign authors/institutions. There is a lack of objective and critical research by Montenegrin intellectuals and political scientists. This gap in research leads the article to explore the question: "Why did the DPS lose the parliamentary elections in 2020 and the presidential elections in 2023?" Despite the DPS's dominance over Montenegrin politics for decades, the party's control has been largely attributed to various mechanisms such as co-optation, repression, programmatic flexibility, and ethnopolitical clientelism.

The DPS, which is the successor to the LCM, underwent significant changes after the first multiparty elections in 1990, evolving into a party that embraced Slobodan Milošević's Serbian nationalist agenda. The party's dominance in Montenegro (1945-2020), especially from 1990 to 2020, is explained through its use of electoral manipulation, control over state media and institutions, and the exploitation of public resources. This period is described as one of "competitive authoritarianism", a system that resembles other competitive authoritarian regimes worldwide.

The chapter divides the DPS's rule into two periods: the first, characterized by competitive authoritarianism, and the second, following the formation of the first multiparty government in 1997. Despite this transition, the research indicates that the DPS's rule remained undemocratic, with recent studies continuing to classify Montenegro as a competitive authoritarian regime even beyond 1997. The party's long-standing control over the country is seen as a direct result of its ability to manipulate the political system and maintain a grip on power through non-democratic means. Because of that, under the rule of a dominant party, Montenegro transitioned from an authoritarian system to a semi-consolidated democracy.

In line with other post-socialist countries, the processes of privatization and democratization in Montenegro were not mutually reinforcing (Ost, 2005). In contrast, they resulted in a fragile balance, where both democracy and markets remained incomplete (Gilley, 2010). This environment allowed political elites to amass wealth through privatization, corruption, and cronyism (Nee, 2000), leading to the rise of a "transitional bourgeoisie" that exploited state resources for private gain (Ost, 2000). As a result, the working and middle classes suffered the most from the political transition (Birdsall and Nellis, 2003). Along with the rise of authoritarian neoliberal policies, the erosion of socioeconomic rights weakened already fragile democracies, paving the way for more reactionary politics (Ost, 2005). In Montenegro, this manifested as "state-sponsored populism", with the DPS using ethnopolitical rhetoric to legitimize clientelism and frame it as necessary for defending the state from alleged threats by certain ethnonational groups, further deepening societal polarization (Laštro et al., 2023; Džankić and Keil, 2017).

Another key point discussed is the relationship between Montenegro's political system and the country's ethnic diversity. The DPS is seen to have exploited this diversity for political gain, ultimately contributing to the political split within the country. Montenegro's society, with its flexible identity and "situational nationalism" (Kapidžić and Komar, 2022), has been shaped by political elites who continuously reference the past and frame conflicts based on ethnic divisions. This has led to a situation where Montenegro's political landscape is deeply divided, reflecting what the research describes as "ethnically divided societies" with "segmental volatility". These divisions are seen as malleable, with political elites constantly influencing the formation of Montenegrin ethnic identity, thereby contributing to the country's ongoing political polarization.

In conclusion, this research provides a detailed examination of Montenegro's post-communist transition and the political dynamics that have shaped the

country's development. By analyzing the role of the DPS, ethnic identity, and the broader Balkan context, the study offers insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by small Balkan nations during their transitions to democracy. It contributes to a deeper understanding of Montenegro's political transformation, highlighting the complex interplay between historical legacies, political elites, and external factors that have shaped its path toward European integration.

Montenegrin Case: Transition Years in the Balkans

During a significant part of the 20th century (more precisely, after 1918), Montenegro[6] was one of the six constituent republics of Yugoslavia.[7] Therefore, from 1945 to 1990, Montenegro participated to some extent in the foreign policy of federal Yugoslavia, more specifically as a federal unit. However, to better understand the political processes that took place in this region during the 1990s, we need to look back several years.

In 1974, on the European continent, the process of political transition began in Portugal with the Revolution of the Carnations and ended on the other side of the continent, in Eastern Europe, with the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989. This process of change was described by Vladimir Goati as "great changes in the 'social landscape'" (Vuković, 2011: 60), influenced undeniably by the dominant political culture of the involved countries (*Ibidem*). It took decades for this process to be completed. Well, great changes take time. Hence, according to Goati (2008: 258), this process of structural transformation in the post-communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe was (much) faster and more intense compared to the countries and societies of the Western Balkans (WB). In this "problematic" region, however, the situation was very different. The political

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6　At the Berlin Congress (1878), the Principality of Montenegro became an independent and internationally recognized country. Then, in 1910, Nikola I, who went on to rule as King of Montenegro, officially proclaimed it a kingdom. After World War I (1918), Montenegro was annexed by Serbia, lost its sovereignty, and became part of the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (*Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*). From 1918 to 2006, Montenegro disappeared from the global political map, until May 2006, when it re-established its independence and regained its legal status through a referendum.

7　During this time, the name changed many times. Initially, it was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918-1941) / Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929-1941), later the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1963), then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1963-1992), the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992-2003), and finally, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003-2006).

transformation of the Balkans "was much more intense than fast" (Vujadino-vić et al., 2005, in: Vuković, 2011: 60). As professor Vuković (2011: 60) noted, the transition from a system of real socialism to a new democratic society quickly became a difficult and painful experience. What was initially envisioned as a hopeful shift turned into a nightmare before it even truly began. The privatization and redistribution of state assets, especially after the mass voucher privatization (2001), led to a growing concentration of wealth among networks loyal to the DPS. This shift in ownership, transferred state funds to private investment funds, controlled by key figures within the regime. Concurrently, the DPS government implemented austerity measures, cutting benefits, freezing public sector wages, and maintaining one of the lowest minimum wages in the region, along with a highly regressive tax system. These actions increased public dependence on the party-state for social benefits and government jobs. Additionally, the DPS used the funds from privatization to foster loyal elites in business, government, media, academia, and culture, reinforcing its hold on power. The regime framed its continued dominance as crucial to the country's democratic development, pro-Western orientation, and state-building efforts, positioning itself as the only viable force for national progress (Bešić and Baća, 2024: 5). Therefore, the Balkans region "entailed different types of communist breakdown, varying from Romania's popular revolutionary uprising to Bulgaria's internal coup, Yugoslavia's disintegration, and Albania's anarchic and disorderly change" (Anastasakis, 2013: 97). The nature of revolutionary change in each state influenced the rise of illiberalism during the early transition years, the extent of continuity with the past, and the role of domestic elites in shaping the outcome of that period (*Ibidem*).

During that time, Montenegro was affected by several key events that had an impact on the later shaping of the political conception of the country, such as the collapse of the SFRY[8] (1992), the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (1992-1995), economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) (1992-2000), NATO military intervention against the regime of Slobodan Milošević (1999), the

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8   In *The Balkans 1804-1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers*, M. Glenny (1999: 581 in: Anastasakis, 2013: 95) underlined that Yugoslavia is described "as an original experimental mix of the Cold War ideological competition: a country that was socialist but non-Soviet; that abandoned central planning and adopted ‹self-management›; that introduced decentralization and some form of confederalisation of the political system under the guidance of Yugoslav ‹unity and brotherhood›; that experimented with liberalization of its foreign trade, closer links with the capitalist West and opening its borders for Yugoslav citizens to go to the West."

transformation of the FRY into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003), and the Montenegrin referendum on independence in 2006 (Vuković, 2011). In other words, during the existence of the FRY, Montenegro as its federative republic was politically and economically isolated, far removed from the Euro-Atlantic path. Hence, it is crucial to highlight the view of professor Srđan Darmanović, the former ambassador of Montenegro to the USA, who argues that Montenegro, although the smallest Yugoslav republic, represents the most complicated and difficult case of transition process in the post-communist world. There are two main reasons for it. Firstly, the problem of statehood was accentuated, as well as the crisis of the former SFRY, which was resolved through the war and the ethnic conflicts, without conflict breakingout on Montenegrin territory. More specifically, the first transition in Montenegro was established by an authoritarian party – SKCG, led by the oligarchic elite. This social order eventually collapsed. In 1997, the second political transition began in Montenegro with a split within the ruling party – DPS[9]. The party reformists won and made a pact with the opposition (anti-Milošević regime). From that crucial event, the Montenegrin pro-independence government won all elections, including the decisive one on October 20, 2002. In line with that, the most important and sensitive issue in Montenegro's modern history and politics – the statehood question – was resolved, for the next three years, by the *Belgrade Agreement* (2002) between Montenegro and Serbia, sponsored and created by the EU: the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003). This legal and political institution had a temporary character, although it was clear that Montenegro has entered a period of electoral democracy, with no future authoritarian turnovers (Darmanović, 2003).

In other words, in the Balkans, the 1990s were the "foundation years of political change from one party rule to multi-party political pluralism, when the first 'political pacts' were made and the first political, economic and social conflicts developed" (Anastasakis, 2013: 91). Communism was an ideology with deep roots in the Balkan society. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, along with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, had the greatest influence on this part of Europe, leading to the significant changes in its political scene. In

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9   It is important to underline that in 1997, the DPS split, as a consequence of an international disagreement between the two party leaders and their respective factions: the traditionalist faction, led by President Momir Bulatović and the progressive faction, led by Prime Minister Milo Đukanović. Later, Bulatović established a new party – the SPP (Vuković 2011). This event was described as "the first serious conflict in the post-communist political life of Montenegro and, more importantly, the one whose outcome would largely determine its political future. In order to understand the reason behind it, it is necessary to come back to the very beginning of the Montenegrin transition story and enlighten the relationship of the DPS with Slobodan Milosevic" (*Ibidem*: 63).

other words, Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, in *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (1996), argued that, in Eastern Europe, the first years of the transition process from communism to democracy reflected a significant range of post-communism countries with different national forms.As a result, some Eastern European countries transformed into democracies, while others remained fragile, with some form of authoritarianism as a product of their rupture from the communist past. Therefore, each country had its own national variant of the post-communist political transition. The Balkan countries, despite significant national variations, shared some common traits in the early years of their political transition (Anastasakis, 2013). All the Balkan countries shared three key traits during their political transition: they maintained connections with their communist past, were shaped by domestic elites and top-down politics, and experienced a collapse of their initial illiberal systems before adopting reformed and more mainstream ideas. (*Ibidem*: 92).

By definition, political transition represents "a historical sequence of political events usually associated with the last stages of authoritarian/totalitarian regimes through to the introduction of a more liberal pluralist system" (*Ibidem*: 93). Many authors and scholars of democratic transition "dichotomize the *telos* of the transition process into two distinct stages: completed transition and full consolidation. A completed democratic transition is the successfull establishment, through competitive elections, of a viable and effective government. Full consolidation is reached only when the democratic order has become the 'only game in town', its institutions fundamentally accepted by all relevant political actors as well as the overwhelming majority of the mass public" (Kullberg, 1998: 123). In the Balkans region, transition is described "as a deviation from expected norm, or from the usual type of democratic 'transition and consolidation' (Anastasakis, 2013: 93). These terms are often defined in derogatory ways, such as: "incomplete" (International Crisis Group, 2009), "defective" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011), "double post-communist and post-conflict" (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006), "delayed" (White et al., 2003) or the "laggards" (Bechev and Noutcheva, 2008) of transition. Nevertheless, the transition process can be started without ever being fully completed, and a new authoritarian regime does not come to power (Linc and Stepan, 1998). In accordance with this, political elites – both opposition and government – have the opportunity and political space to reshape the political environment.

Dominance of the DPS

In post-communist Montenegro, during the early years after the transition, the contours of political life were shaped and determined by the DPS. The opposition was weak and lacked the power to challenge the political dominance of the ruling party. The results of the parliamentary elections[10] demonstrated the ineffectiveness of opposition demands for political and economic reforms, highlighting the inability of these demands to challenge the DPS and transform the country into a modern democratic system based on market economy principles (Vuković, 2011: 62).

In addition, during the escalating conflict in Kosovo (1999), the relations between Podgorica and Belgrade changed, with tensions gradually increased. Official Podgorica disagreed with the political views of Slobodan Milošević. As a result, the pro-democratic leadership of Montenegro later received economic and political support from important Western countries. In the international community, Milošević became the epitome of war and new conflicts in the Balkans, in contrast to Milo Đukanović, who was presented to the world as his opposite and a person who openly opposed his policies. As a reminder, in 1997, Đukanović's opinion about the President of the FRY, Slobodan Milošević was highly critical. He called him "an outmoded politician" (Janković, 2020), although, according to words of Milka Tadić Mijović, President of Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro, Đukanović was "until 1997 a shadow of S. Milošević, but he had already shown an incredible sense of political survival" (*Ibidem*). In line with that, Đukanović became a leader of a new opportunity for the region's prosperity and stability. Therefore, Montenegro's pro-Western and pro-European orientation was strongly confirmed by the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia (1999). Despite pressures from Milošević and his supporters to involve Montenegro in the conflict, President Đukanović successfully kept the country neutral. Although still part of the FRY, Montenegro distanced itself from Serbia, which was facing internal instability. By October 2000, Montenegro was clearly moving towards Western alignment, while Serbia remained increasingly isolated (Vuković 2011: 65). Aaron Presnall (2009: 662) in the book chapter *Which Way the Wind Blows: Democracy Promotion and International Actors in Serbia*, emphasized that after the collapse of the Milošević's regime in October 2000, the Western countries, as "international donors virtually flooded Serbia with money, initially to seize a perceived window of opportunity to boost efforts at democratisation of the new order." In

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10   The DPS, in the parliamentary election 1992 won 46 out 85 seats in the Parliament, while in the 1996 election, it won 45 out 71 seats.

accordance with that observation, the political situation in the Federation drastically changed. In that context, Montenegro was no longer the favourite player in the Balkans political arena; Serbia had now taken that position.

According to Darmanović, although Montenegro was a federal unit in the joint country with Serbia, it followed a different transition path. The first transition in Montenegro had similarities to Romania's case, except without violence. On January 10-11, 1989, the communist leadership in Montenegro was overthrown in a coup, driven by a wave of change and a populist and anti-bureaucratic revolution. The coup had all the characteristics of the mass demonstrations held in the Montenegrin capital, Podgorica, where tens of thousands of people from all over Montenegro gathered to demand the removal of the country's and party's leadership of the SKCG. This event resembled the Romanian situation, as it took place within the communist party. The coup was organized spontaneously, arising from popular discontent and rebellion. However, the leaders of this movement were all members and officials of the communist party of Montenegro and Yugoslavia. In Romania, the protests were organised against the Ceausescu *(Nicolae Ceaușescu)* dictatorship, while in Montenegro, the protest was against the leadership of the communist party, but not the system itself. In this way, a hybrid regime was created, with authoritarian elements of governance. In Montenegro, the DPS became the foundation of the regime, presented as a dominant and hegemonic party, based on an oligarchic principle. It was a state party that took full control of country's resources. The opposition was fragmented and so weak that it failed to seize power in Montenegro's political scene. The end of the one-party communist regime began with the January coup in 1989, but it resulted in a stalled democracy. However, in Montenegro, the regime never had Milošević's sharpness, largely due to issues surrounding statehood (the most sensitive political issue in Montenegro's 20th and 21st century history). Milošević's politics in Montenegro became dominant due to the loyalty of the political elite. However, historical injustices and the sensitivity of the national issue led to a break from of the Milošević's policies and a rift within the narrowest circle of the ruling DPS. It was a period of stalled transition, requiring a new transition from this regime was necessary. The split in the DPS represented a transitional transaction model – the prevailing regime of reformists (Milo Đukanović's DPS) versus the conservatives (Momir Bulatović's SNP). In 1997, negotiations between those two parties led to the *Agreement on the Minimum Principles for the Development of Democratic Infrastructure in Montenegro* (*Sporazum o minimumu principa za razvoj demokratske infrastrukture u Crnoj Gori*), ahead of the Montenegrin presidential elections. In short, the real transition in Montenegro began in 1997, not in 1989.

The transition was completed on October 5, 2000, with the fall of the Milošević regime, as this removed the direct threat to Montenegro (Darmanović, 2002).

On the other hand, in Serbia, the collapse of Milošević's rule and transformation from Caesarism to Sultanism coincides with his complete confrontation with the Western world. This period led to the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, which became a fatal event for the Milošević regime. It is important to highlight that his regime was highly repressive during 1998 and 1999, and he further intensified repression in the Federation after NATO intervention. The characteristics of Sultanism were evident everywhere. He transformed the police and army into the his private guard. Milošević's entry into this phase of rule was closely linked to his loss of trust from both citizens and the international community, along with the looming possibility of political failure. As a result, he had to defend his authority with all available tools. This is why the transition in Serbia was closely tied to the fall of Milošević's regime and the establishment of a new democratic regime. The exit from this regime occurred in October 2000, in the form of regime collapse, accompanied by a violent conflict of limited intensity. Thus, October 5th holds historical significance in modern Serbian history. Afterward, Serbia was forced to go through a period of interim government – a co-ministerial government – until early parliamentary elections in December 2000, when the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) won convincingly. After the opposition overthrew Milošević, it disintegrated into two factions: the presidential block (Vojislav Koštunica) and the prime ministerial block (Zoran Đinđić). These two political factions led the battle for supremacy in Serbia's political landscape (*Ibidem*).

Based on all these events in Yugoslav federal republics, the political landscape of the Balkans has changed significantly over the years. The lessons learned were difficult, but the results are visible today.

The Fall of the DPS

After Montenegro restored its independence in 2006 and adopted a new Constitution in 2007, the country focused its efforts on EU and NATO integration, aiming to strengthen its position both within the Euro-Atlantic community and in the broader regional context. The government actively pursued normalizing relations with its neighbors, striving to ensure regional stability and consolidation. As part of these efforts, Montenegro was granted EU candidate status on October 17, 2010, emerging as a key leader in the European integration process in the Balkans. To clearly define its foreign policy priorities and international

standing, Montenegro adopted the *Foreign Policy Priorities of Montenegro* (*Spolj-nopolitički prioriteti Crne Gore*) in 2006, aligning its strategic goals with its political interests and proactive role on the global stage. Notably, Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic orientation is explicitly stated in the Preamble of its Constitution, underlining the country's commitment to integration with Western institutions. This trajectory culminated on June 5, 2017, when Montenegro officially became NATO's 29th member. This achievement not only marked a significant milestone for the country, but also contributed to stabilizing the WB and countering the influence of the Russian Federation, which remains a crucial issue for the West (Đukanović, 2019).

However, the success of NATO membership was overshadowed by domestic concerns. The long-standing dominance of the DPS and its coalition partners created a sense of stagnation in Montenegrin politics. Tensions escalated in December 2019 when the Parliament passed the controversial *Law on Freedom of Religion* (*Zakon o slobodi vjeroispovjesti)*. The law, which included provisions on the return of property historically owned by the state, but now, under the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)[11] (Srpska pravoslavna crkva, SPC), led to weekly processions (litije), predominantly organized by the SOC, under the slogan "We will not give away our churches!" (Softić, 2020). These processions, which grew in scale over several months, that were joined by thousands of citizens, numerous opposition figures from the Democratic Front *(Demokratski front*, DF), members of other religious communities, and even some lower-ranked officials from the DPS, and were a catalyst for the downfall of the DPS in the parliamentary elections on August 30, 2020. After three decades in power, the DPS was forced into opposition, marking a significant shift in the country's political landscape (*Ibidem*).

The subsequent period, however, was marked by political instability. Between 2020 and 2024, Montenegro witnessed the formation of several governments,

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11   The relationship between the DPS and other societal actors in Montenegro, including the SOC, has often been characterized by pragmatic and sometimes unstable alliances. These alliances were crucial at key moments for the DPS, such as the ambivalent relationship with the SOC. In accordance with that, in 1997, Archbishop Amfilohije Radović supported the DPS's anti-Milošević stance, partly due to Belgrade's severing of ties with Bosnian Serb leaders. However, in 2006, despite his pro-unionist views, the SOC remained silent during the DPS's independence campaign. In exchange, the DPS allowed the illegal construction of churches by the SOC, such as the one in Sveti Stefan (Morrison and Zdravkovski, 2014, p. 250). While the DPS sought to maintain good relations with the SOC, particularly due to the latter's influence over many of their supporters, tensions arose over issues like Kosovo's independence (2008) and NATO membership (2017). Despite efforts to make the SOC in Montenegro more independent, the DPS's attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, as the SOC resisted these changes (Džankić, 2013: 421).

each struggling to maintain parliamentary support. Both the government of Zdravko Krivokapić and that of Dritan Abazović lost backing in Parliament. The government formed in October 2023, led by Prime Minister Milojko Spajić, faced similar challenges, with reports of potential government reconstruction and growing dissatisfaction among its constituents. Additionally, since the 2020 elections, there has been a notable reshuffling of Montenegro's diplomatic and consular personnel. Many diplomats, particularly those linked to the DPS regime, were recalled from their positions, leading to a significant void in the country's representation. As of 2024, Montenegro's diplomatic missions in critical countries such as Russia, China, the United States, and key European nations, as well as in international organizations like the UN and NATO, remain understaffed. Moreover, some recent appointments of ambassadors have raised concerns, with some individuals lacking diplomatic experience but being closely tied to the ruling elite. This practice has faced criticism, notably from President Jakov Milatović, who has publicly opposed these appointments (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024; Šorović, 2024a: 94-95).

Despite these challenges, the post-2020 period has seen some progress in the areas of rule of law and anti-corruption reforms. These efforts have led to significant legal actions, including arrests and indictments of former high-ranking officials in the judiciary and police. In early 2020, Montenegro adopted a new negotiation methodology with the EU, *Interim Benchmark Assessment Report* (IBAR), which required positive assessments of Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security), before any chapters could be temporarily closed. The country achieved this goal in June 2024, marking a notable step in its EU accession process. However, the overall pace of reform between 2020 and 2024 was slow, as reflected in the European Commission's annual reports, with the country struggling to maintain momentum in its integration efforts (Šorović, 2024a: 95). Nevertheless, in an official statement, the US Embassy in Montenegro highlighted this period as a significant milestone, noting that it brought Montenegro closer to its goal of joining the EU and further integrating into the Euro-Atlantic community (US Embassy, 2024).

Research Results and Discussion

Transition, in the context of political science, refers to the process through which a country moves from an authoritarian regime to a democratic governance structure. This process often involves significant political, economic, and social transformations as the country adopts new institutions, legal frameworks, and policies conducive to democratic principles. The transition phase can vary in

duration and complexity, depending on various factors such as the country's historical background, socioeconomic conditions, and the influence of internal and external actors. Successful transitions typically result in the establishment of stable democratic institutions, the protection of human rights, and the development of a market economy, though the path can be fraught with challenges, including political instability, economic hardship, and social unrest.

In the context of Montenegro, the transition from a communist state to a democratic republic illustrates the complexities and nuances of this process. Montenegro's transition years in the Balkans are marked by its efforts to build a democratic political system while navigating regional dynamics and international pressures. This research aims to elucidate how Montenegro's unique historical legacy, coupled with its strategic geopolitical position, has influenced its transition journey. By examining the roles of international organizations, regional influences, and domestic political actors, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Montenegro's post-communist development. The results of this research offer insights into the specific challenges and opportunities faced by Montenegro, contributing to the broader discourse on political transitions in the Balkans and providing valuable lessons for other countries undergoing similar processes.

The political transition in Montenegro, set against the backdrop of the broader upheaval across Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the late 20th century, was marked by a complex interplay of internal and external influences. The dissolution of the SFRY and subsequent conflicts significantly impacted Montenegro's political trajectory. Notably, Montenegro's transition diverged from the faster, more intense transformations seen in other Central and Eastern European post-communist societies. While countries like Romania experienced rapid upheavals, Montenegro's journey was more protracted, characterized by a gradual shift from an authoritarian regime dominated by the DPS to a more pluralistic political landscape. The first major phase of this transition, initiated in 1989, saw the replacement of the communist leadership with a new oligarchic elite within the DPS, marking the beginning of a stalled democracy that would later require further transformation.

The second phase of Montenegro's transition began in earnest in 1997 with the split within the DPS and the emergence of reformist leadership under Milo Đukanović. This period was crucial as it marked a clear departure from the policies of Slobodan Milošević, aligning Montenegro more closely with Western democratic norms and garnering international support. The collapse of Milošević's regime in 2000 further facilitated Montenegro's path towards democracy,

culminating in the peaceful referendum on independence in 2006. During this time, Montenegro navigated significant challenges, including economic sanctions and NATO intervention, while managing to maintain internal stability and avoid the violent conflicts that plagued neighboring regions. The international community's perception of Montenegro shifted, recognizing it as a pro-Western entity distinct from Serbia's tumultuous political environment.

In the post-independence period, Montenegro accelerated its efforts towards EU and NATO integration, achieving notable milestones such as EU candidate status in 2010 and NATO membership in 2017. These achievements underscored Montenegro's commitment to democratic reforms and regional stability. However, the prolonged dominance of the DPS raised concerns about the entrenchment of power and lack of political diversity. This culminated in the adoption of the controversial *Law on Freedom of Religion* in 2019, which sparked widespread protests and ultimately led to the DPS's electoral defeat in 2020. Despite subsequent political instability and frequent government changes, these developments have contributed to significant reforms in governance and the rule of law, positioning Montenegro as a leader in the European integration process in the WB. The ongoing political evolution, marked by a focus on anti-corruption and judicial reforms, reflects the complex but steady progress towards a consolidated democracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the political transition in Montenegro at the end of the 20th century marked a significant milestone in its post-communist transformation, a process that was notably peaceful due to the role of mass protests, ultimately avoiding the violence that characterized many other transitions in the region. This period saw the establishment of a multiparty system, the introduction of democratic values, and the strengthening of the rule of law, mirroring similar transformations in other European countries. However, Montenegro's journey stands out for its unique and complex nature, given the small scale of the republic and its challenging political landscape.

The transition to democracy was not without its intricacies. Montenegro became a symbol of both the potential and difficulties faced by small post-communist nations. The DPS, led by Milo Đukanović, dominated Montenegrin politics for over three decades, making the 2020 parliamentary elections, which saw the end of DPS rule, a pivotal moment in the country's political history. While it is still early to draw definitive conclusions about the future of Montenegro's political system, the fact remains that the DPS's prolonged reign and Đukanović's nearly

three-decade leadership in the region mark Montenegro as an exceptional case in Europe. This transition offers a rich and compelling subject for future scholarly work, particularly as Montenegrins themselves determine the next stages of their democratic evolution.

Through this chapter, the research has provided a deep dive into Montenegro's post-communist transformation within the context of the broader Balkan region, offering a detailed exploration of the country's journey from a communist state to a democratic republic. It has examined the political, economic, and social shifts that have shaped the country, shedding light on the complex dynamics at play. On the other hand, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the internal and external factors influencing Montenegro's development, including the role of international organizations, regional dynamics, and domestic political actors.

Moreover, the case of Montenegro offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by small nations in the Balkans, navigating both internal transformations and external pressures. As Montenegro continues to evolve politically, its experience will remain an important subject for analysts, theorists, and historians seeking to understand the broader implications of post-communist transitions in Europe.

In this book chapter, we conclude that there is a clear correlation between the political consequences of the dominant party system (DPS) in Montenegro and the exploitation of ethnic diversity, which caused the country's political split. Furthermore, Montenegrin society and its "flexible identity" and "situational nationalism" (Kapidžić and Komar, 2022) demonstrate that the division within Montenegrin society would not have existed unless political elites had conceptualized the conflict situation and constantly returned to the past. Because of this, Southeastern European societies, including Montenegro, are defined as ethnically divided societies with 'segmental volatility,' as reflected in the formation of Montenegrin ethnic identity. The country's political split is "malleable" (Enyedi, 2005: 699; Šorović, 2024b: 15).

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CHAPTER V

GREEK FAR-RIGHT: THE FORMATION OF AN AUTONOMOUS POLITICAL SPACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction[1]

The 1990s marked Greek politics and society with a series of events. In the political field, at the beginning of the decade, significant political conflicts erupted, linked to a major financial scandal in which the then Prime Minister and key government officials were allegedly involved. At the same time, international events following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the subsequent changes (e.g., in migration flows) directly affected political parties and the political system.

This instability had immediate consequences for Greek political parties as well as society. As in other European countries, in Greece too, significant levels of dissatisfaction and political cynicism also begin to emerge, while abstention rates start to concern the entire political establishment. Thus, this marked the beginning of a continuous period characterized by both a crisis of representation and a legitimacy crisis, which, with various fluctuations, spans at least a two-decade-long course. Among the multiple crises that arise, new political

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parties emerge that differentiate themselves from the mainstream parties, with rhetoric focusing partly or entirely on critiquing the democratic model and the practices of Metapolitefsi[2], and gradually affecting the entire political landscape. A key player in this effort is Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos (LAOS-Popular Orthodox Rally), a radical far-right party that appears in the early 2000s and will play a decisive role in renewing conservatism and reshaping the party system.

In order to examine the above in detail, the following will be analysed: a) the trajectory of the broader right-wing space in the Metapolitefsi period, in an attempt to trace the multifaceted relationships that have developed between the Right and the far-right[3]. The post-war organisational model of the far-right sought to establish close ties with the Right, making this connection of crucial importance, b) the emergence of LAOS and the strategies it employs to break the far-right's long-standing dependence. In this context, the political opportunities leveraged by LAOS will be examined, along with the political platform it presents, which appear to persuade the electorate to place their trust in it. These include its ideology, the political personnel it gathers, and the communication strategies it adopts. At the same time, through its trajectory, to what extend has it built strongholds in electoral districts that consistently support similar parties and political agendas, allowing the far-right to stabilize within the political system for nearly 20 years? Finally, c) the strategies of the Right towards the far-right will be examined, with a reference to similar parties in the Balkan region.

The historical and political evolution of the Right in the post-Junta period (1974-1999)

The fall of the Regime of the Colonels (1967-1974) does not simply restore the democratic system, nor does it return the political and party system to its previous state. The post-authoritarian régime -the Metapolitefsi-will leave a decisive mark on political subjects and will affect the social dynamics for more than 40 years. The right-wing party, which had been the key point for the formation of the state apparatus and the political system in the post-war period, would be radically reformed under the leadership of Konstantinos Karamanlis, who reject the idea

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2   Metapolitefsi refers to the Third Hellenic Republic, i.e. the post-Junta (1974-) régime change into a democratic republic.

3   The term far-right is used throughout the text to delineate a boundary between the right-wing and the political parties, organizations, and individuals situated further to the right. This includes various subcategories, such as populist, radical, and extremist right, among others.

of re-establishing the pre-dictatorial Ethniki Rizospastiki Enosis (ERE-National Radical Union), and establish Nea Dimokratia (ND-New Democracy).

The new party of the conservative faction moved significantly away from the pre-Junta habits of the Right. Initially, it accepted and legitimized the Communist Party (KKE), which had been illegal until that time, and then, although the nationalist side had strong ties to the crown, it chose a neutral stance in preparation for the 1974 referendum on the return of the king, which was decisive in the outcome of the result against the establishment of the monarchy (Mavrogordatos, 1984). At the same time, the leader of the Right relied heavily on the tactics of reaching out to the centre and moderation rather than following more radical paths.

The new régime will find the far-right in complete disarray, as during the dictatorship its leading members were placed in important positions in the state administration. With the fall of the dictatorship, they were completely delegitimized and found themselves in a political dilemma without a specific strategy and political identity. For this reason, a strategy of acceptance or opposition to the democratic framework was crucial for their political integrity. The main directions that the far-right chose to pursue were: a) to follow an autonomous direction, where they formed short-lived and personalised political groups, which were unable to produce an overall strategy, b) they tried to approach and to some extent join the new party of the centre-right.

The coalition of the Right and the extreme right was an important tactical choice for the stability of the Greek post-war political system. Particularly in the field of youth, significant convergences and collaborations can be found throughout the turbulent period before the dictatorship, culminating in the 1960s. In the post-Junta period, the formation of ND, with strong ideological groups and factions[4] within the party, was a major factor assisting its contact and cooperation with the far-right. To understand this better, two important political groups that formed and acted within the party will be examined below.

The first one consisted of political personnel coming mainly from the old right-wing party of ERE, clinging to the old splits of the political system, reintroducing divisions and tensions that were now considered obsolete for the renewed party system. The second clustered around the personality of Karamanlis, who,

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4   The terms *group* and *faction*, as used throughout this paper, refer to intra-party divisions within political parties and to the groupings—whether formal or informal—that emerge based on ideological, political, or tactical alignments among party members. For a more detailed analysis of these intra-party groupings, see, *inter alia*, Sartori (2005: 63-66).

through the ND, was seeking to modernise the Right based on the European standards (Alivizatos, 1980: 71-72). Smaller groups developed between the two groups, but the main internal life and the ideological and political disputes within the party were based on the two lines mentioned above.

The far-right groupings of the period gradually developed relations with the first group within the ND. It should be noted that even within this group one can identify significant differentiations, which schematically form two sub-groups. One of them openly adopts pro-conservative positions, opening up the constitutional issue, on which the ND opted for neutrality, while simultaneously strongly criticizing the strategy of approaching the centre. However, they consider their role particularly crucial for the party to remain on the ideological principles of conservatism and ultimately obey the party's needs and tactics. The second sub-group, while ideologically close to the first, does not hesitate to make its (radical) demands known in the public sphere, regarding not only the monarchy but even the better management of the coup leaders. This group will develope close relations with far-right parties and personalities (Papavlasopoulos, 2004: 332-333).

As the relations between the two sides were marked by a series of crises, especially after the referendum for the return of the king and the trial of the Colonels, the extreme right was in a constant state of dynamic movement and continually seeking its own autonomous course. When conditions matured and the right leaders who could lead this effort emerged, the extreme-wing left the Right party and, together with other groups from the extra-parliamentary sphere, formed the Ethniki Parataxis (EP-National Camp). This party was the most successful group for the post-Junta far-right, until the emergence of Chrisi Avgi (GD-Golden Dawn), as it won 6.8 % in the 1977 elections.

However, the new far-right party from the very beginning does not simply claim the space of the nationalist right and the corresponding electorate but acts mainly as a blackmail party (Mavrogordatos, 1983: 77). In other words, it tries to exert influence on the positions and the political space occupied by ND. Its aim was to weaken ND and restore the conservatives to their pre-dictatorial positions (Pappas, 1998: 60-62). Within a few years, and in preparation for Karamanlis's transition to the Presidency of the Republic, the departed conservatives will return to the ND, with the most prominent members being directly absorbed into the party's electoral lists in the 1981 elections.

With the return of the far-right to the ND, the ultra-conservative wing was revitalised and reclaimed a role in the party's internal activities. The change in leadership and the adoption of more conservative positions by Averoff's ND not

only help integrate this group into the party but also strengthen its influence. Furthermore, alarming trends of radicalization were emerging within the right-wing youth sphere. In fact, task forces—known as the Centaurs and Rangers—were formed around the party's official youth organization,[5] ONNED, and took on an important role as strike cores. Their methods of action closely resemble those of corresponding groups of the extreme right. This section will "host" various far-right figures from whom the party recruits members (Papavlasopoulos, 2004: 345). Accordingly, both their actions and the rhetoric they use are virtually identical to those of the post-war far-right. Their activities were not limited to combating "enemies" outside the party; they also serve as the "frontline" in internal conflicts and disputes.

The new leadership change in the right-wing party, due to its poor electoral performance against PASOK, and the rise of Konstantinos Mitsotakis, a liberal politician, did not affect the favorable conditions that were formed in the previous period for the far-right wing within the party (Tsiras, 2012: 99). In fact, as the party was constantly searching for the ideal formula to challenge the dominance of the centre-left, it repeatedly shifted in an attempt to appeal to both the center-right electorate and those further to the right. It is notable that leading far-right figures have admitted that in the political crisis of the '89-'90s and in the triple elections, they chose to withdraw from contesting votes, indirectly opting to move them towards the ND.

Meanwhile, the party leader was surrounded by key figures of the ultra-conservative wing of the party, with Georgios Karatzaferis standing out as the most significant. Relying on his expertise in communication topics, which increasingly influenced the election campaigns, he will compete for a position in the high echelons of the party. As a politician, Karatzaferis prioritized issues that were important at the political and ideological core of nationalist voters, such as the release of the Junta Colonels, as well as demands regarding the fate of the monarchy and the king himself (Psarras, 2010).

During this period, organizations and groups on the radical and extreme right (such as EPEN[6] and the Hellenic Front) were renewing their ideological and

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5 For their use and actions as task forces, see Sklavenitis (2015: 366-369).

6 EPEN was a party formed within the Korydallos prison in 1984, led by the dictator G. Papadopoulos. Politically, it follows many of the positions of the junta régime and strongly advocates for the release of its leader. It is worth noting that within the party, and particularly in its youth wing, there were members who will play leading role in the Greek far-right of the 21st century (e.g., Michaloliakos, Voridis). See Georgiadou (2019: 97-125).

political strategies. Many of them, following the example of similar parties across Europe, began adopting free market and privatization demands, coupled with strong criticism on the role of the state and public administration. As a result, they gradually integrated neoliberal positions into their political platforms, which facilitated the far-right's growing ties with factions and members of ND who shared similar views. In the years of economic crisis and austerity measures, these connections would make it easier for parts of the far-right to gain influence within and even shift toward the ND party.

The discussion about the ultra-conservative faction within the ND came into the spotlight in the 1990s, a decade in which the demand for the nationalist agenda increased significantly. The Macedonian conflict and the dispute over the name of the then FYROM propelled nationalist figures as "experts" on TV panels, giving them significant airtime to promote their views.[7] At the same time, the emergence of private television channels marked a new era in Greek media, society and politics. On regional stations and notably on Karatzaferi's own station, significant personalities of the far-right began hosting shows, further facilitating the spread of nationalist narratives (Lazaridis, 2024: 158-159). Issues that, as mentioned earlier, were at the core of the far-right, were strengthened by a series of conspiracy theories, that glorified the Greek nation and the central place it supposedly holds in global culture.

The political vibrations caused, in part, by the handling of the Macedonian issue will led to: a) a significant split within the ND, where the then-Foreign Minister A. Samaras will leave ND, to found his own party, Politiki Anixi (Political Spring),[8] b) the fall of the Mitsotakis government in 1993 and the return of PASOK, and c) after intense competition and disputes over leadership succession, Kostas Karamanlis, the founder's nephew, will be elected as the new leader of ND. Under his leadership, the party will expand its influence towards the centre and appeal to moderate voters. This shift will energize the conservative elements within the party, and the political dynamics of the period will set the stage for the creation of a new party to the right of ND.

The continuous conflicts with extreme party officials culminated in the expulsion of G. Karatzaferis in 2000, shortly after which he found LAOS. This new party

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7   A notable example is the TV program "Telos Epohis" (1995), broadcast on a nationwide TV station. The program featured for one episode the leader of GD N. Michaloliakos, the deputy leader Ch. Pappas, and the historic figure of the extreme right K. Plevris. The relevant video can be accessed: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYv863E-lM8

8   For the differences between the party and LAOS, see Ellinas (2010: 136-137).

would later include prominent members of the ND as well as other groups from the extra-parliamentary far-right, both radical and extremist, which will be examined below. Prior to the establishment of LAOS, the far-right had primarily made its presence felt through the EP. However, smaller groups connected to youth, such as ENEK, also played a notable role, as did parties like EPEN, which managed to achieve temporary electoral representation. These groups, however, lacked a stable political trajectory and typically faded into marginality after elections.[9] Despite this, they gradually built significant electoral "castles" and cultivated a dedicated voter pool, contributing to a consolidated nationalist vote within the broader right-wing electorate. These voter bases would become the foundation upon which LAOS and its later successors would initially build their political presence.

Aspects of a (successful) strategy: the consolidation of the far-right within the party system

As analysed earlier, the post-Junta Greek far-right remains largely attached to and rooted in the ND, with a few exceptions that, however, have relatively small impact and are (socially) marginalised. With the rise, growth and electoral success of LAOS, the political landscape seems to be shifting significantly, with notable effects on the party system. Yet, what is the innovation of the LAOS that will make it the first far-right party to succeed in being elected in consecutive elections?

Ignazi (2003:1) observes that despite "*The initial, albeit very limited, success of neo-fascist parties...it was not to be confirmed later on and the extreme right almost disappeared*", however, it was the populist radical right[10] that ultimately broke this pattern of failure, establishing a more stable presence in the party system. The case of LAOS exemplifies this shift. Although the party entered the political arena with a renewed pro-conservative agenda, many of its members expressed nostalgia for the military junta and positive views towards the monarchy. Typically, adherence to the old régime is seen as a negative factor to the success of right-wing parties (Ignazi, 1997: 312), yet LAOS seems to overturn this model. To

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9   The weak electoral performance of the far-right will be the primary reason why both the academic literature and public discourse will appear insufficient when the extremist right makes its appearance through GD, sparking an extensive public debate regarding the reasons behind its continued rise. One of the "innovations" brought about by the rise of LAOS is the renewed focus of researchers on parties and figures within this space (Ellinas, 2012: 124).

10   For the placement of the party as a Populist radical, see Mudde (2007).

understand the party's success, it will be analysed the ideological framework it was built around, the staff it recruits, the political opportunities it receives through its media exposure, and the electoral reservoirs that favor the consolidation of this party and its later successors.

Ideology

Appearing in 2000, in a relatively favorable context for a pro-conservative agenda, LAOS emerged at a time when significant political issues were unfolding: a major state-church confrontation had begun over the mandatory registration of writing the religion on identity cards and the name dispute over FYROM was quite recent and political conflicts were continuously erupting around it. Moreover, the "middle ground" strategy adopted by the ND, which partially sidelined the electorate on its right, left considerable political space for the development of new parties. LAOS would capitalise on every aspect and political opportunity that emerged. It established strong ties with Archbishop Christodoulos, who was a key figure in the ID controversy, and the party, both in terms of rhetoric and symbolism, fully adopted the principles of the Orthodox faith.[11]

It is crucial to understand that LAOS operates in a state of ambiguity concerning its views and positions. The television charisma of the leader, as well as of his most important cadres, many of whom were highly familiar with the media, as will be analysed later, enabled them to tailor their discourse according to their audience. On the same issue they adopted extreme positions when addressing to their followers, while presenting more moderate, conservative stances when they were on national TV stations. Although this adaptability was criticised by party members for its inconsistency, it provided LAOS with the opportunity to appeal to a wide range of voters.

Despite its tendency to muddy the waters, its ideological core was built around an irredentist nationalism, in which the Orthodox faith—considered intrinsically tied to the Greek state—occupies a central position. Following the path of the Greek far-right of the 1990s, the primary enemies of the nation are identified as immigrants (particularly illegal ones) and other groups often implicated in the "nation's fate" through extensive networks of conspiracy theories. Depending on the context, these groups may include Jews, bankers, or other nations, with Turks, Albanians, and Americans occupying a prominent position (Ellinas, 2010:

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11   From its title (Popular *Orthodox* Rally) to its founding date (14/09/2000), which was chosen symbolically as it marks the Orthodox Church's celebration of the Elevation of the Holy Cross, its close relationship with the Church is clearly evident.

138-139). These enemies are frequently blamed for every issue facing the Greek state, from unemployment to the financial crisis of 2009.

Thus, the party leader often directs his rhetoric against the "corrupt elites" who, as he claims, are destroying the country's productivity for the benefit of the few. This positioning and focus on the people vs. elite dichotomy becomes more pronounced with the outbreak of the economic crisis, during which Marxist terminology is strategically instrumentalised in the party's discourse in order to construct an anti-plutocratic framework of critique (Iliadeli, 2010: 121-129). Despite its seemingly anti-capitalist position—used primarily as a populist rhetorical strategy—on economic issues it advocates neoliberal demands, which will be evident in its stance during the memoranda period (Lazaridis, 2024:163). However, consistent with its nationalist principles, the party prioritizes keeping critical economic sectors under state control (Mudde, 2007: 129).

Despite its extensive criticism of the democratic system, the party focuses primarily on the deconstruction of Metapolitefsi guarantees, accusing political personnel of being corrupt, and advocating for the moral restoration of conservative symbols. At the same time, it does not entirely reject democracy but proposes reinforcing it through an authoritarian control framework. The authoritarianisation of the state comes as a demand in the face of "fear", which in the party's rhetoric is mainly provoked by immigrant populations. The party's manifesto refers to immigrants as "imported criminals" (LAOS, 2004), arguing that addressing this issue requires strengthening the "law and order" doctrine. In line with this doctrine and the push for more punitive measures, the party also called for the reintroduction of the death penalty.

Political personnel

Karatzaferis establishes his new party by recruiting political personnel from two main sources[12]: a) executives and staff from extra-parliamentary far-right parties or from ND, and b) television and lifestyle personalities (Karoulas, 2014: 117). Regarding the first group, although it includes cadres bearing the "*New Democracy identity*" (Georgiadou, 2019: 154), particularly in the initial local elections in which the party participates, it also attracts members spanning the entire spectrum and factions of the extra-parliamentary far-right of the time.

More specifically, as a direct result of the party's collaborations, members of K.

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12   It is important to note, however, that the lines of distinction between the categories of personnel origins are often blurred and indistinct. For instance, some personnel recruited as public figures had simultaneously established significant political careers.

Plevris's[13] Proti Grammi (PG-Front Line), an organization with a clear national-socialist orientation, participated in its founding activities from the outset. Along similar ideological lines, members with ties to GD were also present. Although LAOS did not establish direct cooperation with GD, the "nationalist electoral list" for the Super-prefecture of Athens-Piraeus elections in 2002—jointly supported by LAOS and PG—included individuals with explicit connections to GD (Tsiras, 2012: 118). Among them was I. Panagiotaros[14], who later became a member of parliament for GD (2012–2019) and was convicted in 2020.

In 2005, the party cooperated with the Elliniko Metopo (EM-Hellenic Front) led by Makis Voridis, a former EPEN member, who served as a MP for LAOS (2007-2012) and later joined ND in 2012, where he held ministerial positions in key government ministries. The EM was founded within the far-right political milieu of the 1990s (EPEN, National Party), and despite its poor electoral performance and limited regional influence, it played a significant role in renewing the ideological core of the radical far-right. Drawing inspiration from radical parties of the period, particularly Le Pen's National Front, the party placed a strong emphasis on issues such as (illegal) immigration, the protection of national identity, and nationalism as central tenets of its ideological framework (Ellinas, 2010: 133). This was combined with a blend of authoritarianism and pro-free market policies, with a specific focus on privatisation and limiting state intervention (Georgiadou, 2019: 141-145).[15]

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13   Plevris was a prominent figure of the national socialist parties and movements, serving as leader of the post-war 4th of August Party (supporters of Dictator Metaxas), which is considered a breeding place for right-wing extremists. He held high-ranking positions within the state during the Junta period and later established connections with leading members of the extremist right in the Metapolitefsi era. Additionally, Plevris hosted his own TV show on Karatzaferis channel, where he promoted his books. Much of his published work addresses issues related to Jews, most notably his revisionist take on the Holocaust and his endorsement of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Notably, Psarras (2013, p. 205) refers to him as "*the Goebbels of (dictator) Papadopoulos*". Furthermore, there are several allegations against him, including claims that he collaborated with the Greek secret service during the post-Junta period, see Omada Ios (1996).

14   Panagiotaros was also a key member of *Galazia Stratia*, an organized supporter group associated with the national football team, which became notorious for its involvement in incidents at football matches and for displaying banners with explicit Nazi and nationalist messages before the rise of GD. This group garnered significant media attention, as documented in sources such as *Omada Ios* (2001).

15   The path of Voridis and his party, which strategically invest in xenophobia and closely resemble the tactics of Le Pen, is also supported by the observation made by von Beyme (1988), that right-wing parties now aim for "intellectual hegemony", promoting the corresponding "militant-rightist intellectuals". Voridis is one of the first far-right leaders who attempts to challenge the "ideological hegemony of the left," even using Gramsci in his analyses.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, there are also several members from ND, who either left the party at some point during the post-Junta period or later joined Karatzaferis. In the first case, these were members expelled due to their political views. For example, I. Savvouras, a pro-royalist former MP, was expelled from ND in 1976, partly due to his involvement in organizations linked to the monarchy. Similarly, M. Manolakos, a member of the youth task forces and a prominent figure in the nationalist movement, was known for his openly pro-Junta stance.

The aforementioned schematic classifications of the political personnel recruited by LAOS largely reflect the party's political flexibility and the diversity of ideological factions that coalesce within it. By the mid-2000s, the party succeeded in incorporating the three main ideological camps of the Greek far-right (Tsiras, 2012: 109): the extremist faction, including hard national-socialists, the radical nationalists, who had renewed their strategies in the preceding period and played a leading role in the party's alignment with European far-right parties, and, finally, the so-called "popular right", which includes executives who were part of ND at some point during the Metapolitefsi period, as well as conservative individuals with pro-royalist and/or pro-Junta views who had previously been involved in various parties and organizations[16].

The political personnel mentioned were generally well-known in the public sphere or within nationalist circles and political groups, due to their political involvement and views. The second, and more numerous, group consisted of personalities from television, radio, and the broader lifestyle sector. This group included singers, actors, athletes, and even individuals with cult characteristics, many of whom gained media attention via underground broadcasts. In this way, Karatzaferis significantly renewed the sources of political candidates by promoting people with whom he had collaborated within television circles and who had gained visibility using television programs. The topics they focused on included issues of historical revisionism, extensive conspiracy theories, telesales for controversial (scientifically) historical and political books, and finally, shows with an interest in ancient Greek culture that glorify the Greek nation.

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16 This mapping overlooks the analysis of personnel with symbolic importance for the Greek far-right, such as A. Giosmas (who later appeared on the GD electoral lists), the son of Xenophon Giosmas (or Fon Giosmas), who was known for his connections with the WWII German occupation forces and played a prominent role as a leading figure in the post-war *parakratos* (deep state), culminating in his involvement in the assassination of the left-wing politician G. Lambrakis in 1963.

From the TV camera to the parliamentary seats, figures like A. Georgiadis[17] and K. Velopoulos[18] will emerge, while D. Liakopoulos[19], a close associate and best man of Karatzaferis, known for his conspiracy theories, will participate in party events and propagate party positions. The political personnel of this recruitment pool is directly guided by the party leader and director of their television station. Karatzaferis serves simultaneously as mentor, party leader, and employer of his MPs. However, these relationships will not remain harmonious for long, as after 2011, many of these executives will be absorbed by ND, "betraying" Karatzaferis and leaving the party in obscurity. Some will rise to high positions within ND governments, while others will seek refuge in new far-right parties.

Media

The field of communication was one of the strong assets of the leader of LAOS, and to a large extent, it was one of the main reasons that helped him rise to the leadership of the party while he was still in ND. Before the introduction of privately owned television in Greece in the early 1990s, Karatzaferis had developed a substantial business activity in producing radio programs and also played an active role in the party's newspaper (Psarras, 2010: 45). The expertise he gained from his involvement in the media would be used to acquire his own media outlets. With the entry of private television in Greece, Karatzaferis founded his own (regional) television station, Telecity (later renamed TileAsty). This station provided significant airtime for figures from the radical and extremist right, creating a mix of commercial nationalism: in addition to promoting their ideas, they also endorsed materials (books, magazines, tapes) that validated their statements. The television airtime, both through the leader's personal show and the shows of party officials, helped these previously unknown figures become familiar to the television audience and established a form of direct communication with them.

Additionally, the TV station would also serve as an organizational tool for the development of the party's (underdeveloped) internal structures. As Psarras (2010: 12) notes, *"(LAOS) is essentially a creation of television"*, and through it, the party

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17 Georgiadis will eventually leave the party and join ND, where he will even run for its presidency. He will hold significant government position. For more on his path, see Psarras (2010, pp. 203-205) and Psarras (2018).

18 Velopoulos will initially join ND, but will soon leave and establish his own party, Elliniki Lisi (EL-Greek Solution), a faithful replica of LAOS. For more, see Psarras (2010, pp. 205-208).

19 Liakopoulos was one of the most prominent figures who emerged in the space between the far-right and conspiracy theories, having authored numerous books and become one of the most high-profile personalities of the television station. For more, see Psarras (2010, pp. 208-210).

recruits and trains its officials. It is also the medium that connects, and in fact brings into the public sphere, officials, members, and supporters from across the spectrum of the extra-parliamentary far-right (Ellinas, 2010:141).

The personal television station, of course, was not enough on its own to provide the nationwide visibility that the party leader desired. The leader's charisma and his ability to create impressions, made him popular with the media, securing him television airtime during prime hours. In fact, his presence was not limited to politically-oriented programs but extended to appearances on tabloid talk shows as well. A similar strategy and approach to television exposure were adopted by many of the officials who were at the forefront of the party.

Electoral Reservoirs and Political Descendants

The political space located furthest to the right of the established right, which was largely controlled by the latter, has now, after more than 20 years, acquired an autonomous trajectory. The emergence of LAOS marked the beginning of this space, as it was followed by a series of parties that were elected at both national and European elections.[20] In fact, the rise of GD demonstrated that not only is there a stable space for extreme right-wing narratives, but also that a segment of society is shifting towards this direction, a segment that was largely mobilized during the period of 2011-2015. Therefore, to examine the conditions under which these parties establish themselves in the political system, it is necessary to consider their electoral appeal, specifically the electoral bases and strongholds they gradually build, which will provide steady support for these parties and their policies.

The first elections in which LAOS participated were for the Super-prefecture of Athens-Piraeus will address all the ideological issues previously examined, particularly the strategy followed by the ND in its approach to the centre. The party received 13.6%, making an impressive entry into the political and party arena. In the 2004 national elections, it came close to parliamentary representation[21] with 2.2%. However, in the 2007 snap elections, it successfully surpassed the required threshold for its entry into parliament (3.8%). It repeated this success in 2009 with 5.63%, while its participation in the Papademos government in 2011, along with the absorption of its key members by the ND, gradually sidelined the party.

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20   Specifically, in 2012 GD and ANEL were elected, in 2019 EL, in 2023 Spartiates and Niki, and in the 2023 European elections, in addition to EL, Spartiates and Niki, Foni Logikis was elected. See more about the latest elections, Georgiadou & Rori (2023).

21   The threshold for entering the Greek Parliament is set at 3%.

From 2012 onward, it has seen a steady decline in votes, far from the prospect of regaining parliamentary representation. Its performance in the European elections mirrored this trend. In 2004, unlike the national elections of the same year, it managed to cross the threshold (4.12%) and elect the party leader as an MP, while in 2009, receiving 7.15%—the highest percentage it has ever achieved in a national or European election—and elected two MPs. Since then, its support has continued to shrink dramatically.

In the analysis of the geographical distribution of LAOS, it is observed that the most significant performances are recorded in major urban centers. Specifically, with its strongest stronghold being the city and suburbs of Thessaloniki (Thessaloniki A & B regions) and, to a lesser extent, the Central Macedonia region (Imathia, Kilkis), it achieves its highest percentages in the first case and significantly higher percentages in the second, compared to its nationwide results. Similarly, in the electoral regions within Attica (Attica, Athens A & B, Piraeus A & B), the largest population regions, the party records percentages in the 2007 elections that are 1.5% higher, and in the 2009 elections 2-2.5% higher, than its national results (Table 1).

Table 1. *2007 and 2009 highest LAOS's number of votes in large urban areas.*

Regions	2007 elections	2009 elections
Thessaloniki A	6.22 %	8.26 %
Attica	5.82 %	8.23 %
Piraeus B	5.52 %	7.58 %
Athens A	5.39 %	7.59 %
Thessaloniki B	5.35 %	7.48 %
Piraeus A	5.25 %	7.56 %
Athens B	5.04%	7.28%
National percentage	3.80 %	5.63 %

Note : Data from Ministry of the Interior, https://ekloges.ypes.gr/

The participation of LAOS in the Papademos Government, the strategic moves of New Democracy under the leadership of A. Samaras, and the tactic of absorbing the far-right into the broader right will lead to the gradual decline of the party. In the 2012 elections, which reshaped the party system, the fall of LAOS coincides with the simultaneous rise of

Anexartitoi Ellines (ANEL–Independent Greeks)[22] and GD. In those elections (May 2012), the far-right in all its variations garnered the highest percentage ever achieved by this political space during the post-dictatorship period (20.47%).

The "strongholds" built by LAOS, however, appear to benefit the far-right parties emerging during that period. Analysing GD's performance, it seems to draw significant portion of its support from two main sources: a) electoral regions that traditionally favor right-wing and far-right parties. Specifically, areas in the Peloponnese (Corinthia, Laconia, Argolida), which in the past delivered high percentages to the EP and showed strong support for the monarchy in the 1974 referendum, and b) GD also appears to achieve high percentages in areas of Attica, where LAOS had previously performed particularly well (Attica, Piraeus, Athens). In contrast, LAOS's electoral bases in Northern Greece seem to benefit ANEL, which, as a party straddling the broader right-wing spectrum, preferentially attracts the votes of disenchanted right-wing voters.

The influence of GD in Athens can be explained both in relation to the pre-existing influence that LAOS had in this electoral district and independently of it. The high concentration of immigrant populations in the center of Athens, combined with the violent activities of GD's paramilitary squads, brought the party into the spotlight as early as 2010.[23] At that time, it secured 5.3% and managed to enter the Municipal Council of the city of Athens, where its leader, through extremist and pro-Nazi rhetoric and actions, succeeded in attracting public attention.[24] From that point onward, the party embarked on a steady upward trajectory. In this way, the Municipality of Athens (and the electoral district of Athens A) constitutes a significant stronghold of the far-right, not only at the national level but particularly in local elections.

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22   For its classification as a far-right movement party, see Fielitz (2019).

23   Since then, the so-called "social" activities began, where the party and its members-initiated actions benefiting "only Greeks". These activities were highlighted by the far-right press and attracted the attention of television stations. For more on the activities of these groups, which at times served as a cover for violent attacks on migrants, see Koronaiou & Sakellariou (2013).

24   For the role of the 2010 local elections as a political opportunity for GD, see Dinas et al. (2016).

In conclusion: Dilemmas of the Right - Strategic Choices between Imitation and Distancing

Regardless of the strategies employed by the far-right and the political opportunities it utilizes in order to remain in the political spotlight, the actions and choices made by the right-wing parties play a pivotal role in enabling the far-right to ascend and secure the political space necessary for its establishment within the political system. This is because the trajectory of the far-right, throughout all phases of its post-war development, is intertwined with the right-wing, with these two spaces intersecting on a political-ideological level and through programmatic agreements. However, this contact is neither symmetrical nor controlled by the far-right, as the right functions post-war as a political camp orchestrating the actions of (ultra-)conservative social and political actors (Papavlasopoulos, 2015). In conclusion, this chapter examines the main strategies adopted by the right parties, focusing primarily on the Greek example while also exploring analogous tactical approaches adopted by right-wing parties in neighboring Balkan countries.

The relationship between the right-wing and its far-right offshoots varies depending on the political and social context at stake. Based on Kriesi (1999), the intersection and interaction of these two spaces can be summarized as follows:

- The tactic of "instrumentalisation" of the far-fight agenda and leaders. By engaging in an open dialogue with far-right organizations, the right-wing shifts its position along the center-right to right-wing spectrum. This approach aims to broaden its appeal to new constituencies while simultaneously curbing the growth of other parties and groups further to its right. However, this strategy may inadvertently benefit far-right parties, as the established right legitimizes extreme rhetoric and symbols (Kriezi, 1999: 418).

A notable example of this dynamic is the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which emerged from the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Despite positioning itself as center-right, the SNS incorporates (ultra-) nationalist rhetoric, particularly on issues such as Kosovo, and retains ideological ties with the SRS (Stojarová, 2013: 66). This approach allows the SNS to dominate the conservative voter base, marginalizing extremist far-right parties over time.

- The tactic of "demarcation" of the right from the far-right. Under this approach, the right-wing partially adopts certain far-right issues while maintaining a firm position within its own ideological framework. This strategy helps it solidify its status as a center-right party, while minimizing opportunities for interaction with more extremist groups. Simultaneously, it emphasizes its

opposition to more radical political positions. However, under this strategy, the far-right often finds ground for growth, as the established Right shifts towards the center.

The case of Croatia exemplifies, in a sense, this strategy. Although the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) is classified by scholars as a radical right party (Bustikova, 2020) and is considered responsible for a series of illiberal actions (Čepo, 2022), in recent years with the European integration as a central issue, it has been increasingly shifting towards the center-right. While it shares a common ideological base with far-right parties, particularly on nationalist views of the state, HDZ tries to distance itself and draw clear distinctions. For instance, on issues like EU membership and international relations (such as NATO), the HDZ adopts positions that distance it from extremist right-wing parties, leaving the far-right largely marginalised (Stojarová, 2012: 144–147). At the same time, the attempt to shift towards the center-right left a space to its right, which in the latest elections (2024) was represented by the Homeland Movement.

Moreover, in order for the right to impose clear limits on the development of the far-right, even when cooperating with them in government coalitions, it implements additional safeguards to define and protect its own space. Barriers to legitimizing the far-right agenda may include programmatic guarantees, such as those agreed upon by coalition partners in Romania (1992-1996), including the far-right parties Greater Romania Party and the Romanian National Unity Party (Shafir, 1996: 91).

Nevertheless, Georgiadou (2013: 80) adds a third strategy to the above model, based on the Greek example and the actions of Konstantinos Karamanlis. In this case, the right-wing party instrumentalises the far-right and its staff (Pappas, 1998: 153), as in 1980, when it absorbed the majority of the EP back into the ND. However, the right remained faithful to its leader's stance on moderation and centrist approach, while simultaneously managing to eliminate the far-right from the political map.

The tactical approach of the right-wing is not static over time. Since the late 1990s, ND has consistently followed the strategy of *demarcation*, which led to the departure of LAOS. In government, ND would take hardline positions particularly on national issues, while attempting, to some extent, to engage with more extreme audiences. However, during the subsequent period of the economic crisis, under the leadership of A. Samaras, ND adopted a strategy of *boundary-setting*. Initially, this was attempted with LAOS, whose popularity continued to rise steadily until 2011, showing no signs of the sharp decline that would follow. By

placing national issues at the forefront of its agenda and adhering to an anti-immigration rhetoric, Samaras effectively absorbed much of LAOS's agenda. The gradual disintegration of LAOS and ND's open doors to its members marked the party's disappearance from the political landscape. However, as two new far-right parties (ANEL and GD) emerged to the right of ND, achieving notable electoral success, and with ND's electoral collapse,[25] it became clear that this strategy was not entirely successful.[26] It may have been effective in demarcating specific types of the far-right (e.g., populist radical right), but not in halting the broader rise of far-right parties.

In summary, it is clear that the right does not act in a unified or coordinated manner in response to the far-right threat. Its tactics evolve based on historical and political contexts as well as social availability. Moreover, even the same parties, such as ND, alter their strategies over time. The tactic of instrumentalising the far-right, while strategically aimed at consolidating the Right in the nationalist space, seems to have, in the Greek case, created an opportunity for more radical forms of the far-right to emerge into the political spotlight. This kind of tactic, in addition to further elevating and legitimizing the ultra-conservative agenda, carries the risk of the right-wing itself becoming progressively radicalized. By following this path, the danger arises that Le Pen's statement—"that the voters prefer the original over the copy" (Mudde, 2007: 241)—may ultimately prove true. With the establishment of an autonomous far-right space and the rooting of far-right parties to the right of ND, it appears that even in the more conservative positions it adopts, the right-wing is no longer able to define the political developments to its right.

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25 In the May 2012 elections, ND received 18.85%, the lowest rate achieved in an electoral contest since its founding.

26 The approach to the demarcation culminated in the contacts and discussions between the Prime Minister's inner circle and key figures from GD. The confession by several members of ND regarding a possible alliance with Golden Dawn was confirmed by the revelation of the contacts between Baltakos (the then General Secretary to the Government) and Kasidiaris (a GD MP), an event that triggered significant political confrontations targeting the right-wing party, see Psarras (2014).

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CHAPTER VI

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN BULGARIA'S TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY FROM 1990 TO 2007

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Intruduction

Following the cessation of the Second World War, the Kingdom of Bulgaria became a constituent state of the Eastern Bloc under the Soviet Union's dominion. Consequently, a communist system was established within the country. The Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) assumed a structural equilibrium with the state, thereby establishing itself as the sole power of the country for a considerable duration. During the period of the BKP administration, political opposition was systematically suppressed, resulting in its complete exclusion from decision-making processes. The oppressive communist regime in Bulgaria, which endured for nearly half a century, ultimately collapsed in a relatively brief period in 1989, a consequence of the dynamic shifts that occurred on the global stage. Despite the long-term oppression of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, the country experienced a successful and bloodless revolution when compared to other Central and Eastern European[1] countries.

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1   Some countries have experienced significant challenges and civil wars characterised by violence during the transition from communist and socialist regimes to democracy. Examples include Romania's transition to democracy and the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia following a series of civil wars.

The transition of the Bulgarian state to a democratic system of governance was facilitated by the rapid implementation of reforms by the Bulgarian Communist Party, which subsequently evolved into the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Concurrently, the Bulgarian Socialist Party's acquiescence to the transition from the former communist system to democratic rule, the apparent absence of resistance, the peaceful acceptance of elections and the advent of a multi-party era in the country are worthy of citation as exemplary.

A further reason why Bulgaria's transition to democracy was peaceful is that the anti-communist opposition in the country united under one roof (United Democratic Forces Party) and managed this process by acting in a planned and programmed manner. The UDF united the disparate opposition factions, eschewed the use of force, and managed the democratization process in accordance with the rule of law. It also played a balancing role against the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) during this period.

The third role in the successful democratization process in Bulgaria was played by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party. For decades, ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, most notably Turks, endured significant oppression, and consequently, they endeavored to secure their rights through diverse means in the period preceding the dissolution of the communist regime. However, with the sudden collapse of the communist system in 1989, legal channels were established through which minority groups could seek redress. The establishment of the MRF served to appease ethnic groups and provide them with a formal voice in parliament. This played a pivotal role in the democratization process in Bulgaria, which was bloodless, and subsequently led to the country's accession to the Euro-Atlantic organizations, namely the EU and NATO.

The principal objective of the study is to examine the formation and internal transformation of political parties in Bulgaria following the country's transition to democracy in the 1990s. In order to achieve this, the following research questions were considered:

1. What was the internal transformation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and its role in the democratisation process?

2. What was the role of the Union of the Democratic Forces party in the democratisation process by uniting the opposition under one roof?

3. How did the Rights and Freedoms Party become the voice of the Turkish community in the Parliament and contribute to Bulgaria's peaceful transition to democracy?

A substantial body of literature has been produced examining the broader issues surrounding the transition to democracy in Bulgaria. However, the present study focuses on the formation of political parties in Bulgaria's transition to democracy and the specific relationships these parties played in this process. This study makes a further contribution through its analysis and consideration of how political parties managed this process despite the fact that Bulgaria was on the brink of ethnic conflict and struggling with political and economic crises. In addition to the analysis presented here, the study has also made use of the findings of other researchers published in books, journals and newspapers. The temporal scope of this research project covers the period from Bulgaria's transition to democracy in the 1990s to its EU membership in 2007.

The period between 1990 and 2007 constituted the most critical phase in Bulgaria's recent history. The process was impeded by the crises that accompanied the establishment of the democratic system. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the significant measures implemented by the political parties, this process was ultimately successful. This section will provide a broad analysis of the main parties that played a vital internal factor role in the democratization process of Bulgaria.

Re-formation of parties in Bulgaria

Political parties played a significant role in the democratization process of Bulgaria (Карасимеонов, 2006: 10). One of the most significant indications of the democratisation process and the cessation of the communist regime in Bulgaria was the transition to a multi-party system and the emergence of new political parties and organisations (Карасимеонов, 2006: 26).

Table 5. *Participation and Number of Political Parties in Bulgaria According to Parliamentary Election Years*

Party System Indicators in Bulgaria						
Indicator	1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005
Number of participating parties	42	38	49	41	56	22
Number of effective parties in the system	2,75	4,197	3,88	2,89	4,54	5,8
Number of parties in parliament	6	3	5	5	4	8
The number of effective parties in the parliament	2,42	2,41	2,73	2,53	2,92	4,8

Source: (Mandaci, 2020: 112).

Note: In this table, the number and achievements of the parties established with the transition to the multi-party system in the 1990s are summarized. This political participation also appears as an indicator of the development of democracy in Bulgaria.

A country can be considered democratic if parties with different ideological views participate in competitive elections and accept the results. The conviction of people, as members of certain parties, that political, social, and economic problems in a country can only be solved by democratically elected parties indicates the strengthening of democracy in that country.

This section will provide a broad analysis of the main parties that played a vital internal factor role in the democratization process of Bulgaria as an internal factor.

Under the half-century rule of the BCP, other political parties and formations were prohibited[2] from participating in political processes in the country. Bulgaria took part in the democratization process that followed the global collapse of the communist system. With the transition to a multi-party political system, the previously banned parties were re-formed. The opposition, which played a role in the collapse of the communist system in Bulgaria, seized the opportunity to transform into political parties and implement their thoughts and ideas in political life.

The main parties that played a significant role in the democratization process of Bulgaria are the following:

• The "Bulgarian Socialist Party", which was an extension of the Bulgarian Communist Party

• The "Union of Democratic Forces" formed by the democratic opposition

• The "Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party", which generally represented the Turkish minority

The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union BANU generally represented the peasantry and those engaged in agriculture. The party existed during the old communist regime and re-established itself, taking on important roles in the first years of the democratization process. However, it lost power in the following years. The following sections analyse the three main parties in the democratization period.

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2   During the communist era, The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union BANU, an established political party representing peasants, participated in general elections, but the Bulgarian Communist Party consistently emerged victorious. BANU's involvement in the elections was an attempt to demonstrate that the country was not under a repressive regime.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

During the 1980s, significant global changes occurred. The socialist bloc faced political, economic, and social crises and stalemates, while the Cold War dominated the agenda and course of the period. Consequently, the communist system in Bulgaria experienced a major crisis. However, what distinguishes Bulgaria from other CEE countries experiencing regime changes is the significant weight and influence of the Bulgarian Communist Party[3] in both the changes and the protection of the authoritarian regime (Иванов, 2019: 266).

To gain a better understanding of the democratization process, it is necessary to analyse the Bulgarian Communist Party. In the mid-1980s, party members with pro-democracy views emerged and participated in the democratic opposition that arose between 1988 and 1989. Despite the appearance of a unified communist party, it is evident that three distinct factions formed within its internal structures.

- The first group within the communist party was guided by Aleksander Lilov[4] and pursued a left reformist policy as a target tried to act in the direction of maintaining the socialist system and democratizing that system (Иванов, 2019: 267). But the "democratic socialism" led by Alexander Lilov failed because the pro-democracy opposition reacted sharply to this political view and acted to establish a pure democratic system. At the same time, the existence of factions within the Bulgarian Socialist Party caused this idea not to be realized.

- The second group clustered around Georgi Atanasov[5] and generally favoured the continuation of the old system without any reformations and represented the conservative wing of the party (Иванов, 2019: 267). However, the events took place around the world and the political conjuncture disproved this idea from the very beginning and did not allow it to be implemented.

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3   At that time, the number of members of the BCP comprised 10 % of the society and represented considerable power. Although the democratic opposition dominated the streets, a rapid transition to democracy was not experienced since the rural bureaucracy, important administrative staff of the state and rural areas were in the hands of the communist party. A certain amount of time and pro-democracy leaders were needed to resist such a power, but since there were groups with different ideas within the democratic opposition, it was not easy to stand against the communists in the first stage. This factor also prolonged the transition to democracy, which caused the communists to gain time.

4   Aleksander Lilov graduated from Bulgarian Philology and assumed the post of chairman of the first-term Bulgarian Socialist Party. He was involved in politics for a long time in the communist era and also served in important state positions.

5   Georgi Atanasov, who is a historian, has been involved in politics for a long time in the communist era between 1981 and 1989, pioneered the assimilation policies against the Turks in Bulgaria, and supported the removal of Todor Zhivkov from power (Иванов, 2019: 267).

- The third group was guided by Andrey Lukanov[6] and supported the reform of the socialist system and the transition to a capitalist economy, but it was in favour of keeping the power in the hands of the communist political elite at that time (Иванов, 2019: 267).

In an intra-party referendum held at the beginning of 1990, it was decided to change the name of the Bulgarian Communist Party to the Bulgarian Socialist[7] Party. The main reason name change decision was to expand the intra-Bulgarian and international connections (Първанов, 2021: 23).

Graph 1. *Results of the Referendum for Rename the BCP to the BSP*
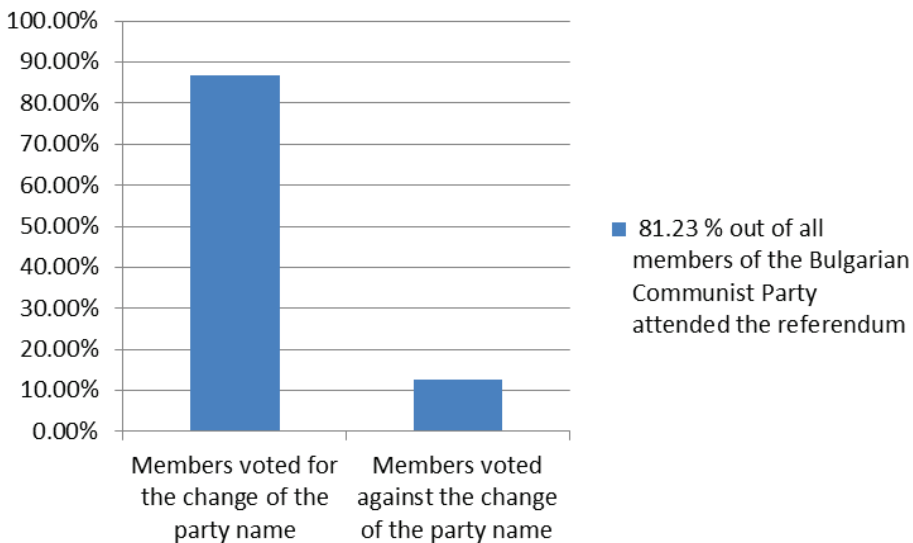
Source: The graph is prepared by the researcher. The source of information is: (Първанов, 2021: 24).

In this referendum 726 000[8] people took part, which is 81.23 % of all members, 629 552 people voted for the new name, that is, 86.71 % of the participants and 91

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6 Andrey Lukanov finished international relations in Moscow and was appointed as the minister of foreign relations and foreign trade in the 1960s during the communist regime in Bulgaria.

7 The communists adopted a strategy of changing the name of their party, making it easier to integrate into the new political system. During the communist era, societal and minority oppression was primarily associated with Todor Zivkov, and secondarily with the BCP. The transformation of the BCP into the BSP was a strategy to distance themselves from their past.

8 On January 1, 1990, the number of members of the BCP was 983 899 people. This figure reveals how much stronger was the communist party in early Bulgaria's democratization process than the Communist Parties in other CE countries. That's why the BSP won the first democratic elections and extended its stability to one year more.

973 people voted against, that is, 12.66 % of all participants (Първанов, 2021: 24). Upon examining the aforementioned figures, it becomes apparent that the Bulgarian Socialist Party holds significant influence, which explains its prolonged tenure in power. The BSP's fixed electoral cadre, mostly composed of elders and peasants, has also contributed to its survivability (Daskalov, 2018: 12).

The BSP is characterised by a well-organised and disciplined bureaucracy, both domestically and internationally, during Bulgaria's democratisation process (Daskalov, 2018: 13). The BSP officially came to power at the very beginning of the democratization process in the country and won the government in 1990-1991 and 1994-1997. Additionally, Bulgarian Socialist Party was the largest supporter of the interim government from 1991-1994 (Dolenec, 2016: 137). Socialists took part in different administrative positions in the country, both locally and nationally units, until 1997 (Dolenec, 2016: 137).

As for the basic policies of the BSP, it has been redefined as "Democratic Socialism" and "socially-oriented market economy" and these decisions were taken especially at the extraordinary congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Ekinci, 2018: 56). From the establishment of the BSP to the EU membership between 1990 and 2007, four leaders have changed. The table below shows the party leaders and the time they remained in the administration:

Table 6. *The leadership of the BCP from its founding in 1990 until it accedes to the European Union in 2007*

Name of the Politician	Length of stay at the Administration
Aleksandar Lilov	1990 – 1991
Zhan Videnov	1991 - 1996
Georgi Parvanov	1996- 2001
Sergey Stanishev	2001- 2014

Source: The table is prepared by the researcher. The source of information is: (24chasa, 2022)

Note: In this table, the heads of the BSP and the years of their presidency are indicated. BSP presidents were generally educated at universities in Russia and were generally pro-Russian foreign policy supporters.

One of the major successes of the BSP after winning the first democratic elections[9] for the GNA was the 1994 general elections. Even though the 1994 general

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9   The election of the Grand National Assembly has been thoroughly examined in the preceding sections.

elections had a very low turnout, the BSP won the majority. BSP had a high share of votes in the elections and deserved 125 seats in the parliament. In January 1995, Zhan Videnov[10] was tasked with forming the cabinet by President Zhelyu Zhelev (Mandaci, 2020: 78). In the table below, the course of the general elections held in 1994 and the gains of the parties are presented:

Table 7. *Results of the Bulgarian National Elections on 18 December 1994*

Party	Votes	% votes	Seats	% seats
The coalition of the Democratic Left	2,258,249	43.42	125	52.08
UDF	1,260,374	24.23	69	28.75
Popular Union	338,478	6.51	18	7.50
MRF	283,094	5.44	15	6.25
Bulgarian Business Bloc	244,695	4.70	13	5.42
Parties Below the 4 % National Threshold				
Democratic Alternative for The Republic	196,807	3.78		
Bulgarian Communist Party	78,370	1.51		
"New Choice"	77,641	1.49		
Coalition - Patriotic Alliance	74,350	1.42		
Coalition "Kingdom of Bulgaria"	73,096	1.41		
Others	316,228	6.09		
Total	5,201,382	100.00	240	100.00

Source: (Bell, 1997: 390).

Note: The BSP won the elections in 1994 and formed its own government. The society was not satisfied with the short-term governments established by the democratic opposition UDF and again supported the socialists. Although this seemed like a victory for the socialists, it later turned into a major defeat. During the Videnov government, the economic crisis deepened even more and became inextricable. However, early elections were held after the resignation of Prime Minister Zhan Videnov at the end of 1996, before the socialist government could complete its term of office.

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10   After Alexander Lilov, Zhan Videnov was the chairman of the BSP from 1991 to 1996. As one of the youngest politicians of the period, he assumed the duty of the Bulgarian prime minister. He was more in favour of reforming the old communist system and improving relations with Russia.

After the elections, the communists came to power under Zhan Videnov's Prime Ministership. Since Zhan Videnov[11] was a follower of Alexander Lilov, he advocated more democratic socialism and was in favour of improving relations with Russia (Тодоров, 2019: 101). The Bulgarian Socialist Party pursued a policy of improving relations with Russia by opposing privatization and expressing hostility towards Bulgaria's membership in NATO.

Concerning the role played by the BSP in Bulgaria's transition to democracy, it is evident that the party played a significant role in this process.

- Following the renaming of the BCP as the BSP, the party played a pivotal role in Bulgaria's transition to democracy by abstaining from advocating for the immediate reform of the communist regime during the roundtable discussions.

- This concession, which effectively negated the previous party's stance, not only secured the party's place in the nascent democratic system but also represented a significant gain for the party.

- Furthermore, the BCP's abandonment of the pursuit of reforming the existing regime and its endorsement of the transition to democracy had a pivotal influence on Bulgaria's seamless transition.

Under the leadership of Georgi Parvanov (1996–2001) and especially Sergei Stanishev[12] (2001–14), the BSP began to move toward West European social democracy (Ganev, 2018: 95). During the presidency of Georgi Prvanov[13] , major changes were observed in the policy of the BSP. Bulgaria became a full member of NATO in 2004 and joined the EU on 1 January 2007, during the prime ministerial term of Stanishev, following the policy of intensified membership of the EU and NATO.

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11   Zhan Videnov was compelled to resign due to mounting public pressure, largely as a result of his inability to effectively address the economic crisis that Bulgaria faced during the winter of 1996. The government established by the Democrats, who succeeded him, completed its term for the first time, marking a positive shift in Bulgaria's democratic trajectory.

12   He was the 48th Prime Minister of Bulgaria and the General Chairman of the BSP after Georgi Prvanov.

13   Георги Седефчов Първанов (Georgi Prvanov) was born on June 28, 1957, graduated from Sofia University, department of history and completed his doctorate in the same field. In 1996, he was elected as the general chairman of the BSP. He won both the presidential elections held at the end of 2001 and the elections in 2006, and he was the president of Bulgaria until 2012 (Omda. bg, 2018).

The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)

Following significant political changes in Bulgaria in 1989, the communist system began to collapse. The climax of the transition period towards party pluralism in Bulgaria was the establishment of the Union of Democratic Forces as a coalition of different factions struggling for a democratic system (Карасимеонов, 2006: 27). Although the Bulgarian Communist Party still maintained its position, the anti-communist opposition that started to emerge led the big street demonstrations in the country and began to be effective in accelerating the changes. Since the opposition was gathered under different dissident organizations and acted dispersedly during that period, its effect was limited. Short-term meetings were held between the leaders of different opposition and dissident groups to unite and stand up against the communist regime, along with the final decision was taken to be established one democratic front (Желев, 2010: 259). With the gathering of different pro-democracy opposition groups under one roof, the first organized democratic opposition on 7 December 1989 "The Union of Democratic Forces" was formed (Желев, 2010: 239).

Under the umbrella of the UDF that emerged after Todor Zhivkov's overthrow on 10 November 1989, many unofficial associations and re-formed traditional parties gathered and united around the keyword "democracy" (Иванов, 2019: 275). The main goal of the opposition was to dismantle the totalitarian communist regime and replace it with a new state system that complies with the principles of democracy. Owing to that the opposition did not support the reformist approaches of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Иванов, 2019: 275).

With the start of the democratization process in Bulgaria, the most outstanding party has been the UDF According to Fish and Brooks the UDF: "was not only the strongest party in Bulgaria; but it was arguably the mightiest right-centre party in post-communist Europe" (Fish & Brooks, 2000: 64).

Since the UDF was a combination of many different factions, there have been conflicts between the leaders in many political decisions. Although these leaders struggled for democracy, some of them continued their left-oriented views and thoughts, and some of them displayed as a careerist and opportunists. For that reason, splits took place within the democratic coalition (Daskalov, 2018: 14-15). During the elections, UDF voters had different reasons for supporting the party. Some were pro-democracy, while others were anti-communist. During the vote for the new constitution[14], 39 deputies left the parliament, leaving the UDF in

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14   The inaugural elections for the Bulgarian Constituent Assembly were held, with the communist party emerging as the victor. Given the dominance of communists in the constitution-making process, some politicians from the UDF opposed the outcome. As the process of constitution-making

a difficult situation due to their lack of control over their members (Daskalov, 2018: 15). The situation caused the party to weaken against the ex-communists.

The UDF was led by a National Coordination Council under the leadership of Zhelyu Zhelev, and its members were leaders of the reconstituted old parties and some democratic opposition activists (Желев, 2010: 369).

Table 8. *Associations, civil society groups and parties united under the umbrella of the UDF*

№	Party and Associations established UDF
1.	the Club for Support of Publicity and Reconstruction
2.	the Independent Association "Ecoglasnost"
3.	the Confederation of Labor "Support"
4.	the Independent Society for the Protection of Human Rights
5.	the Committee for the Protection of Religious Rights
6.	Freedom of Conscience and Spiritual Values
7.	Club of the Illegally Repressed after 1945
8.	Independent Student Association
9.	Civic Initiative Movement
10.	Bulgarian Social Democratic Party
11.	Agrarian Union - Nikola Petkov
12.	the Radical Democratic Party
13.	the Green Party joined the union
14.	Democratic Party
15.	New Social Democratic Party
16.	United Democratic Center
17.	Democratic Front

Source: The table is prepared by the researcher. The source of information is: Omda. bg (2018). The Union of the Democratic Forces (Съюз на демократичните сили /СДС/). Retrieved 8 March, 2022, from http://www.omda.bg/public/bulg/news/party/sds.htm (Omda. bg, 2018).

Note: The anti-communist opposition in Bulgaria started to form two years before the beginning of the transitional period. The opposition was made up of very different factions and different groups and united under the name of the UDF. The fact that the opposition was composed of such different groups affected the next political steps, and there was no consensus within the group, and over time,

continued, these politicians ultimately left the UDF.

splits emerged from the party. Despite this, the contribution of UDF in the democratization process of Bulgaria should not be ignored. If there was a bloodless transition in Bulgaria, the balanced steps of UDF in the turbulent period can be counted as one of the reasons for that.

The UDF lost the first democratic elections for GNA, and in the process of making a democratic constitution, conflicts occurred within the coalition. Between 1991 and 1996, various groups and parties left the UDF coalition to form new parties.

In mid-1996 Bulgaria faced a major economic and financial crisis and Zhan Videnov, the Prime minister from BSP of the time, resigned on 21 December (Kormusheva, 2003: 436). The Bulgarian Socialist Party has decided to establish a single-party government again. Meanwhile, the UDF have united all opposition towards the BSP and have joined the protests alongside other labour unions and student marches (Kormusheva, 2003: 436). After a month of marches and protests, the government was dissolved and it was scheduled to hold early general elections.

On April 19, 1997, the fourth parliamentary election took place after the collapse of the Bulgarian totalitarian system (Crampton, 1997: 560). Before elections on January 19, 1997, Petar Stojanov[15] from UDF was elected as the second president of Bulgaria in the democratization period, replacing Zhelyu Zhelev (Otfinoski, 2004: 37).

Table 9. *Results of the Bulgarian National Assembly Elections on April 19, 1997*

Party Name	Distribution of Votes	Seats
the UDF (ODS)	52.3	137
The Democratic Left (DL)	22.1	58
The Union for National Salvation (ONS)	7.6	19
The Euro-Left Coalition (KE)	5.5	14
The Bulgarian Business Bloc (BBB)	4.9	12
Parties Below the 4 % National Threshold	7,6	
The BCP (BKP)		
The Union for the Monarchy (OTs)		
The Liberal Forum (F)		
Total	100	240

Source: (Crampton, 1997: 562).

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15 Petar Stefanov Stoyanov served as the President of Bulgaria from 1997 to 2002. He succeeded Zhelyu Zhelevin and became the second democratically elected president of Bulgaria.

Note: The 1997 parliamentary elections went down in history as one of the turning points for Bulgaria in terms of the democratization process. For the first time, a strong democratic opposition government was established in Bulgaria, which had been struggling with political and economic turmoil for a long time. Under Ivan Kostof's prime ministership, this government accomplished great things and played an important role in the opening of Bulgaria's path to NATO and European Union membership. During this period of UDF, steps were taken toward political and economic stability inside the country.

Before the 1997 elections, major changes were made in the UDF under the management of Ivan Kostov[16]. In order to get the votes of young people, studies have been started for them and clubs have been established in different fields (Fish & Brooks, 2000: 64). With the intention to unite the opponents of the BSP, the United Democratic Forces coalition (ODS) was formed as an ancestor of the UDF.

The United Democratic Forces (ODS) won the 1997 parliamentary elections. 2 223 714 people voted for UDF, which corresponds to a rate of 52.26 per cent (Спасов, 2004: 245). The UDF won 137 seats in the parliament and increased its votes to 963 340 people after the 1994 elections (Спасов, 2004: 245). As for the communists, they suffered a great defeat and lost 1 323 635 votes compared to the 1994 elections. The BSP won only 58 seats in parliament in these elections.

One of the most significant challenges that Bulgaria faced in the transition from a totalitarian regime to a democratic system was the privatization process. This process started when the UDF passed the restitution law in 1991 in the parliament, and the restitution process continued from 1992 to 1997 (Houbenova-Delissivkova, 1998: 73). The restitution process included the return of the lands taken from the people during the communist era to their real owners. In 1991, related to the privatization program, the Land Act was passed in the parliament. The Land Act was tried to be banned by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which came to power in 1994, for the sake of establishing agricultural cooperation as a target, but they could not succeed (Houbenova-Delissivkova, 1998: 74).

The Ivan Kostov government, formed by the UDF that came to power in 1997, accelerated the privatization process and a successful way was covered in that government period. The privatization process has been a significant for the democratization process in Bulgaria for leaving the central planning economic system and integrating into the open market economy. However, the communists' staying in power for a long time interrupted the privatization process at certain

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16 During Bulgaria's transition to democracy, Ivan Kostov joined the UDF. He served as the 47th Prime Minister of Bulgaria from 1997 to 2001.

intervals. Nevertheless, when the UDF government consolidated its power in 1997, success was achieved in the privatization.

Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

With the transition of Bulgaria to the democracy, the previously banned parties came to life again, and new parties began to be formed. The democratic constitution, which was established following the abolition of the communist one, prohibits the formation of political parties based on ethnicity, religion, or minority status.

> "The Constitution stipulates that there shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor shall there be any parties which seek the violent seizure of state power. This is set out in Article 11 (4)." (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 11 and 44, Stefanova, 2012: 772).

Despite the article in the constitution, parties were formed whose leaders were predominantly Turks and whose electors were from the Turkish minority group. Some of these parties were in existence for a relatively brief period, while others have continued to operate since their inception. The party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is one of them and has been in existence since democratic transition.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms is a party founded on January 4, 1990, a few months after the removal of Todor Zhivkov from power. The establishment of the MRF straightaway in short time has been an indication that the Turks in Bulgaria organized quickly and entered politics successfully.

During a meeting of the BCP in 1989, Andrey Lukanov discussed the pros and cons of creating a political party[17] to represent the Turkish minority group in Bulgaria. He emphasized that the democratic West had such a will; otherwise, Bulgaria would not be able to be recognized by the West (Япов, 2009: 124). Subsequently, the communists decided to allow the Turks to establish a political party. This would enable the Turks to obtain their rights through peaceful means, represented by leaders in parliament, rather than resorting to violence and demanding autonomy.

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17   The reason for the discussion within the BCP was considered preferable for the Turks to pursue legal avenues, namely through the party in parliament, rather than resorting to force to reclaim the rights they had lost as a consequence of the assimilation process implemented by the Communist system.

After the establishment of the MRF, they applied for registration as a political party. This move received a strong reaction from both nationalists and communists in parliament, who attempted to deny the party's legitimacy by accusing it of being an ethnic and religious organisation (Eminov, 1999: 6). On October 8, 1991, 93 members of the Bulgarian GNA (almost all belonged to the BCP), asked the newly formed Constitutional Court to declare unconstitutionally the MRF because according to them the party was an ethnically Turkish party (Ganev, 2004: 66). However, the desired decision was not accepted.

The MRF played an important role in the democratization process by participating in the elections for the Grand National Assembly and other parliamentary elections. Ahmed Doğan[18] has been appointed as the leader of the party. As MRF represented the Turks in Bulgaria during the first post-communist era, it generally had fixed and stable voters, which secured its place in parliament in the long term (Daskalov, 1999: 205).

The involvement of ethnic groups and minorities in politics has been a significant achievement for Bulgaria in terms of strengthening democracy and meeting European Union standards (Stefanova, 2012: 767). Since its establishment in 1990, the "MRF has served as a crucial element in structuring the factors that make ethnic peace possible in Bulgaria" (Ganev, 2018: 94).

In the transition period, the MRF took part in different government coalitions and became a balancing element between the communists and the democratic opposition (Stefanova, 2012: 768). In the first democratic election on 10 and 17 June 1990, two-round elections for the GNA, the MRF gained 23 deputies in the parliament. During the formation of the first democratic constitution, the MRF emphasised their commitment to politics based on liberal norms such as equality and tolerance, rather than ethnicity or religion (Ekinci, 2018: 82).

In the general parliamentary elections in 1991, MRF received 7.6 % of the votes and was able to get 24 deputies. In 1992, the MRF, which was a partner in the government, withdrew its support and in this way, the first democratic government in the post-communist era collapsed. Subsequently, neither the UDF nor the BSP could form a government, this time the MRF again nominated a candidate and a new government was established by Lyuben Berov[19] (Eminov, 1999: 7).

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18 Born on May 29, 1954, Ahmet Doğan graduated from Sofia University, Department of Philosophy. Doğan, who was imprisoned before "the Democratic Revolution" in Bulgaria, played a role in the organization of the Turks who were fighting for their rights. At the beginning of 1990, he founded the MRF Party and was elected as the general president (Omda. bg, 2018).

19 Lyuben Berov was born on October 6, 1925, in Sofia. He graduated from the department of econo-

In the 1997 general elections, the MRF formed the "Alliance for National Salvation" coalition with the monarchist parties and some groups that left the Union of Democratic Forces and was able to exceed the 4 per cent threshold (Daskalov, 2018, 16). "Since its inception in 1990, the MRF has consistently fulfilled the role of a coalition mediator and behind-the-scenes operator" (Dedominicis, 2011: 448).

With the beginning of the democratization process, only the MRF survived as a representative of the minorities and continued to play a key role in Bulgaria's political life, and the role was seen clearly in the period of Bulgaria's NATO membership and integration into the European Union.

With the establishment of the MRF, the Turkish minority group in Bulgaria got successfully involved in politics, which prevented future ethnic conflicts and Turks tended to obtain their political rights in the parliament. At the same time, an ethnic conflict was prevented in Bulgaria and the country managed an efficacious democratization process. The establishment of MRF and its auspicious management of the process appear as an important internal factor in the democratization process of Bulgaria.

The establishment of political parties, such as the MRF, has facilitated the integration of Turkish society into politics. The party's participation in various governments has also allowed for the integration of ethnic groups, particularly the Turks, in the democratization process. Considering the Balkan countries, the absence of such an internal factor in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, in particular, caused ethnic and civil wars to arise, and war crimes were committed, including genocide. In this regard, it was observed that Bulgaria followed a successful soft transition to democracy after the end of the old communist regime.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the present article was to undertake a thorough examination of the role played by political parties (BSP, UDF, and MRF) in the transition from the communist system to a democratic regime in Bulgaria.

The democratization process in Bulgaria between 1990 and 2007 was complex and multifaceted, and the political development of existing and re-established parties in the country also impacted it. In the aftermath of the collapse of the

mics at Sofia University and became a professor in 1971. Berov was the economic advisor to Zhelyu Zhelevin, the first democratic president of Bulgaria. He served as the prime minister between 1992 and 1994 (Omda. bg, 2018).

communist system in 1989, the Republic of Bulgaria confronted two significant challenges. The initial challenge pertained to the establishment of new democratic institutions, while the second challenge entailed the resolution of the economic and social problems that had persisted from the previous regime. Certain prominent political parties have exerted pivotal influence in the democratization process and in resolving the political, social, and economic challenges that have arisen.

Despite the fact that the political landscape was initially shaped by the Bulgarian Socialist Party in the early 1990s, a competitive political situation emerged in the country with the United Democratic Forces' electoral success. The advent of this competitive environment also had an impact on the progress of democracy. In the 2000s, the electoral gains of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, coupled with its dexterous balancing act between competing political parties, paved the way for Bulgaria's accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions such as the EU and NATO.

In conclusion, political parties have played a critical role in Bulgaria's transition from a one-party system to a functional democracy. The role of these parties has been instrumental in successfully governing the country during turbulent political, social and economic changes, as well as in preventing and resolving major problems.

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CHAPTER VII

FOREIGN POLICY ATTITUDES OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN SERBIA: HOW FAR FROM THE EAST, HOW CLOSE TO THE WEST?

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Introduction

Following democratic changes in 2000, the new Serbian (Yugoslavian) government proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic integration as "the basis of the country's foreign policy orientation" (Dragojlović et al., 2011: 295). While accession to the European Union (EU) was placed as the primary foreign policy goal in 2001, the 2004 Defence Strategy additionally labelled joining NATO as one of the country's "vital security and defence interests" (Скупштина СЦГ, 2004). However, such an orientation has been constantly challenged by the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which was winning almost 30% of the popular votes in three consecutive parliamentary election cycles (2003, 2007, 2008). Together with a gradual shift of the national-conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) towards more Eurosceptic positions and its advocating for the country's military and political neutrality (Коштуница, 2013), pro-European forces embodied in the Democratic Party (DS) were not sufficiently strong to accelerate internal reforms and move Serbia closer to the EU.

In light of the failed negotiations on Kosovo's status and, consequently, its unilateral secession, Serbia's political landscape underwent a significant transformation. Even though military neutrality was proclaimed with the votes of nearly

nine-tenths of the parliamentary members, the ruling coalition fell apart soon after Kosovo declared independence. United under a pro-European platform, in the context of changed circumstances and the support of leading EU member states for Kosovo's independence, the ruling parties were unable to reach a consensus on modalities for proceeding with the European integration process. From that point forward, every government will strive to somehow reconcile the interest of EU membership with at least the formal maintenance of Kosovo as part of Serbia. The foreign policy strategy formulated by the DS governments, known as the concept of "four pillars", was embraced and further developed in practice by the SNS-led governments.

Meanwhile, the majority of opposition parties have endeavoured to reconcile the country's aim to become an EU member and to propose a resolution for the Kosovo issue that would satisfy Serbia's vital national interests. On the other hand, holding the EU responsible for Kosovo's secession and asserting that Serbia's recognition of it is the key condition for its EU accession, the New DSS advocates for the ceasing of the European integration process, suggesting that Serbia should revise its relations with the EU on a politically neutral but mutually beneficial basis. At the same time, Western support of Kosovo's secession and its international affirmation, together with the EU enlargement fatigue, indirectly led to the emergence of right-wing populists seeking to propose a foreign policy alternative in the form of turning Serbia towards the BRICS. All things considered, this work will comprehensively present the foreign policy views of all parliamentary groups in Serbia, aiming to answer the central research question: "Which aspects of Serbia's foreign policy strategy enjoy parties' consensus and which are contested to a lesser or greater extent?"

Kosovo's Secession and the Transformation of Foreign Policy Views in Serbia's Political Landscape (2007 – 2012)

A thorough understanding of the internal dynamics and ideological shifts of political parties in Serbia – particularly regarding their foreign policy attitudes – cannot be achieved without considering the still open Kosovo issue.[1] The unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo, initially encouraged and later internationally recognised by the leading Western nations, directly caused the DSS's shift from pro-European to increasingly Eurosceptic positions. In the atmosphere of an inability to reach a compromise solution on the Kosovo status and

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1   In this article, the author refers to Kosovo as an entity of disputed international status, which remains to be resolved under the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue.

Serbia's rejection of Ahtisaari's proposal for the so-called "supervised independence" of Kosovo (UNSC, 2007), strongly supported by the USA (Reuters, 2007) and the majority of European countries, the DSS adopted the Declaration on Serbia's Military Neutrality at its Main Board session on 28 October 2007 (NSPM, 2007). Following the failure of the final attempt to solve the Kosovo status issue, while confronted with the reality that "some Western states were encouraging Albanian representatives in Kosovo and Metohija (KiM) to declare the province's independence and threatening the Republic of Serbia with recognition of this unlawful act," the National Assembly adopted the Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order, in which military neutrality was declared (HCPC, 2007). Through this Resolution, Serbia explicitly rejected the possibility of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), which represents a geostrategic orientation that has persisted to this day, with practically no significant political actor seeking to alter it.

Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 and its almost immediate recognition by the US and key EU member states (first France and the UK, then Germany, Italy, etc.) subsequently triggered new frictions within Serbia's political landscape. Although Serbia's political parties reached a broad consensus to reject this unilateral act in the National Assembly, the question of potentially redefining relations with the EU emerged as a dividing issue among key political actors, eventually causing the government's collapse. Namely, after the far-right and then-opposition SRS proposed a resolution obliging the government not to sign any document with the EU unless it explicitly affirmed that Kosovo was part of Serbia, a rift emerged within the ruling coalition (RSE, 2008). While Prime Minister Koštunica's DSS and conservative New Serbia (NS) accepted the SRS proposal, President Tadić's DS refused to support it, stressing its commitment to "insisting on Serbia's accelerated path to the EU" (Ibidem). Moreover, the other, smaller coalition partner, G17+, rejected the radicals' proposal even more strongly, with its leader accusing Koštunica of pushing the country into self-isolation (Ibidem). As a result, the ruling coalition collapsed less than 10 months after its formation, leading to snap parliamentary elections in Serbia, where the "For a European Serbia" list, headed by the DS, secured victory with more than 38% of the votes.

However, despite their electoral victory, the pro-European block fell short of the parliamentary seats needed to form a ruling majority on their own. Faced with the necessity of securing a coalition partner to support the continuation of the country's European integration process, the DS achieved a "historic reconciliation" with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) (Политика, 2008). As a result, eight

years after the fall of its founder and authoritarian leader, Slobodan Milošević, the successor of the League of Communists once again assumed power, now officially embracing a pro-European agenda. Meanwhile, in the context of the previously signed Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, the individually strongest political party and a key opponent of Serbia's EU integration split over the support to the SAA. Namely, the deputy president of the SRS, Tomislav Nikolić, along with 17 MPs – including Aleksandar Vučić, the undisputed leader of Serbia nowadays – left the party to establish what they described as the "modern right" Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Although this ideological schism in the anti-EU, far-right SRS and the consequent foundation of the pro-EU, centre-right SNS was initially perceived as a victory for European forces in Serbia's party landscape and expected to solidify the country's Western foreign policy orientation, things became significantly more complex, particularly following the SNS's rise to power in 2012.

Even though the newly formed government positioned "commitment to Serbia's European future" as the first among the key elements of its programme, emphasising that "full EU membership is in the deepest Serbian interest" (Влада РС, 2008), its foreign policy was far from solely pro-Western in practice. Aiming to simultaneously advance EU integration and enhance economic development, while also securing Russia's and China's political support in its diplomatic campaign over Kosovo, the Serbian government implemented what became known as a "four-pillar foreign policy." While Serbia, following a period of strained relations with Western countries due to their recognition of Kosovo's independence, returned its ambassadors to Washington and European capitals shortly after the formation of the new government (Balkan Insight, 2008), the parliament simultaneously ratified the Energy Agreement with Russia (HCPC, 2008), paving the way for the sale of Petroleum Industry of Serbia to Gazprom in December 2008. In a similar manner, 2009 saw reciprocal visits by Serbian and US high-ranking officials, alongside Russian President Medvedev's visit to Belgrade, during which several agreements were concluded between the two sides. Furthermore, in the same year, Serbia officially applied for EU membership (EC, 2011: 3) after previously signing the Agreement on Strategic Partnership with China (MFACN, 2009). Overall, during the period from 2008 to 2012, by simultaneously restoring relations with the US, deepening ties with Russia and China, and obtaining EU candidate status, the Serbian government set the stage for a multi-vector foreign policy. The unresolved Kosovo issue will remain a key determinant of Serbia's foreign policy, which will, despite the regime change, maintain the four-pillar foreign policy.

Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić's Political Era (2012 – present)

After the founder and then-leader of the SNS, Tomislav Nikolić, defeated the serving head of state, Boris Tadić, in the 2012 presidential elections, Serbia entered a new political era marked by the rule of Aleksandar Vučić. By declaratively embracing Serbia's European path but also preserving what was seen as "traditional friendly relations" with Russia and deepening a "strategic partnership" with China, the SNS did not abandon the previously established principles of foreign policy. On the contrary, although the concept of the "four pillars" was no longer invoked in official political discourse, this approach was further developed in practice and, along with the additionally affirmed military neutrality, solidified as the cornerstone of Serbia's foreign policy to this day.

This is clearly reflected in the SNS programme platform, adopted in the year preceding their ascent to power. Although EU membership is listed as the primary basis of their foreign policy, the programme simultaneously highlights military neutrality, enhanced cooperation with Russia, China, and Japan, as well as striving for the best possible relations with the US (CHC, 2011: 39). Thirteen years later and after more than twelve years of dominant rule in Serbia, the foreign policy principles of the SNS have remained largely unchanged. In the Programmatic Goals adopted on 6 December 2024, the SNS emphasises that Serbia "can enhance its role and position in the world only by acting as a *bridge between East and West* (italicised S.M.), cooperating with all its friends, and leveraging the benefits stemming from both hemispheres, whether from the East or the West (CHC, 2024). Furthermore, although the SNS remains committed to Serbia's EU membership, its programme underscores that Serbia "can only join the EU as a whole, with KiM as its integral part" (Ibidem). When it comes to relations with other centres of power, as before, the focus is on developing the closest ties with Russia and China, with India now being added to the party's programme (Ibidem). However, it is noteworthy that there is no explicit mention of the US, which can be assumed to be implicitly included under the formulation "other major political and economic powers" (Ibidem). Additionally, in the briefly described context of the "sharp confrontation between NATO and Russia", the SNS perceives military neutrality as the "only logical and reasonable solution" for Serbia (Ibidem).

The analysis of the SNS program should certainly be supplemented with an analysis of the program of its far largest and most significant coalition partner, the SPS. Just as in the 2010 SPS Program, where it is stated that this party will provide "full support to the EU accession process" (СПС, 2010: 24), their 2014

Program Declaration describes the commitment to EU membership as a "strategic and political, historical and civilisational choice" that should lead to the "Europeanization of Serbian society as a whole" (СПС, 2014: 84–85). On the other hand, in both program documents, SPS emphasised that Serbia "should develop the concept of (active) military neutrality", describing it as non-membership in military alliances while remaining open to various forms of international security cooperation (СПС, 2010 :22; 2014: 86). Much like its larger coalition partner, the SPS describes Serbia's geostrategic position through the metaphor of a "bridge" or a "crossroads between the West and the East, the North and the South" (СПС, 2010: 24; 2014: 88). In this regard, SPS also supports further development of relations with all major powers, specifically listing them the US first, then Russia and China, followed by India, Brazil, and others (Ibid; 2014: 85).[2] Overall, it can be concluded that the SPS's foreign policy principles closely align with those outlined in the SNS's program.

In practice, already within the initial years of its rule, the SNS-SPS coalition demonstrated a foreign policy strategy that was largely consistent with that of the DS-SPS government. Throughout 2012 and 2013, Serbia reached almost full alignment with the EU's foreign policy declarations and measures and constructively engaged in the EU-facilitated dialogue with Pristina, characterised by the elevation of negotiations to the highest political level and culminating in the signing of the Brussels Agreement (EC, 2013: 5). On the other hand, Serbia simultaneously deepened its strategic partnership with China (Председник РС, 2013) and obtained observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (PACSTO, 2013). While maintaining good relations with Russia was relatively unproblematic at the time, this began to change sharply by early 2014 – a period characterised by Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for Donbas rebels, which led the US and EU to respond with sanctions against Moscow. From that moment and even after the Russian open aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the SNS-dominated governments have consistently refused to align with Western sanctions on the Kremlin. In addition, Serbia substantially advanced both its economic and political ties with China in this period, setting itself apart from other Western Balkan countries that prioritised the Euro-Atlantic integration over all other foreign policy relations (Митровић, 2023: 79-80).

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2   That being said, it should not be overlooked that the socialists' latest program document dates a decade ago, while today, especially judging by their actions during the election campaigns, it appears that Russia holds a more favoured position in their stance. See: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/izborna-kampanja-srbija-ratni-zlocini-rusija-invazija-pretnje/32718745.html.

Government Composition Under SNS Leadership: Reflection of the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

SNS's balanced foreign policy approach is visible not only through external partnership choices but also through internal choices. Namely, since the SNS came to power in 2012, and especially after the 2014 elections, although the party has typically been able to form a government on its own, it has consistently sought coalition partners. The SNS's attempt to mirror the country's multi-vector foreign policy in domestic political relations is especially reflected in the parties and individuals who, thanks to the will of the SNS, became part of the Serbian government. Despite the official and permanent commitment to strive towards membership in the EU,[3] Serbia's governments would also regularly include politicians known for their significant pro-Russian stances, such as Nenad Popović from the Serbian People's Party, Aleksandar Vulin from the Socialist Movement, or nowadays Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski from the Oathkeepers. However, together with these, ministers would also be individuals with notable pro-Western stances, such as the former ambassador to the USA and current minister of Foreign Affairs, Marko Đurić, or minister of European Integration, Professor Tanja Miščević. By forming these types of "mosaic" governments, the SNS effectively demonstrated a lack of a cohesive foreign policy orientation, allowing President Vučić to navigate the country's foreign policy almost as his personal domain.

The fact that the views and actions of certain government members are sometimes in sharp contrast to their official policy is best exemplified by the statements and actions of the current Deputy Prime Minister and long-serving Minister, Aleksandar Vulin. Namely, he firmly argued that "there is no place for Serbia in the EU", which he described as nearing its end, therefore suggesting that Serbia should seek an alternative offered by BRICS (N1, 2024a). While Deputy PM Vulin met with Putin in Moscow to convince him that Serbia is "not only a strategic partner but also an ally of Russia" (PTC, 2024), just a few months later, Foreign Minister Đurić held talks with the American Deputy Secretary of State on enhancing cooperation and establishing a strategic dialogue between Serbia and the US (Политика, 2025). Moreover, despite the fact that the current Government Programme declares EU membership as a strategic goal, a minister was appointed who just five months prior to their appointment, accused the EU of "denying Serbia the right to exist" while describing European integration as "a process of Serbian disintegration" (Danas, 2023). However, although the

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3   For more information, see the archive of Serbia's government programme, available from: https://www.srbija.gov.rs/template/en/2438/keynotes-archive.php.

selection of minister and their subsequent behaviour, at first glance, suggest notable foreign policy inconsistency, they are, in fact, deliberately crafted to fit into the logic of a multi-vector policy in which a small state "bargains with various external actors and tries to extract benefits from all of them" (Gnedina, 2015: 1024).

Foreign Policy Attitudes of Opposition Parties: Is Anyone Truly Contesting the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy?

Foreign policy attitudes of opposition parties in Serbia should also be examined in relation to the question of where they see the country's future between the West and the East. However, the fact that more than 53% of citizens believe Serbia belongs to neither the West nor the East, along with 14% of those who do not have an answer, demonstrates that the foreign policy of the ruling party is firmly grounded in prevailing public opinion (Spring Insight, 2022: 5). On the other hand, those who explicitly choose sides are divided, with a slightly higher share of citizens believing that Serbia belongs more to the East (19.6%) than to the West (13.2%) (Ibidem). This indicates that the opposition – expected to propose alternatives to government policy and eventually replace it once – would likely be able to rely on only a small share of the electorate if it advocated for a complete foreign policy alignment with one side. In other words, placing Serbia on the imaginary geopolitical map – whether closer to the West or the East – constitutes a challenge that opposition parties must navigate amid the Serbian public, which is, to a large extent, against choosing sides.

The electoral campaign that took place in the first months of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 stands out as a significant case of study on this. At that time, even the parties with the strongest pro-European orientation refrained from taking a clear stance in favour of imposing sanctions on Russia – seen as a very unpopular measure among Serbian voters. For instance, Dragan Đilas – the President of the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), often labelled as one of Vučić's key opponents – stated that the opposition condemns the Russian invasion, but his principal position was that Serbia should never impose sanctions on anyone (Euronews 2022). The fact that neither of the pro-European parties in Serbia was willing to even mention imposing sanctions on Russia during the election campaign, while their condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine was largely framed in a diplomatic manner, was also well noticed in Radio Free Europe's research. For example, while the Social Democratic Party (SDS) of former President Tadić expressed "support for Ukraine's sovereignty" and the nowadays

Green-Left Front (ZLF) emphasised its "anti-militarist position and commitment to Western values," it was only the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG) that urged the government to "unequivocally condemn the act of aggression" (RSE, 2022).

Speaking of the current convocation of Serbia's National Assembly, constituted in February 2024, it comprises 18 parliamentary groups, of which 11 can be labelled as opposition groups. From an ideological standpoint, the opposition parliamentary groups encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from the left and greens, through centre-left and centre-right parties, to the nationalists, right-wing and eco-populists. Precisely because of the large number of opposition groups, as well as the diversity of their ideological stances, it is most suitable from a research perspective to start the analysis with pre-election coalitions.

Serbia Against Violence: A Big Tent Coalition Lacking Unique Foreign Policy Orientation

In this regard, the coalition of opposition parties that won the largest share of votes (23.66%) in the elections participated under the list "Serbia Against Violence" (SPN), bringing together 11 parties, political movements, and citizens' associations. Developing their platform around the demands of the protests of the same name – "Serbia Against Violence," the demonstrations' organisers and future coalition members formalised a "Pact for Victory," articulated in 10 concise points. However, as this document primarily represents an agreement on the opposition parties' methodology to replace the government, it offers little in terms of programmatic details while remaining completely silent on foreign policy. After they had already submitted their election list and were deeply involved in the election campaign, SPN representatives were given the opportunity once again to present their program in an interview with Euractiv. Nevertheless, when questioned about their coalition's position on the EU and sanctions against Russia, they avoided giving a direct response. Instead, they explained that their aim is to form a technical government after winning the elections, which would then prepare new "free and fair elections, where citizens will be able to decide on ideologies, policies and programs" (Euractiv, 2023b). On the other hand, it was emphasised that the coalition's stance regarding the Kosovo issue was clear – it is an integral part of Serbia and there must not be recognition of it as an independent state (Ibidem). However, this absence of clearly articulated foreign policy stances could be important research finding. It indicates that the unified opposition – even when it is dominantly composed of centre-left and few centre-right parties, many of which hold strongly pro-European positions – struggles to identify common ground on foreign policy matters.

Left-centre SSP stands out as individually the strongest political party within the SPN coalition. As an observer within the Party of European Socialists (PES), SSP strongly supports Serbia's EU accession process. At the very outset of its programme platform, the SSP pledges to fundamentally restore the European integration process to ensure Serbia becomes a full member of the EU in the shortest possible time (ССП, 2022: 2). Unlike the ruling SNS and SPS, which, alongside European integration, advocate for balanced cooperation with other major powers (such as the US, Russia and China), the SSP exclusively highlights strengthening relations with the EU and the US, thereby clearly affirming its pro-Western orientation (Ibidem: 6). Although before the April 2022 elections, the SSP president emphasised that Serbia should never impose sanctions on anyone, shortly after, he adjusted his position, stating that while he remains "principally against sanctions on Russia," Serbia is in a situation "where it has no choice" (Danas, 2022). Later that year, Đilas stated that "the policy of cooperation with everyone is no longer possible," adding that "neutrality at this moment is perceived as siding with the other side" (N1, 2022b). However, SSP's programme contains explicit guarantees regarding the preservation of Serbia's military neutral status, which appears to be interpreted by this party in a very narrow sense – as the absence of membership in military alliances (ССП, 2022: 6). When it comes to regional relations, the SSP outlines its dedication to resolving open issues with neighbouring countries while ensuring the protection of the rights and interests of the Serbian people in the region, including cultivating special ties with the Republic of Srpska. Regarding the Kosovo issue, the SSP proposes the adoption of a Declaration on Reconciliation between the Serbian and Albanian peoples, intended to bring genuine normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina while respecting the Constitution of Serbia and UN Security Council Resolution 1244. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that the SSP unequivocally holds pro-Western foreign policy positions, though it also recognises the importance of protecting Serbian national interests concerning Kosovo and the Republic of Srpska.

The equally strong parliamentary group emerging from the SPN coalition is the centre-right group, comprising ten MPs from the People's Movement of Serbia (NPS) and two from the New Face of Serbia (NLS). The NPS supports Serbia's membership in the EU, perceiving it as a "path towards building the state in line with European values" rather than simply a standalone goal (НПС, n.d.). However, this party considers that this should exclude cooperation with other major international partners, including the USA and countries of BRICS (Ibidem). In that regard, the NPS wish Serbia to be "a meeting point of East and West, promoting peace, solidarity, and regional cooperation in line with the baseline principle

of military neutrality" (Ibidem). In a similar way, the NLS highlights that Serbia stands as "the East to the West, and the West to the East", which is why this party advocates' for both military and political neutrality and foreign policy based on four pillars (НЈС, 2023: 12). Additionally, the NLS offers concise analyses of the key foreign policy factors shaping Serbia's relations with the EU, the US, Russia, and China, highlighting the benefits and drawbacks of cooperation with each, yet refraining from establishing a hierarchy of their significance to Serbia. Although the NLS acknowledges the EU's significance, both as an economic union and a peace project that upholds the highest civil rights, it contends that the EU is currently uninterested in the enlargement (Ibidem). Therefore, Serbia must not be "servile" towards the EU, particularly regarding issues related to Kosovo or family values, which are supposedly undermined by the EU laws incompatible with Serbian culture and tradition (Ibidem). To summarise, although both the NPS and NLS lean towards conservative social values and endorse a diversified foreign policy, the NPS favours Serbia's EU accession process, in contrast to the NLS, which is much more sceptical about it.

The third-largest parliamentary group resulting from the SPN coalition is the ZLF, built upon the programmatic foundations of the "Don't Let Belgrade D(r) own" movement and the unification of several other local initiatives with similar ideological orientations. As a full member of the transnational European Green Party (EGP), the ZLF (n.d.) determines EU accession as its goal, emphasising that European integration represents "an important step towards a stable and just state." Moreover, the ZLF regards European values, together with the broader European political and cultural environment, as essential components in shaping Serbia's development. In that regard, ZLF's parliamentary group president, Radomir Lazović, stated that his party believes Serbia should align its foreign policy with the EU on all matters, including Russia, though he avoided being explicit about the sanctions (NIN, 2024). However, when it comes to NATO, Lazović considers that Serbia does not belong there and should remain neutral (N1, 2022a). In line with ZLF's position on the EU as Serbia's strategic direction, Lazović emphasised that the Kosovo issue should also be part of a European solution for Serbia, which would include substantial autonomy for Kosovo Serbs as a safeguard of their vital interests (N1, 2024b). While he stopped short of explicitly clarifying ZLF's position on Kosovo's status, he underlined that a frozen conflict would be the most tragic outcome and questioned how to coexist with people unwilling to live in Serbia, thus implying that Kosovo's reintegration is unrealistic (Ibidem). In this regard, ZLF has shown a willingness to accept the so-called Franco-German plan for Kosovo, which would effectively commit Serbia to an

implicit recognition of Kosovo through the acceptance of its passports, national symbols, and membership in international organisations, on the condition that it ensures meaningful autonomy and protection for Serbs and Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo (NIN, 2024). In essence, the foreign policy views of the ZLF can be described as fully pro-European, reflected in their support for resolving the Kosovo issue through the framework of the Brussels dialogue and their clear distancing from undemocratic Eastern powers.

Most of the other MPs elected from the SPN list are organised within two parliamentary groups headed by the Serbia Centre (SRCE) and the DS. The remaining five belong to the eco-populist group Ecological Uprising,[4] while three members of the liberal association PSG operate jointly with representatives of the Bosniak and Albanian minorities. The SRCE and the DS are the only political organisations advocating for the adoption of the country's Foreign Policy Strategy in which EU membership would be defined as a foreign policy priority (ДС, n.d.; СРЦЕ, 2023: 72). Both parties support Serbia's military-neutral status, for which the DS insists on being operationalised in the Foreign Policy Strategy, while the SRCE considers it compatible with international security cooperation, particularly with NATO through the Partnership for Peace and its Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission (Ibidem:81). However, while the SRCE advocates for the improvement of strategic cooperation with the USA, a continuation of cooperation with China, and the preservation of good relations with Russia (Ibidem: 73), the DS does not mention other foreign policy partners in its programme. Although the DS and the SRCE share a stance on the importance of safeguarding the rights and interests of the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, the SRCE is explicit regarding red lines in the dialogue with Pristina – specifically, the rejection of both implicit and explicit recognition of Kosovo, as well as its potential UN membership (Ibidem: 75).

Despite being formally registered as a citizens' association and holding only three parliamentary seats, PSG's foreign policy agenda differs notably from most of the opposition parties in Serbia, which makes it worthy of special consideration. As the first point of its Political Platform, PSG (n.d.) prioritises "ending the policy of balancing between East and West and a clear alignment with European values and standards." Furthermore, it explicitly advocates for imposing sanctions against Russia and joining all other EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decisions. While there is no explicit call for NATO membership, PSG

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4   Given that Ecological Uprising's programme documents do not contain any foreign policy content, and considering its objectively small impact on Serbia's political landscape, it has not been it has not been included in the analysis.

believes that Serbia cannot afford neutrality and that not only European but also Euro-Atlantic integration represents the only sustainable foreign policy trajectory. Regarding its policy on Kosovo, PSG shares a similar stance with the ZLF, prioritising better living standards for the Serbian community and protection of cultural and historical heritage while endorsing the Franco-German plan (i.e., the Ohrid Agreement) for Kosovo. By being a full member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) since 2022, PSG positions itself as arguably the most pro-European political force in Serbia, though it remains largely marginalised in the country's political life.

National Democratic Alternative: Both Military and Political Neutrality

The National Democratic Alternative (NADA, also meaning "hope" in Serbian) is a right-wing coalition led by the New DSS and the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS), which represents individually the largest opposition group in the Serbian Assembly. Established in January 2021 through an Agreement on Joint Political Action between the DSS and POKS, NADA participated in the 2022 and 2023 elections, achieving 5.37% and 5.02% of the votes, respectively. The first point of the coalition agreement outlined the defense of Serbian national interests in KiM, the Republic of Srpska, and wherever Serbs live, alongside a commitment to maintaining and strengthening Serbia's military neutrality and dedication to political neutrality (НАДА, 2021). They describe their Euroscepticism as a realistic rather than anti-European policy, arguing that, on the one hand, it is unacceptable to recognise the secession of part of the territory in exchange for EU membership, while on the other, the EU is unlikely to admit new members in the foreseeable future (Euractiv, 2023a). In that context, the NADA strongly opposes the Franco-German proposal and advocates for the continuation of diplomatic efforts to secure the withdrawal of Kosovo recognitions (Ibidem). Additionally, the NADA is firmly against the introduction of any sanctions against Russia, considering them detrimental to the vital security and economic interests of Serbia (Ibidem). However, it should be noted that the NADA recognises the importance of comprehensive cooperation with the EU and does not advocate for further rapprochement with Russia but political equidistance from the East and the West.

Nevertheless, while the New DSS explicitly calls for the halting of European integration and a referendum on political neutrality in its programme (Нови ДСС, n.d.), POKS already, in its Statute lists EU accession as one of its programme goals (ПОКС, 2017a, члан 1). Rooted in the Europeanism of the Kingdom of Serbia

and recalling the sacrifices made by the Serbian people for freedom and the values now embedded in the EU, POKS believes that Serbia should join those "to whom it has always belonged" (ПОКС, 2017b: 11). On the other hand, while rejecting EU membership, the New DSS advocates for comprehensive cooperation with the EU, taking inspiration from the Swiss model of bilateral agreements or the Norwegian model of joining the European Economic Area (Нови ДСС, n.d.). Speaking about relations with other major powers, the New DSS prioritises cultivating friendly ties with Russia, followed by China, India and the USA (Нови ДСС, n.d.), while these countries (excluding India) also appear in the same order in POKS's programme (ПОКС, 2017b: 12). While the New DSS and POKS are united in the belief that Kosovo and Metohija are an inseparable part of Serbia, the New DSS considers the EU's involvement in Kosovo's "seizure from Serbia" as the primary cause for shifting the country's relations with the EU to one of political neutrality (Нови ДСС, n.d.). In practice, the impression is that the influence of the more dominant partner (New DSS) has prevailed within the NADA coalition, advocating that Serbia should abandon its EU accession process and instead focus on establishing its relationship with the EU based on economic and other forms of partnership, without seeking membership.

We – The Voice from the People: Right-wing anti-Western populists

The third opposition list to surpass the electoral threshold was the "We – The Voice from the People" (MI–GIN) movement, led by pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović, known for his controversial views and promotion of conspiracy theories. However, shortly after the elections, the movement split due to personal disagreements among its founders, resulting in MPs elected from this list now operating within two ideologically nearly identical parliamentary groups. Nestorović left the MI–GIN with four other MPs to establish the "We – Power of the People"(MI–SN) movement. As its primary programmatic goal, this movement states the "reintegration of the currently occupied KiM into Serbia's constitutional and legal order," advocating for the cessation of European integration (МИ–СН, n.d. -b). By characterising Russia and Belarus as "friendly countries," the MI–SN supports intensifying cooperation with BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Ibidem). This movement opposes the alleged "falsehoods about climate change propagated by the West" and commits to "eliminating the neoliberal-globalist influence from state-run media" (МИ–СН, n.d. -a).

In a similar way, the MI–GIN movement opposes the European integration process, arguing that the Serbian regime is progressively turning the country into a "Western colony" and that, thereby, Serbia needs a "decolonisation" (МИ–ГН,

n.d. -a). From a foreign policy perspective, apart from revising relations with the EU, this "decolonisation" involves eliminating foreign NGOs' influence, ceasing cooperation with the Ohio National Guard, and promoting partnerships with friendly states that did not recognise Kosovo (Ibidem). In that regard, this movement proudly shared that it was, as the only political entity from Serbia, present at the BRICS Summit in Sochi,[5] where its representatives reportedly held meetings with high-ranking officials from the Russian Federation, as well as with representatives from China, India, the German AfD, and others (МИ–ГН, n.d. -c). Furthermore, in its programmatic principles for KiM, MI–GN explicitly states that what truly matters is a territory, which is why the movement suggests a range of measures aimed at restoring Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo, including having the Serbian army back to the province (МИ–ГН, n.d. -b). Overall, while Nestorović's MI–SN can primarily be described as a populist and anti-globalist movement, MI–GN's program embraces certain notably radical and extremist principles. Although both the MI–SN and MI–GN strongly emphasise the reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia as a goal, the second one seems more inclined to accept a military solution to this issue, emphasising the primary importance of the territory as such rather than the people living there.

Concluding Remarks

As illustrated in this paper, the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence, recognised and promoted by the US and most EU member states, has largely reshaped not only Serbia's official foreign policy but also the wider foreign policy perspectives of political parties. It has led not only the DSS to abandon Serbia's European path and advocate for political neutrality but also caused DS to diversify the country's foreign policy in practice, opening the door to strategic partnerships with other major countries, primarily Russia and China. The frustration stemming from Kosovo's secession, backed by the West, has made Serbian public opinion prone to right-wing populism, which proposes an alternative by turning to BRICS while also advocating for the reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia, implicitly leaving the military option for achieving this open.

Research findings further confirmed that military neutrality, proclaimed in response to Kosovo's anticipated unilateral secession, has now become an

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5   It is apparent that the term "summit" was incorrectly used by the MI–GN movement, as it is typically used in international relations when referring to the meetings at the highest level between heads of state or government, whereas what was described here was, in fact, some kind of international conference.

indisputable element of Serbia's foreign policy. While EU membership is considered the primary foreign policy objective within the SPN coalition, its members have no consensus on whether this should imply abandoning partnerships with other major powers, including imposing sanctions on Russia. Additionally, the members of this coalition differ in terms of how far they are willing to go in pursuing a compromise solution to the Kosovo issue in order for Serbia to join the EU. These two issues hinder the formation of a truly united, pro-European opposition bloc in Serbia, while also indicating that many opposition parties do not fundamentally challenge the official multi-vector foreign policy. Adding to this the fact that right-wing parties advocate for halting the EU accession process, it can be concluded that the pursuit of EU membership is no longer an indisputable aspect of Serbia's foreign policy, if it ever was.

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PROCESS TRACING THE POLITICAL COURSE, IDEOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF SOCIALISTS (DPS) IN POSTCOMMUNIST MONTENEGRO

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Introduction

Up until its defeat in the August 2020 parliamentary elections, the communist successor party in Montenegro, Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), represented the only uninterrupted ex-communist incumbency in Southeastern Europe. This chapter will process trace the political course, ideology and transformation of this party throughout the 30 years that it held the reins of power in the tiny Adriatic republic. In so doing, the chapter will also analyze the transformation of the Montenegrin party system from competitive authoritarianism and one-party dominant system to a more inclusive but fragile democracy recently. I will rely on fieldwork that I did in Montenegro in April 2019, during which I conducted semi-structured elite interviews with party leaders and deputy leaders (from Montenegrin, Serbian, Bosniak and Albanian parties), current and former ministers, members of parliament and Montenegrin academics and public intellectuals. Besides this, I will also draw on secondary sources to properly contextualize my arguments.

I will process trace (Bennett & Checkel, 2014) DPS' political course, ideology and transformation by focusing on four different periods of causal significance in the postcommunist history of Montenegro. First, from the collapse of the communist system (end of the Cold War) in 1990 until its momentuous split into two rival factions in 1997, DPS was allied with the *Milošević* regime in Serbia, hence presiding over a repressive authoritarian regime at home. This authoritarian regime significantly liberalized from 1997 until the 2006 independence by becoming much more open and less repressive. Indeed, this arguably represented the most liberal period of the Montenegrin party system until the recent DPS loss of power in August 2020. The reason for this is that DPS critically needed the support of Montenegrin opposition and minority parties to win the independence referendum, which they eventually did win with a razor-thin majority in May 2006.

The regime reverted to competitive authoritarianism following the achievement of independence until DPS was eventually unseated in the August 2020 parliamentary elections. The party remained nominally a pro-Western reformist actor and bought the support of the international community by promising to preserve domestic and regional stability. On the domestic front, on the other hand, it used every opportunity to raise the salience of identity issues as a way to keep the opposition divided and rally the non-Orthodox minorities (Albanians, Bosniaks and Croats) behind the regime. It was indeed one such attempt, the passing of a controversial religious law in late 2019, that backfired on the regime, leading to massive protests led by the powerful Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro and to DPS' eventual loss of power in the August 2020 parliamentary elections. I argue that this undoubtedly represents a critical juncture as Montenegro experienced for the first time a rotation of power, and this provides an opportunity for institutional development. On the other hand, however, the coming to power after 2020 of parties and politicians associated with more (pro-) Serbian positions necessitates that we treat the recent developments with caution. The current regime might be more inclusive and open but at the same time is very fragile.

I conclude by reassessing the ideology of DPS as the dominant party in postcommunist Montenegro. I argue that far from any commitment to any ideological principles or values, what mostly distinguishes DPS and its long-serving leader Milo *Đukanović* is the extreme pragmatism and great ability to sense and quickly adapt to the shifting international and regional conjunctures.

From the end of communism until the 1997 split: DPS as the "copycat" of *Milošević*'s Serbian Socialist Party (SPS)

DPS was the legal successor of the Communist League of Montenegro (SKCG), adopting its new name only after winning an absolute majority of seats in the first pluralist elections in December 1990. Although nominally a center-left party, since the very beginning it had very little ideological focus. DPS was rather a loose coalition of "bureaucrats, security services personnel, company directors and Yugoslav Army veterans" who had diverse interests but united together by a "significant personal stake in preserving Yugoslavia" (Morrison, 2009: 87). As the former Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs Srđan *Darmanović (2016-2020) aptly puts it, "[t]he dominant-party regime of the DPS was an oligarchy" and, as such, one of its most distinctive features was the intra-party factional struggle (Darmanović, 2003: 148). Darmanović further notes that:*

> [The DPS was] a composite party of intertwining group and personal interests and heterogeneous political currents, not infrequently opposing each other. The existence of divergent interests and political currents had been mostly kept under the carpet, both because they had never generated such internal political differences as to threaten the functioning of the party, and because everyone was aware of the ultimate common interest binding them together: the preservation of absolute power. *(cited in Morrison, 2009: 147)*

At the top of the DPS oligarchy stood a triumvirate composed of Milo Đukanović, Momir Bulatović and Svetozar Marović, all of whom had been catapulted to the top by the so-called "anti-bureaucratic revolution" that the *Milošević* regime engineered in January 1989 in Montenegro (Lika, 2023 : 357). Given their weak domestic position, Serbia's heavy military and paramilitary presence in Montenegro and the West's indirect support to the *Milošević* regime during those years, it was not difficult for the DPS leadership to conclude that they had to ally with Belgrade if they wanted to preserve power in Montenegro (Lika, 2024: 1366). DPS thus became the "copycat" of *Milošević*'s Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), as aptly described by the spokesperson of the Montenegrin Social Democratic Party (SDP) Mirko Stani*ć (personal interview, April 3, 2019), and for seven years it presided over a repressive authoritarian regime at home. Following Levitsky and Way (2010), the DPS regime could be more accurately described as a "competitive authoritarian" one, in the sense that "[s]uch regimes are competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents." (p.5). DPS indeed*

*controlled all levers of power during the 1990-1997 period, had virtually a media mo-nopoly, gerrymandered the electoral districts before each election and consistently in-timidated its opponents (*Dedović & Vujović, 2015). The remarks of Montenegrin opposition leader, Ljubiša Stanković (personal interview, April 1, 2019), on the first pluralist elections in 1990 are worth quoting in full here:

> Massive fraud happened, absolutely not fair elections. They were really cheating everywhere, by support of intelligence from Serbia, support of intelligence from here and so on … conditions were such that there was a terrifying media. All ugly stories about me, about other people, appeared in front pages in Serbian newspapers and Montenegrin newspaper. All you can think of, ugly things, they were in the titles. So, ordinary people said, yeah, this is bad, just go away from these people. Even it was dan-gerous for life.

All of this is not to say that the DPS was a blind follower of *Milošević and his greater Serbian policies. The relations between the two sides were mostly uneasy and the DPS was overall an actor for deescalation and restraint and sought to preserve in-terethnic peace domestically (Lika, 2024: 1366). Equally important, despite opposing independence back then, DPS always promoted titular Montenegrin identification th-roughout the republic and sought to attain some degree of autonomy within the rump Yugoslav federation with Serbia (Bieber, 2003: 20; Jenne & Bieber, 2014: 450; Ranko* Krivokapić, personal interview, April 4, 2019). Serbian political proxies in Monte-negro often castigated DPS because of this. For instance, the leader of the Serbi-an Radical Party (SRS) in Montenegro Acem Višnjić once called Milo Đukanović, in a rather hilarious way, a criminal who had "no equal anywhere on the planet, or anywhere on the planets of the solar system!" (cited in Morrison, 2009: 144).

Of course, all this once more attests to the extreme pragmatism that was the primary driving factor of DPS' unholy alliance with *Milošević during those fate-ful seven years. It also pointed to the fact that its extreme pragmatism and oligarchic structure would lead to the intensification of intra-party factional struggle and would lead the DPS to shift geopolitical course when the conditions were ripe for this. As Montenegrin public intellectual and founder of the first opposition media outlets in the country (Monitor and Vijesti)* Miodrag Perović also remarked:

> We had our objectives. We wanted to produce a division within the ruling party. They were ex-communists and were always a party primarily of interests, and we knew very well that some of their members would sup-port the project of an independent Montenegro in order to preserve their interests. So our objective was to split the party into two factions. The

Liberals, the Social Democrats, and those within Monitor were seeking this. (cited in Morrison, 2009: 155)

The end of the Bosnian war and its political fallouts- most importantly the fact that Western powers did not need *Milošević any more as a "peacemaker"*- would eventually provide the ripe conditions for shaking the domestic political scene in Montenegro and the region as a whole.

From the DPS split until the 2006 independence: internal transformation and regime liberalization

The DPS oligarchy would openly split into two factions in 1997 because the ultimate interest of preserving power necessitated that the party shift geopolitical course and distance itself from *Milošević and ultimately from Serbia as well. Then prime minister* Milo Đukanović, who controlled the party's middle and upper echelons, was more adept at seizing the opportunity and rebranded himself as a pro-Western reformist seeking more autonomy (and eventually independence) from Belgrade, whereas then president Momir Bulatović opted for staying loyal to *Milošević (and to Serbia) and went ahead to establish a new party* (Roberts, 2007: 449-453; Morrison, 2018: 69-81). The fact that it was once more pure pragmatism that drove DPS' choices is substantiated by former Montenegrin Foreign Minister and SDP leader *Ranko* Krivokapić, who in a personal interview with the author (April 4, 2019) posited that: "We got new class of tycoons, they needed to be independent from Belgrade", critically adding that "the key is international pressure. The alternative [for Đukanović] was to stay with *Milošević* and go with him to Hague."

The split in the ruling DPS and the imperative of preserving power in turn compelled Đukanović to liberalize the system because he critically needed the support of Montenegrin opposition parties and the non-Orthodox minorities (Albanians, Bosniaks and Croats) to defeat the Bulatović-led Serbian bloc in the country. Đukanović indeed made the system much more open, inclusive and less represive, signed a formal agreement in September 1997 with opposition Montenegrin and minority parties on the "development of democratic infrastructure" (considered by *Darmanović (2003:149) to be "something like a set of roundtable negotiations held seven years late"), allowed the establishment of the first opposition newspaper (Vijesti) in the postcommunist period, and many anti-war and anti-DPS activists and public intellectuals of the early 1990s were rehabilitated.* This arguably represented the most liberal period of the Montenegrin party system up until the recent DPS loss of power in August 2020. *All of these reforms allowed* Đukanović

and the DPS to win first the critical 1997 presidential election against Bulatović, and then, in turn, the 1998, 2001, 2002 parliamentary elections and finally the 2006 independence referendum, undoubtedly the most consequential achievement (Lika, 2023: 359).

While the domestic changes in Montenegro coincide with the collapse of a number of other competitive authoritarian regimes in east-central Europe in the late 1990s, including Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, I argue that the change in Montenegro was qualitatively different from the other countries because it did not involve a power rotation but just an internal transformation within the dominant ruling party. Stated differently, one part of the very same political actors that presided over the repressive authoritarian system of the early 1990s were still in control of most levers of power in the system, this time being rhetorically committed to reforms and Western integration. Hence, I posit that the domestic changes in Montenegro from 1997 until 2006 can be more accurately characterized as liberalization of a competitive authoritarian system rather than democratization. There are scholars and practitioners who would argue otherwise. For instance, in a 2003 article published in the influential *Journal of Democracy,* Srđan *Darmanović (2003:152) maintained that:*

> Although Montenegro is still not likely to be mistaken for a secure, Western-style liberal democracy, it is definitely an electoral democracy with some of the trickiest phases of transition behind it. It is, in other words, a country in which competitive and basically fair democratic elections have become what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan would call 'the only game in town,' and where there is no serious prospect of an authoritarian turn.

However, this also seems to be mere rhetoric as there is no serious evidence to substantiate Darmanović's argument. To the contrary, there is much evidence to support my claim that the 1997-2006 period should be better described as one of liberalization rather than democratization. Indeed, *Ranko* Krivokapić, long-time junior coalition partner of Đukanović, related to the author in a personal interview (April 4, 2019) that: "In the 1997 agreement with opposition parties, Đukanović promised free and fair elections, but after that we never saw free and fair elections". Likewise, a number of mainstream political parties (like the strongly pro-independence Liberal Alliance of Montenegro, LSCG) and activists / public intellectuals (like Milan Popović (personal interview, April 3, 2019) and Srđa *Pavlović)* have *never* endorsed Đukanović and the DPS on the ground that their change is merely cosmetic and not real.

In brief, DPS in the 1997-2006 period underwent an internal transformation that ushered in a period of liberalization of the country's political system. However, apart from the rhetoric of reforms and Western integration, not much else substantially changed. DPS was still the party of power of the early 1990s, with very little ideological focus and characterized first and foremost by its extreme pragmatism and great ability to adapt quickly to the shifting international and regional conjunctures. The achievement of independence in 2006 would once more recalibrate Montenegrin politics by decreasing the salience of identity issues and making civic and corruption-related issues take center stage, thus rendering liberalization not useful anymore for the DPS to preserve power. In response, DPS will also recalibrate its strategy by reverting to competitive authoritarianism.

From 2006 until the unseat of DPS in 2020: revert to competitive authoritarianism

Prominent observers of Montenegrin politics have noted that post-2006 Montenegro represents an example of a "clear competitive authoritarian regime" (Bieber, 2018a: 340). The re-emergence of such a regime after almost a decade of liberalization (1997-2006) was once more part of a broader regional trend of rising authoritarianism or democratic backsliding across the Balkans and Europe as a whole. The crucial difference this time is that DPS' competitive authoritarian rule in Montenegro, and other fellow regimes in North Macedonia (under Nikola Gruevski), Serbia (under Aleksandar *Vučić) and Republika Srpska (under Milorad Dodik), were granted external legitimacy by the Western powers in the name of preserving domestic and regional stability. Srđa Pavlović (2016) and Florian Bieber (2018b; 2020) have aptly called the external legitimacy granted to such regimes as "stabilitocracy" and consider it to be one of the main obstacles to these countries' prospects of democratization. In brief, what was different about the reemergence of competitive authoritarianism in the post-2006 period is that* Đukanović's DPS rule merely transformed "the more repressive competitive authoritarianism of the 1990s into one that was pro-Western, rhetorically reformist and tolerated greater opposition" (Bieber, 2018a: 341). As a result, many of the activists and public intellectuals that had opportunistically supported DPS during the previous decade turned against it after independence. As Miodrag Perović also remarked:

> From my point of view, Mr Djukanović and the DPS have become the main obstacle to democratic development in Montenegro. Mr Djukanović stands in the way of such a development. He, or at least his party, wants to control every aspect of public life. Monitor is now against him,

not because we do not like him or acknowledge his achievements, but because we are fighting for a free society in Montenegro. (cited in Morrison, 2009: 226)

Apart from having a virtual monopoly over the state resources and largely controlling the economy and the media, DPS' authoritarian repertoire in the post-independence period also included using every opportunity to raise the salience of identity issues as a way to keep the opposition divided and rally the non-Orthodox minorities behind the regime. The instrumentalization of Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo's independence in October 2008 and of the NATO membership process in 2016 fit neatly into this description. According to prominent Montenegrin academic and public intellectual Milan Popović (personal interview, April 3, 2019), DPS always tried to "fabricate identity-related issues" and "mini-crises" as a way to provoke Serbian parties and push them toward greater Serbian nationalist rhetoric. The aim, according to Popović, was "to remove the picture of the mighty citizens against the government, and instead of that picture, to have a picture of the state that is in question. We must support Đukanović, we know Đukanović is mafia boss but better mafia boss than the Chetniks". In a personal interview with the author (April 1, 2019), former Montenegrin prime minister and opposition leader Dritan Abazović also touched upon DPS' repertoire of authoritarian strategies:

> [Even though Montenegro's population is slightly more than 600,000] We are dealing here with an electorate of only about 300,000, since many people don't live here. And Đukanović with 160,000, sometimes 170-180,000 votes controls Montenegro. 60,000 are employed in the public administration [effectively 20 per cent of the electorate] and 90 per cent of these state employees cast their ballots for DPS since you can't get a job in the public sector without being a member or activist of DPS ... Second, Đukanović has developed a vast clientelistic network by which he controls business, criminals, drug trafficking, and cigarette smuggling ... We as opposition are in a position where it is very difficult for us to even find sponsors.

Still, these authoritarian strategies were also bound to have their limitations. Such was indeed the case with DPS' latest attempt to raise the salience of identity issues. Following two months of massive opposition protests over electoral fraud in local elections (February-March 2019) and the signing of the *Sporazum za Budućnost* (Agreement for the Future) among *all* opposition deputies in the Montenegrin parliament, the DPS-led coalition government passed a controversial religious law in December 2019. The law in question enables the state to take over the property of religious communities that can not prove their ownership

before 1918 when Montenegro was annexed by Serbia (Lika, 2020a). While the law was clearly aimed at the powerful Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro, this time it immensely backfired by leading to massive anti-government mobilization among the Orthodox majority and eventually to the DPS loss of power in the August 2020 parliamentary election (Lika, 2020b). The post-2020 Montenegrin governments, in turn, have featured either a coalition of Serbian parties led by a non-party figure (Zdravko Krivokapić) close to the SOC (Lika, 2024: 1369) or a completely new ruling party led by new faces who "arrived onto the political scene as cadres of the Serbian Orthodox Church", as is the case with current prime minister Milojko Spajić and president Jakov Milatović from the Europe Now Movement, PES (Morrison & Pavlović, 2023a; 2023b).

My claim that the DPS regime in the 2016-2020 period was a competitive authoritarian one challenges also some scholarly accounts that consider Montenegro to be a deviant democratizer in the postcommunist space due to the fact that it supposedly democratized despite not experiencing power rotation (Komar & Živković, 2016; Darmanović, 2017). For instance, writing in 2017, Srđan *Darmanović (123-124) posited that:*

> Unlike the other countries in its immediate neighborhood or in Southeastern Europe as a whole, tiny Montenegro (population 645,000) clearly has a dominant-party system … The DPS and its longtime leader Milo Djukanović … have outlasted every Balkan calamity while steering Montenegro toward independence, NATO membership, and advanced EU-accession talks. If the DPS lost power tomorrow, it would still be remembered as a shaper of national history on par (at its smaller scale) with the Indian National Congress, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, the Swedish Social Democrats, the Italian Christian Democrats, the African National Congress in South Africa, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico.

It is intriguing to note that, with the notable exception of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, all the other parties *Darmanović compared DPS to are the typical, standard examples of one-party dominant systems in democratic regimes cited in the literature (see Barrington, 2013: 261-262; Heywood, 2019: 454-459). DPS can indeed be considered an example of a one-party dominant system, but a system functioning in a non-democratic regime and not a democratic one. Hence, the DPS regime is much closer to the PRI one in Mexico rather than all the other party examples Darmanović referred to. This is also largely confirmed by Freedom House, one of the main democracy indices in the world. Table I below lists the Freedom House ratings of Montenegro from 1990 until 2024.*

Table 1. *Freedom House ratings of Montenegro, 1990-2024*

Year	Status
1990	Partly Free
1991	Not Free
1992	Partly Free
1993	Not Free
1994	Not Free
1995	Not Free
1996	Not Free
1997	Not Free
1998	Not Free
1999	Partly Free
2000	Partly Free
2001	Partly Free
2002	Free
2003	Free
2004	Free
2005	Free
2006	Partly Free
2007	Partly Free
2008	Partly Free
2009	Free
2010	Free
2011	Free
2012	Free
2013	Free
2014	Free
2015	Partly Free
2016	Partly Free
2017	Partly Free

2018	Partly Free
2019	Partly Free
2020	Partly Free
2021	Partly Free
2022	Partly Free
2023	Partly Free
2024	Partly Free

Source: Table compiled by the author based on data available at https://freedom-house.org/

Apart from confirming the patterns relating with the 1990-1997 and 1997-2006 periods, the data presented in Table I above clearly show that the DPS regime in the post-independence period has mostly been classified as a "partly free" or "transitional / hybrid" regime. Critically, the data also reveal that the failure of proper institutional building and the blurring of distinctions between state and party under decades of DPS rule inevitably left lasting legacies. The rating of Montenegro still as "partly free" four years after DPS lost power attests to this fact. Post-2020 Montenegrin governments have just begun to struggle with this authoritarian legacy.

Post-2020 developments: an inclusive but very fragile democracy

More than three decades ago, the prominent comparativist specializing on Eastern Europe Adam Przeworski (1991: 10) wrote that "[d]emocracy is a system in which parties lose elections." If we consider this criterion as one of the main indicators of the democratization of a country's political system, then Montenegro can be said to have experienced its first *real* transition to democracy only after DPS lost power in the August 2020 parliamentary election, that is fully three decades after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. The impression that Montenegro has finally democratized was further reinforced after DPS lost also the June 2023 parliamentary election (scoring its worst electoral result since 1990) and Đukanović himself was defeated by Jakov Milatović of PES in the March 2023 presidential election. In short, for the first time ever in Montenegro's postcommunist period both the executive and the presidency are held by non-DPS political forces. All these developments, though, might prove to be a double-edged sword for Montenegro. On the one hand, the unseat of DPS provides the

long-awaited opportunity for institutional development in the country (D. Abazović, personal interview, April 1, 2019). As a recent commentary on the subject in question also noted (Lika, 2020b):

> The concerning trends of state capture, organized crime, and corruption that have accompanied DPS throughout its long rule may now be reversed. Indeed, it is a well-established empirical pattern in comparative democratization studies that the removal of the formal communist party and its elites from power is a pre-requisite for democratization.

On the other hand, the coming to power of parties and politicians associated with more (pro-) Serbian positions warrants caution. After all, the junior coalition partners of the current ruling PES are the very same Serbian politicians (like current parliamentary speaker Andrija Mandić) who fiercely opposed Montenegro's independence in 2006, its NATO membership in 2016 and still oppose the recognition of Kosovo's independence. Some scholars have argued that it is likely that even current prime minister Spajić and president Milatović "will primarily serve the interests of those that brought them from obscurity to the most powerful political positions", that is the Serbian Orthodox Church (Morrison & Pavlović, 2023b).

For now, these developments have led to two worrisome trends. First, they have generated a sense of insecurity among a part of the non-Orthodox minorities, primarily Albanians, who have in turn supported more the mainstream the Montenegrin parties in the last elections (Lika, 2024: 1369-1370). Second, and arguably more important, the coming to power of (pro-)Serbian parties in the post-2020 period has increased the salience of identity issues, most conspicuously shown in the results of the most recent 2023 population census. Compared with the 2011 census, the 2023 one reported a more than four percent *increase* in the number of citizens self-identifying as Serb (from 28.72 to 32.93 percent), whereas the number of those self-identifying as Montenegrin *decreased* by almost four percentage points (from 45 to 41.12 percent) (MONSTAT, 2011; 2024). Likewise, the 2023 census data show that the percentage of citizens declaring Serbian language as mother tongue also *increased* by 0.3 percentage points (from 42.88 to 43.18 percent), while the percentage of citizens declaring Montenegrin language as mother tongue *decreased* by 2.45 percentage points (from 36.97 to 34.52) (MONSTAT, 2011; 2024). It bears emphasis that the current percentage of Serbs is *the highest* reported among the four censuses conducted throughout the post-communist period (1991, 2003, 2011 and 2023). In other words, Serbs currently constitute a higher share of the population than even before the independence

referendum, when societal polarization and salience of identity was arguably at its peak. These results seem also to confirm the insights of Milan Popović *who in a personal interview with the author back in 2019 (April 3) posited that* in the absence of any other upsurge of greater Serbian ideology, "Montenegrin identity will again stabilize, Serbian identity will probably return to 10 to 15 percent and it will be consolidated." The fact that both identities are still very much in flux (as they have mostly been since at least 1918) shows the significant impact that the coming to power of (pro-)Serbian parties after 2020 has had on identity politics in the country.

All of this portends trouble according to Kenneth Morrison and Srđa *Pavlović, two leading scholars on Montenegrin politics. Writing in late 2023, before the conduct of the latest census, they claimed that:*

> The latest battleground in the 'Serbianisation' of Montenegro is the upcoming population census. The ruling Montenegrin elite regards this process as an opportunity to alter the fragile balance of national and ethnic determination in favour of those who declare themselves Serbs. Even if the results indicate only a couple of percentage points more in comparison to the 2011 census, pro-Serbian political forces will acquire a powerful propaganda tool, one that they would use to legitimise their (ultimate) wish to call for a new referendum on whether Montenegro should remain independent or reunify with Serbia. This may, for those that do not follow Montenegrin politics closely, seem outlandish. But the direction of travel in the past three years means that anything is possible. Moreover, the proponents of the Serbian World, strong in their conviction that the process is irreversible, will patiently wait for their moment. In a febrile geopolitical environment in which international attention is concentrated elsewhere, they believe that they may be close. Indeed, Aleksandar Vučić has stated that the outcome of the upcoming census matters more to him than the election results in Montenegro. (Morrison & *Pavlović, 2023b)*

To be sure, DPS should be given a large portion of the blame if Montenegro is to shift to a non-Western course in the mid-to-long term. As a party concerned primarily with power, interests and with very little ideological focus, it has mostly failed to build the necessary institutions that would outlast the party and provide a solid foundation for state development. Its extreme pragmatism brought Montenegro independence and NATO membership but, as post-2020 developments also show, this pragmatism might also imperil the future of the country. Thus, it is hard not to agree with Morrison and *Pavlović's (2023b) conclusion that:*

Of course, there will be those that argue that the DPS and its governing partners should be given credit for delivering independence in 2006 and NATO membership in 2017. However, such accomplishments cannot outweigh the failures in the domestic state-building process after 2006. The DPS and their governing partners did not build the solid foundations required for a well-functioning state, thereby missing the opportunity to create a professional, independent and non-partisan state bureaucracy and institutions. Those fragile institutions, underpinned by structurally weak foundations, have crumbled in the years that have passed since the DPS lost power. And it is that failure that has made the political takeover of Montenegro easier than it might otherwise have been.

It remains to be seen the extent to which Montenegro will stick to its current Western course or deviate from it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I process traced the political course, ideology and transformation of the dominant political party in postcommunist Montenegro (DPS) by focusing on four different periods of causal significance. First, I analysed DPS' political course from the collapse of the communist system in 1990 until its momentuous split into two rival political factions in 1997. This constitutes a critical period as it coincided with the wars in former Yugoslavia (Croatia and Bosnia) and during this time DPS was allied with the *Milošević* regime in Serbia, hence presiding over a repressive authoritarian regime at home. Second, I focused on the period from the split of DPS in 1997 until Montenegro's independence from Serbia in May 2006. This was the period when then DPS prime minister Milo Đukanović broke off with Slobodan *Milošević* and charted a new political course by rebranding himself as a pro-Western reformist leader. As a result, the repressive competitive authoritarian regime of the first half of the 1990s significantly liberalized by becoming much more open and less repressive, but did not fully democratize. This arguably represented the most liberal period of the Montenegrin party system until the recent DPS loss of power in August 2020. The reason for this is that DPS critically needed the support of Montenegrin opposition and minority parties to defeat the Serbian bloc in the country.

Third, I focused on the period from 2006 until DPS eventual loss of power in the August 2020 parliamentary elections. During the period in question, Montenegro reverted to a competitive authoritarian regime and DPS became increasingly illiberal in its dealings with opposition parties (both Montenegrin and

Serbian). DPS remained nominally a pro-Western reformist party and bought the support of Western powers by promising to preserve domestic and regional stability. After using the issue of recognizing Kosovo's independence in 2008 and NATO membership in 2016 as a tool to increase the salience of identity issues at home, DPS and Đukanović eventually ran out of options to raise the specter of the so-called greater Serbian threat and hence divide opposition parties in Montenegro. In August 2020, DPS' 30-year uninterrupted incumbency came to an end.

Fourth and finally, I focused on the post-2020 developments and the new political course charted by the DPS after losing both the executive and the presidency. I argued that the Montenegrin party system experienced a critical juncture with DPS' loss of power and it is still in the process of being reconfigured. For the time being, Montenegro seems to have a more inclusive democratic regime because it experienced for the first time a rotation of power, and this provides an opportunity for institutional development. However, on the other hand, the coming to power after 2020 of parties and politicians associated with more (pro-)Serbian positions necessitates that we treat the recent developments with caution. The current regime might be more inclusive and open but at the same time is very fragile and susceptible to Serbian (and perhaps Russian) influence.

Taken as a whole, the assessment of the aforementioned four periods shows that far from any commitment to any ideological principles or values, what mostly distinguishes DPS and its long-serving leader Milo *Đukanović* is the extreme pragmatism and great ability to sense and quickly adapt to the shifting international and regional conjunctures. Đukanović is "undoubtedly the most charismatic, pragmatic, single-minded, (politically) intelligent and ruthless politician to emerge in Montenegro in the past few decades" (Morrison, 2018:145). Serving six terms as prime minister, two as president and three sabbaticals from office, he is "the great survivor of Balkan politics (Bieber, 2020: 39). However, the developments during the past four years show also the pitfalls of charismatic leadership and extreme pragmatism (on this topic see also Mylonas, 2018). Charismatic and great leaders come and go, they are temporary. What matters most at the end of the day are strong institutions that can outlast the legacy of leaders.

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COMPREHENDING VETËVENDOSJE AS FREE-ZONE OF ANTI-SYSTEMIC DISCOURSES: LACLAU'S PERSPECTIVE

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> ... operation of taking up, by a particu-
> larity, of an incommensurable u
> niversal signification is what I have called hegemony.
> (Laclau, 2005,70)

Introduction

The political movement, Vetëvendosje, was established in 2005 as a restructuring measure of existing KAN (Kosovo Action Network). (Manifesti i VETËVENDOS-JES, 2005, 2) The new structure, VV, served as a crucible of anti-establishment thought and action, ideologically hardly traceable. Nonetheless, the transition from KAN to Self-Determination Movement cannot be depicted merely as organizational advancement; it represents a watershed moment that marks the identification of the organization with the primary cause. The "self-determination" has been selected as the "primary concept" around which the discursive operation will evolve. The founders identified the organization with self-determination due historical importance — inasmuch as it reflected the acute matter within post-war context of Kosovo, (Vetëvendosje, 2006, 1) and the concept embodies the most substantial notion in the Kosovo's political realm, during the 20th century(Manifesti i VETËVENDOSJES, 2005, 1).

The existence of VV was evidently symptomatic, as it manifested the presence of structural questions.(Kurti, 2005, 2) The illegitimate establishment of an

international mission, namely UNMIK, which applied a neutral approach towards war-related events and constructed a framed political process in what could be alleged as 'controlled opposition', symbolizes the main source of discontent. Operating inside this system, political parties were performing the pre-determined role, alien to grass-roots subject. The reformation of political elements recognized as war affiliated into conventional systems parties, Kosovo's Democratic Party(PDK) and Alliance for Future(AAK), in addition to excluding a significant portion of mass "people' from political process, relinquished one of the most resourceful articulative paradigms: that of popular and democratic self-determination. Ultimately, this unarticulated stance of mainstay political concept, served as inception for discursive discontent, articulated and structured out by VV movement.

Five years after foundation, the VV underwent a transformation process which lead them to participation in the election. In terms of strategic approach, from a political organization that repudiated the role within the political system(Kurti, 2005, 4), to one engaged in more comprehensive, dialectical political activity. This metamorphosis enabled VV to maintain its position as an anti-systemic agent — advancing an out-of-system agenda, as stratagem for political action and maintaining the connection with the grass-roots. VV's frame of reference, unchangingly, conceived politics as characterized by constant antagonism and confrontation, nevertheless politics as decision-making was shuffled by heterogeneous approaches, techniques, and practices. The decision to participate in elections, as it is a critical transformational decision, equally typifies a context wherein the Movement adds a difference from strictly conceptualized confrontational scheme.

Furthermore, the movement initially participated in the elections in 2010 and has continued to act in that accordingly, on four additional occasions, since then. In all of them, VV was repeatedly distinguished for an "alliances-driven logic," attempting to construct a diverse and unique political framework to challenge the system through alliances, which had primarily been discursively dominated by the Vetëvendosje movement. This central role in integrating oppositional organizations transformed VV into a dominant body for anti-systemic action — such a condition had a significant impact on the VV discourse, leading it into a permanent state of adaptation.

To wrap it off, VV, by refusing to comprehend the reality from a conventional perspective, apparently portrayed itself as an enemy of the common political sense. In the first phase, as political movement, VV placed itself in exclusive or extreme strategic positions — without intermediate measures, the dilemma was

freedom or subordination(Kurti, 2005, 6) and the VV role, explained Kurti, consisted of an organization that serves to abolish the illusions of freedom.(Kurti, 2006, 4). In the second, post-independence period, with the transformation of VV into a political subject, open to electoral campaigns, its strategy became rationalized by a populist logic, opening the analysis to external articulations that expressed dissatisfaction with the existing situation. The inclusion of sub-articulations, through equivalent links, aiming to transform particularities into a hegemonic condition, or the particular into universal, will be considered in the article.

LACLAU, DISCOURSE, AND VETËVENDOSJE: CONVERGING STANDPOINT

In the conceptualization of the architects of the theory of radical democracy, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, neither society nor politics can be imagined in the absence of structural struggle, the organization around which challenges the existence of order, in an antagonistic manner. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the fundamental contradiction of society—the ongoing conflict of conflicting interests— is not resolved by the elucidation of right-wing liberalism(Mouffe, 2001,114). In this context, radical democracy serves as critique upon of the orthodox left's legacy: aiming at radicalization of social subjects and still conceives the freedom as the basic premise of human rights, a *sine qua non*.

"The task of radical democracy is indeed to deepen the democratic revolution and connect different democratic struggles." (Mouffe Ch, 2008, 37).

Laclau's and Mouffe's theories proffer organization for the rise of antagonistic action within the framework of pluralized causes, responding to the subject's isolation within the apolitical framework of liberalism(Mouffe, 2017, 104). Furthermore, "democratic revolution", also disapproves the class essentialism of the orthodox left's doctrines and asserts the emergence of new subjects, causes, articulations, communities, and groups whose actions constitute hegemonic struggle. In this condition, the 'democratic alternative' aspire to create links of equivalency, in a fragmented society wherein there is no single center of power. Such a relationship between societal subjects is always made discursively and its materialized as a result of one of the counter-system discourses being established dominantly in respect to the others(Laclau & Mouffe, 2008, 270).

Laclau argues that truth is an endless texture (Laclau, 1980, 87) in the complexity of social and political events—it is permanently shaped by articulatory practices. The universalization of a partial discursive truth over the totality, is recognized

as the moment of hegemony. This circumstance occurs when a discourse or narrative overlaps into every other social articulation, political organization, entities. The inherent diversity of this hegemonic operation, according to Laclau, indicates plurality of articulations, groupings, and communities, which have found a political concept that can politicize the entirety of dissatisfied categories, but still empty/flexible in interpretation. Broadly speaking, political causes that have the power to effect the hegemonic equilibrium cannot be reduced to limited interpretation; therefore, anti-systemic discourses assembly around these 'groundbreaking' causes, and through articulation process, a "people" that is not ideologically profiled but also recognizable as a unit of dissatisfied subjects, emerges (Laclau, 2005, 93).

In this sense, concepts such as freedom and independence are the archetypal examples of ideological/discursive concepts, around which causes are forged, in the name of overarching anti-system politics. In the VV case example, within a complex political process that Kosovo went through around the period of independence, knowledge of political conceptualization didn't meet the required mark. Furthermore, the technocratic practice of negotiation process for the political status, the conditionality of status and the uncertainties on future, erected an ideal situation for permanent and immutable dispute of the system's version of truths.

In a political system wherein conventional parties, as the main political subjects, disregarded the importance of facing the construction of reality from the discursive perspective, the ground for a dislocation of discourse was ideally been established. While the parties aimed to produce popular satisfaction within the electoral framework and through institutional practices — the completely unoccupied ground for interpretations of indefinite concepts, such as negotiations, independence, justice, remained to be ascertained. The discursive field for the creation of the objective and irrefutable truth was being reshaped: liberation was lectured as a new occupation; independence, as symbolic and illusional reality (Vetëvendosje, 2008, 1) and the Republic itself, as non-existent state of organization, required a revolutionary transformation.

On the contrary of the common comprehension, VV, at no stage presented an organic creation from an ideological point of view. The movement, in no sequence, illustrated a unique structure that reflected analysis and ideological action — so to speak, ideological discourse. In fact, VV consistently reflected a 'stable system of signification', characterized by an unstable structure of discourse, open to various sub-articulation. Thereby, VV, unceasingly, acted as a system of channeling discontent towards power — its history consists of perpetual endeavor to create a 'people' of the excluded citizens.

Through parallel interpretation of VV, a disaffected/alienated category of 'people was emerging, whose internal composition was diverse – a beyond-ideological body, but the common denominator can be reduced to discontent. In the first phase, the discourse of the VV, although included different causes, the elaborated ideal of "self-determination" served as principal cause for political discourse — as mediator between the subjects. Between an anti-Rugovism as a criticism of pacifist paradigm and anti-Thaqism critique centered on reformation of the idea of resistance, VV aimed to build validation for its parallel/authentic truth, wherefrom the new "subject" of disaffected people would be carved.

In the first period, during pre-independence, VV, against the establishment had embraced an exclusionary political position. In a political process strictly confined within institutions, VV, sought to mold the equivalent link between groups, categories, classes and political unrepresentated subjects. Irrespective of the context, VV's articulation was fundamentally 'rupurtist'(Laclau, 1980, 92). In a more detailed manner, interpreting the political context Vetëvendosje, considered pathos activism and inclusion of popular will as antidote to the presence of international mission UNMIK (Kurti, 2005, 4), which was pondered as proof of lacking the freedom for unfeigned political action (Kurti, 2005, 4). Additionally, as a second alternative feature of VV's discourse, was the critique of privatization and neoliberal capitalism, whose application created a stratum of population unprotected from the shortness of economic condition.

During the post-independence context of Kosovo, in terms of positional orientation, the main approach of VV to the actors of political process was thoroughly identical — exclusionary, though it advanced strategically. At this stage, along with the articulation of ideas related to the concept of self-determination, VV's analysis gained content from the policy dimension. Criticism of corruption and the lack of an impartial and meritocratic justice system, the pervasive nepotism and clientelism of public appointments began to take part in the discourse of the movement. Consequently, VV's analysis was concretized in two pillars — political status related dilemmas that are now articulated upon the dialogue with Serbia and issues in regard to state-building process — around which groups, classes, categories of the dissatisfied were mobilized.

Examination of the strategy of the VV in relation to the subjects to be articulated, portrays it as a free zone, wherein different articulations permanently interacted. This which the main discourse made achievable the integration into a single unit—although there were substantially contradictory stance among these articulations. VV's willingness to create spaces in the process of forging a 'people', as a construct beyond the classical ideological that convene the dissatisfied, can

be ruminated in openness attitude towards [almost] any political category, entity or organization. This willingness to include diverse perspectives allowed VV to consolidate a broad base of dissatisfied individuals and groups. As the dominant force in oppositional politics, VV sought to integrate the plurality of anti-systemic positions, which according to Laclau are named as "plural positions" (Laclau, 2005, 86) or "differential positions".

 In the first post-independence elections, in 2010, certified as a civic initiative, VV competed in coalition with Lëvizja për Bashkim, a political party that articulated the idea of unification of Albanians, although the outline of the unification process was conceived to follow different path from the Vetëvendosje's scheme. At this conundrum, wherein politics was thoroughly framed from the perspective of Kosovo's status, independence and the conditionalities formatted under the Ahtisaari Plan (Vetëvendosje, 2008, 1), Vetëvendosje provided the simplest solutions of unification with Albanian, as per their radical official position. In terms of membership, VV's intelligence included different currents of thought: from anti-Rugovism and anti-Thaqism as a local/strategic counter-system position; from the orthodox left to right-wing activists with a more nationalistic formation — and everything in between, as typical for populist movements.

In terms of discursive evolution, 2011, in the analysis of VV represents critical momento. Fryma e Re(FER), a political party with membership and non-ideological politics, merged within VV, an action that brought diversity within Movement into new stage. The inclusion of this group, gave wider acceptance to the VV, since until then the dominant popular perception towards VV consisted on characterization of them, as confined organic sect of radicals. In addition, substantial dimension of policy-making was added to the Movement's discourse, and its activity began to be propelled by the social-democratic agenda, so to speak: measures to improve the economic situation of the subject, fighting escalating inequality and poverty, isolation of woman, workers' rights, categories arising from the war, etc.

Between the articulation of existing discontent and the creation of causes to deepen and enlarge discontent into hegemonic crisis, is settled was the praxis of VV. The crisis of legitimacy within the political process produced causes, whose meaning was constantly calibrated by the VV. The meaning of the negotiations with Serbia, was illuminated from the dominant discourse of VV; the recognition of the Agreement on Association of Serb Majority Municipalities, only through the pejorative meaning from the Serbian language as "Zajednica" was made possible through the dominant discursive activity of VV; so for the consolidation of the understanding of the political parties and of the internal politicians as

symbols of corruption and nepotism, as well as inequality as reality of economic relations, lack of workers ' rights, etc. A partial narrative on objective reality, cautiously, was being transformed into universal societal word —truth.

The empowerment of VV's discourse was undeniable, though it didn't convert, immediately, into significant electoral results. This situation created a necessity for a distancing action from system. In this perspective, such an action took place after the 2014 elections: all political parties decided to become part of a coalition against the Democratic Party of Kosovo, led by Hashim Thaqi. This so-called VLAN as broad coalition which existed within an antagonistic border represents a triumph of the discourse of Vetëvendosje.

The role of VV as a system of signification, in the same manner, continued until the moment of electoral victory. In terms of the electoral projects, the movement did not change substantially after 2017. In the elections of 2017, the movement drafted the program called "Alternativa - Priorities of the Republic" which in three subsequent elections, in different electoral contexts and alliances, we find packaged and presented in alternative platforms. The platforms as part of 'discourse' of change in the sense explained by Laclau, as "*a complex of elements*"(Laclau, 2005, 68) that are not limited to writing and analysis; articulated problems of a political nature, such as negotiations with Serbia and question of internal government, such as the reform of the economy, enormous corruption, the lack of a rule of law and mismanagement, educational reform, etc (Vetëvendosje, 2016, 3).

In the 2017 elections, the VV experienced a remarkable result, a doubling of electoral body, whereas in 2019's elections, although with a close margin emerged as the main party. In the sense of praxis, in both cases, Movement acted as link to assemble for anti-systemic signifiers — or main discourses. In acting this linking role, VV, stood out in the 2021 elections, wherein secured over 50% of vote. Since the programs of these elections, in general, registered tautological content, the analysis of the discourse ought to be deepened in the analysis of several sub-articulations, the discursive content of which VV had inextricably integrated within its main discourse.

The articulatory practices and political activities of the VV movement played a central role in anti-systemic discourses, positioning itself in a hegemonic stance in relation to competing discourses, causes, and sub-articulations. This dynamic can be described as the monopolization of multiple "differential positions," from which anti-systemic content could be shaped (Laclau, 2005, 72). Expressed differently, the organization served as an open zone for sub-articulations against the

existing order, although their representation by VV was thoroughly inorganic. Accordingly, VV served as linkage of various and diverse discourses, the equivalence of which was balanced by the leader figure whose articulative content obtained popular consent.

The VV's adopted politics of change, as significative emptiness, integrated a nationalist standpoint, which served to be an essential feature in the process of reaching public consent. This pillar of articulation, primarily consisted in the depiction of the dialogue with Serbia as a destructive process for the Kosovo's statehood. Chief features of this rhetoric included historical claims, emphasizing Kosovo's victimhood in conflict against Serbia and highlighting the inability to manage relations with Albanian state in a more cooperative manner. Examples of causes derived from this category of articulation, are the critical assessment of Agreement for the Border Demarcation Agreement with Montenegro or the Agreement on the Establishment of the Association of Municipalities with a Serbian Majority, or the introduction of the missing persons from the war time, as precondition for dialogue itself.

As second sub-articulation in VV discourse, was driven by the nature of the economy — it highlighted the great social inequalities created as a result of the application of neoliberalism. In this regard, VV had gave essential part of analysis to inclusion of vulnerable subjects — dissatisfied citizens, from the state of market inadequacy that was being produced by this economic order. The creation of the Sovereign Fund as a general institution that manages the activity of public companies was the main counter-proposal, while alternative measures for a welfare state were, also, conceptualizations of VV.

Thirdly, the lack of rule of law, corruption and nepotism, as basic problems of state-building, symbolize one of the pivotal articulating practices integrated within VV's politics of change. Criticizing the lack of meritocracy, VV identified corrupt practices as synonymous with the existing order, while engaged in appearance of VV as the only opposite experience. An example of the cause of this type of content is the proposal for Vetting or even the proposal for the creation of the Bureau for the Confiscation of Unjustifiable Property, as an instrument to establish the order that annihilates the injustices created by previous unjust practices.

Last articulation that dominant discourse of VV managed to integrate was human rights area. Initially, VV outlined judgements or treatments from inclusiveness perspective, including feminist articulations that lectured on woman's rights, with a separate emphasis on elevation (Vetëvendosje, 2018, 1). Paradoxically, VV's discourse integrated both the causes of the conservative community

and the completely opposite, liberal groups. To illustrate this trend, one of the causes was the challenge of the Administrative Instruction which determinate the wearing the headscarf within schools forbidden. Whereas the movement, also, was very open to figures who articulated voices, from the perspective of the openness of society, towards marginalized groups, such as the LGBT community.

The above explained causes served as a general illustration of the construction of discursive practices of VV, within which ultimately succeeded in incorporating numerous sub-articulations, such as the monopolization of discourse advocating the opposition tendencies towards each other. The political algorithm of including opposing positions within same campaigns continued until the 2021 plebiscite-like winning elections; but the period between the 2019 and 2021 elections does not represent a common context for the development of discourse. This period represents what in Laclau's populist readings is coined as "moment of emptiness" (Laclau, 2005, 97). This period consists of the conclusion of a populist operation, the final period of a crisis of hegemony, which closes up with the establishment of a new set of articulative validation — hegemony.

MOMENTO OF EMPTINESS: MAPPING THE POPULIST EXPLOSION

In the polarized situation of us against them, subject/citizen has disparagingly depicted the old politician, as the maintainer of corrupted political order; whereas endorsed anti-systemic politicians as markers of change. This climate of distancing from the existing order, whose wording hegemony had long since been eclipsed, shaped the approach of political parties. In the 2019 elections, two political parties, VV and LDK, appealed equipped with discourse that conceives the necessity to terminate the so-called "old order", while they were led by figures harmonious to new archetype of "popular politician", imposed by the discursive triumph of VV hegemony. Albin Kurti, as ceaseless opponent of the existing order and Vjosa Osmani, a politician with an anti-Thaqist sentiment, who beforehand had antagonistically approached politics.

The election results reconfirmed the new hegemonical setting — Kurti and Osmani, gathered more than 50% of votes, with the former leading by narrow margin of 1%. The result ultimately confirmed the hegemony of the narrative of VV, while the will expressed electorally, has marked the internal boundary between the new politician — modern and meritocratic politicians and the old type, stereotyped as corrupted model. The expressed popular legitimacy, highlighted the necessity for an executive coalition for a **"people's government"**. Both of

candidacies, Kurti and Osmani, presented in different programs or political articulations popular dissatisfaction — voice of a **"people"** composed from excluded citizens. The government of VV and LDK, created after the election was tenuous, with the latter toppling Kurti's government, couple of week later. The inability for this acquired legitimacy, to convert into resilient reformatory executive branch of power, due to the lack of will within the "old" ruling elite of LDK, left unrepresented within political process the popular will, expressed in elections. Consequently, an act as such led to separation of LDK which lost the authentic signifier of the politics of change, Vjosa Osmani, who freely relocated within overarching coalition of populist discourses, directed by VV.

This political context prompted two basic preconditions, which influenced the outcome of subsequent elections. Firstly, the populist explosion or momento of emptiness triggered by the non-manifestation in the political process of the will expressed in the 2019 elections. Momento of emptiness, is the moment of materialization of the empty signifier — this condition typifies the context of the universalization of a signifier which contains multiple discourses, groups, classes, subjects — it is the aggregate state of a newly constructed hegemony. The period between 2019 and 2021, especially after overthrowing the Kurti government, exemplifies a massivization of the demands for change, which can be called a populist explosion.

The second, pre-electoral condition is the unification of all the signifiers of change in a common struggle, as a single bloc of power. Disengaging a signifier of change, comparable to Osman, implies abandoning totally the discourse of change. In the configuration of the populism scene, the release of a figure of change enabled the creation of a common front of change, identifiable with VV; whereas Osmani, from an organic indicator of change within LDK, converted into a 'floating signifier', (Laclau, 2005, 153) or one of the signifiers that represented political demands in the chain of equivalences constructed by VV.

This conditioned context, eventually, heightened the antagonism in the paradigmatic boundaries of populist: we/they. Adding to it, having a sophisticated political insight, was not necessary to conceive the dichotomy of internal border between the young/old; the meritocrats/nepotists; we/they; etc. In the context of the dominant change politics, which absorbed all political actors, organization, parties, the strategy of LDK, facilitated the creation of a unified front of anti-systemic/populist politics, identifiable with VV.

VV, as political organization permanently attempted to impose its discourse upon any other political articulation that partially or radically maintained the demands for a change of political order. This strategy, largely, proved successful,

as figures or public speakers of change did not survive, the VV's monopoly in the anti-systemic action and thought, as free figures of change. In this context, Osmani, managed to persist as a free signifier. Her ability to remain as an independent signifier from the dominant anti-establishment discourse, at a time when society was deeply immersed in the populist conditions, enabled the LDK's position as an authentic articulation of change. In other words, LDK, possessed enough discursive attributes to resist VV's attempt to absorb totality of signifiers of discontent within society. Consequently, there were real possibilities for a populist critique within the LDK, headed by Osmani which would compete for unsatisfied mass of 'people'.

The abandonment of the discourse of change by LDK, caused a moment of populist explosion, during which LDK lost the most important signifier of change, thereby enabling the unification of all populist signifiers within a unique program. This platform, associated with indespensable change, was formally represented by VV's 2021 election campaign — KREJT DHE DREJT (PRIORITETET PËR KREJT QYTETARËT DREJT SË ARDHMES, 2017).

The confrontation of two distinct discourses, which articulated the politics of change, concluded with the complete unification of the anti-systemic sub-articulations, an event that led to the final hegemony of VV's articulation. This organization, VV, between the Movement and the Party, functioned like a machine that internalized any form of dissatisfaction. Osmani's rapprochement within VV's program, in addition to adding a new signifier that somewhat managed to connect main discourse, ultimately positioned VV as a symbol of collective imaginary of a new category of 'people', of the dissatisfied. They represented 'we' in circumstances where the boundary between 'we' and 'they' — of the most essential conditions in building a successful populist praxis — was established (Laclau, 2005, 70).

Kurti and Osmani, as two leaders with over a decade experience in anti-system politics, within a moment of populism explosion, united in beyond ideological formation, personified the 'we' of the people; against politicians who represented 'they' which was subjectively identified with corruption, scandals and power abuses. The idea of being excluded from the political process, while carrying a political will, also helped in identification of this bloc with the "people" — with "we". Thus, in addition to deepening the discontent, it strengthened the identification of people with politics of change, whose political grasp consisted of VV.

When the post-Kurti government collapsed, the conditions for a unified front had already been established. Later, Osmani and her associates from the LDK created a political organization called GUXO, which formed a pre-election

coalition with VV. The coalition, also, included a civil initiative called ALTER-NATIVA. In terms of its government program, this amalgamation of parties, movements, and activists, with VV as the leading symbol, presented a document titled 'KREJT and DREJT,' which was, in effect, a tautological presentation of the programs from the previous elections.

This governing program, does not adequately reflect sub-articulations or micro-narratives within the project. In the case of the 2021 elections, there was a noticeable disconnect between these sub-narratives and the overall program — especially in the direction of GUXO, whose ideological orientation totally was unreflected. Formally, this involvement of this broad social coalition was led by VV, while the ontological function in this populist moment was carried by Albin Kurti. The popular consent, regarding this bloc of power, did not come as a reasonable consideration of the feasibility of the project; the project itself was reduced in the leader, and his arrival was experienced as a cathartic moment — as the final culmination of the confrontation between 'we' and 'they'.

VV's campaign as a full representation of the society of the disaffected: it reflects the emptiness of a populist signifier of change — developed in the diversity of irreconcilable opposites, led by internal division 'we' and 'they' and with a popular identification with change. Notwithstanding, VV promised radical change, the whole hegemonic project was reduced to the leader whose function was entirely ontological: carrying on the populist momento. The totality of this complex engineering of linking the beliefs, opinions, attitudes of different groups, classes, categories into a discursive political body that articulates discontent, represents an exemplary operation of populism — a Magnum Opus.

Conclusion

The article scrutinizes the formation of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje—more concretely, its discursive development. Initially, the paper briefly describes the analysis of Vetëvendosje during its period as an anti-systemic movement, while the central part of the paper focuses on the treatment of the Movement's discursive evolution after its transformation into a political party. The research adopts a Laclau perspective, which attempts to inquire into the Movement's strategy of building connections between causes, articulations, communities, and classes, in a discourse not only identified with the VV, but also reduced to it. In arguing the main hypothesis of the paper, the analysis of the Vetëvendosje Movement as an open zone of anti-systemic articulations, the second part describes an open approach both to alliances and opposing, incompatible articulations.

The article concludes by addressing the populist moment or explosion that occurred between 2019 and 2021, where the anti-systemic discourse became personified and ontologically carried by the leader figure, Albin Kurti. This period was characterized by intense antagonism and a profound shift in the political landscape, marking the full realization of VV's populist discourse.

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STATE CAPTURE THROUGH THE PARTY SYSTEM: THE COLLAPSE OF GOVERNANCE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina is perceived as a multiethnic state where ethnic groups occupy state's posts. This system was established at Ryan Patterson military complex in Dayton, state Ohio in the USA. Based on the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) ethnic groups Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats have taken up state's posts until today.

The chapter "State Capture Through the Party System: The Collapse of Governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina" will analyze how political parties exploit institutional weaknesses, ethnic nationalism, and legislative bodies to maintain their political power, while simultaneously undermining the fundamental principles of the rule of law and democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The analysis will focus on institutional weakness as a key factor enabling political elites to manipulate the state apparatus. The political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established by the Dayton Peace Agreement, has become a tool in the hands of political parties that exploit fragmented and inefficient institutions to remain in power. Instead of serving the citizens, institutions, including the judiciary and state administration, have become instruments of political parties.

The judicial system is susceptible to political pressures, while the administrative apparatus is used to reward loyal personnel through a patronage system. This form of manipulation blocks reforms that could strengthen the rule of law and institutional efficiency, further eroding public trust in political processes. Institutional weakness becomes a self-sustaining system in which political parties entrench their power and prevent any form of reform.

Creators of DPA established the system seeing it as changeable in the following years. Unfortunately, in the following years ethnic-based political system entrenched in Bosnia and Herzegovina and stalled its path to the Euro-atlantic alliance. Regardless of the efforts of international actors and proposal to changing the political system would improve the Bosnian state to a citizenry state. On that account, international actors proposed several constitutional changes. As they said, it would empower the state's competencies and weak entities.

The most striking constitutional changes should be implemented through the "April package" reform system. This system empowered and gathered under one umbrella all security agencies but on the other side entities' veto power remained as the way to block any decision in Bosnian Parliament. Owing to this remaining veto power, two political parties Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH) and Croat Democratic Community '90 (HDZ '90) voted against the "April package". Since then, constitutional reform has not been regarded in any meetings among political parties.

A key element of the analysis will be ethnic nationalism as a tool of political manipulation. Parties continuously exploit ethnic divisions to mobilize voters, using fear and mistrust among ethnic groups as core strategies. Instead of addressing real issues, such as economic stagnation and corruption, political elites employ the rhetoric of protecting ethnic interests to avoid accountability and retain power. This strategy not only fuels political polarization but also prevents the creation of a shared political space that could lead to a more inclusive and stable political system.

Power-sharing is a political system which provides equal representation to each ethnic group in a determined country. Bosnia and Herzegovina is getting close to the power-sharing system where core ethnic groups wield key posts in the country. In this chapter we will examine how this political system is leveraged to political elites in undermining the state's competencies and

The abuse of legislative bodies encompasses mechanisms for blocking reforms that could reduce the control political parties have over the state. Legislative bodies in Bosnia and Herzegovina often become platforms for political showdowns,

obstructing quorums and boycotting sessions, thus preventing the adoption of laws that would strengthen institutional independence and enhance the rule of law. The adoption of key laws, such as those related to the judiciary or public administration, is often deliberately delayed due to political disagreements, further destabilizing the system and prolonging the status quo. This practice not only cements the positions of political elites but also blocks any form of reform that could lead to more efficient state functioning.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization of State Capture

The term "state capture" is used to describe a situation in which political elites or private interests systematically exploit state institutions and resources to achieve their own goals, often at the expense of democratic principles and the interests of citizens. In the context of transitional societies, particularly in post-communist states, state capture is often manifested through institutional control, systemic corruption, patronage networks, and the politicization of the public sector.

Theoretically, state capture is a concept popularized by the World Bank, particularly in post-communist states undergoing a transition to a market economy. Joel S. Hellman emphasizes that this phenomenon is most common in transitional societies, where political actors exploit systemic weaknesses for their own interests rather than implementing necessary reforms. "State capture is defined as shaping the formation of the basic rules of the game (i.e., laws, rules, decrees, and regulations) through illicit and non-transparent private payments to public officials"(Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2000).

State Capture in Transitional Societies: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this phenomenon is deeply rooted. The use of the Dayton constitutional framework to perpetuate ethnic divisions and reinforce the political status quo, the misuse of institutions, and the obstruction of necessary reforms aimed at strengthening state accountability are key indicators of state capture in this context. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina underwent a political and economic transition from a socialist to a market-oriented system. However, instead of stable institutions and democratization, the transition resulted in the strengthening of ethno-nationalist elites who exploited institutional weaknesses to consolidate their power, becoming obstacles to genuine democratization and the building of functional institutions.

"The rise of nationalism and ethno-nationalism as a result of the new world order, especially faced by the East-European communist totalitarian regimes, became obstacles for the genuine democratization process of former communist countries and their societies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina" (SeIzović & Simić, 2016). In this context, the Dayton Agreement played a key role in shaping a political system that favors ethnic interests over civic values and democracy.

The Dayton Agreement: Institutional Fragmentation and Political Paralysis

Political elites during the war were captured in Ohio, Dayton, in the US to negotiate a peace. They had been under pressure and far away from the domestic public. In that way US brokers tried to settle a peace and end the bloody war. In the end, all parties had to make a compromise to settle a peace. Bosniaks had been resented by this agreement because Srebrenica, where Serb paramilitary units committed genocide, became the part of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity Republic of Srpska.

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), signed in 1995, brought peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina but simultaneously institutionalized ethnic divisions and limited the capacities of state institutions. This agreement was unique in that it was imposed by external forces and granted the international community broad authority over the country's internal processes. "Three years on from Dayton, the one-year 'transitional' administration has been indefinitely extended and the democratisation process in Bosnia has become a major international experiment in political engineering"(Chandler, 1999). While Dayton ended the war, it divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska—with vaguely defined boundaries of jurisdiction between state and entity institutions. Article III of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina specifies that "*All governmental functions and powers not expressly assigned in this Constitution to the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina shall be those of the Entities (Annex IV)*" (The Dayton Peace Accords: General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1995). This fragmentation of power enabled the entities, particularly Republika Srpska, to operate as nearly independent political units, often blocking decisions at the state level and undermining the country's unity. As High Representative Carl Bildt stated: "It will be a very loose and highly decentralised state with weak central powers for its common institutions – and thus unlike any other state in existence" (Bilt, 1996).

Power-sharing is entrenched in the constitution which became the part of the DPA. DPA stopped the war but state building was captured in the parties' interests owing to constitutional provisions. Thus every nation is represented equally regardless of the number of its population in the country. In fact, Bosniaks had been defensive and fought for lives during the war because other nations were superior in military compound. Political representatives followed military development and settled DPA on that basis. There had been concessions during the negotiations in Dayton which resulted from DPA and Bosniaks underrepresentation.

The DPA confirms results of the Bosnian war, compromise between all ethnic groups. Bosniaks had managed to defend independence but accepted a decentralized state system. Serbs had protected their right to autonomy but did not join Yugoslav Federation (Bagatskyi, 2016).

The Bosnian political system was created in Dayton where three main ethnic groups are represented in the institutions. Dayton disadvantages mirrors through ethnically representation whereas "Others" are not representative. If they want to win a seat in parliament or in the Presidency, they have to come from three main ethnic groups. Or they occupy seats intended for „constituent people", as read in the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a nutshell, you have to decide which ethnic group your political organization belongs to.

One of the guarantees of the Dayton Peace Agreement was the creation of mechanisms to prevent the domination of one ethnic group over others in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A key solution was the establishment of decentralized governance through the transfer of certain competencies to entities, cantons, and local communities. This political power fragmentation was intended to protect the interests of all three constituent peoples—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats—as well as other minority communities. This decentralization aimed to maintain peace and prevent a return to conflict by giving each group a sense of political security. Entities, cantons, and municipalities were granted significant autonomy in decision-making regarding their respective territories, allowing local leaders to shape policies according to the specific needs of their communities. The goal was to ensure that no single group could unilaterally impose decisions that might jeopardize the interests of others, thereby reducing interethnic tensions and fostering stability.

Benedict Anderson does not separate the nation from political life. A nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1992). A nation is imagined because its members will

never meet all other members. It is limited by the existence of other nations, with its "boundary" marked by the existence of others. A nation is also an imagined community because it implies horizontal camaraderie among its members. On the other hand, Ernest Gellner defines nationalism as "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner, 1998). When applied to multi-ethnic societies like Bosnia and Herzegovina, this principle creates a framework for conflict rather than integration.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was established as a consociational democracy under the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995, with the goal of ensuring peace and balance among the three constituent peoples: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. However, this system also institutionalized ethnic divisions, deepening the influence of nationalism on the country's political landscape. Rather than functioning as a mechanism for integration, the consociational model resulted in the creation of three separate ethnic subsystems, where each ethnic group has its own political parties, interest groups, and narratives.

The "pillarization" of interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina stemmed from historical and political processes. This model enables political elites to consolidate power within their ethnic communities while minimizing interaction among different communities. The system of pillarization extends beyond political fragmentation—it creates separate social spheres in which each ethnic group has its dominant parties, media, and interest groups (Kapidžić, 2019). Gellner's theory of nationalism provides additional context for understanding this dynamic. He argues that nationalism requires cultural standardization to allow the state to function effectively (Gellner, 1998). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, the Dayton Agreement and the consociational model created a framework that favors separate cultural and political identities, undermining efforts toward standardization or integration.

The Political Landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The political scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by a large number of parties, often with narrowly defined ethnic or regional interests, which complicates the formation of stable and functional ruling majorities. Within this complex system, political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be categorized based on several criteria: parliamentary participation, national and ideological orientation, and their role in the political system. Thus, we distinguish between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties, national and non-national (civic) parties, as well as ruling and opposition parties. A particularly interesting

phenomenon to observe is that of national parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although many parties openly emphasize their ethnic or national identity, there are also those that, despite lacking an explicit ethnic prefix in their name, clearly define their national character through their program, the composition of their leadership, and their geographical influence. Examples of such parties include the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). Analyzing party structures and fundamental documents often reveals national determinants, even when they are not immediately visible. National parties dominate the political landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They advocate for the interests of their respective ethnic groups and often employ nationalist rhetoric to attract voters.

If we take into consideration the programs of political parties, we can see that they are on the same track. They focus on EU and NATO integration, defending the state's or entities' competence, independence of the judiciary, safeguarding the vital interest of people they represet. Bosniak or Bosnian, Croat and Serb political parties mostly defend constitutional order, advocate for improvements in the election law and call for returning competence from the state level to entities.

 The Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) is one of the most influential political parties in Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was founded in 1990, with Radovan Karadžić as its first president. SDS is predominantly a Serbian party that advocates for the interests of the Serb people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. SDS defines itself as a democratic, center-right party. Its program is based on principles such as the protection of Serbian interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the preservation of Republika Srpska as an entity with a high degree of autonomy, cooperation with Serbia and other Serbian organizations in the region, and opposition to the centralization of Bosnia and Herzegovina while maintaining the identity of Republika Srpska. SDS was actively involved in the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995. After the war, SDS participated in the government of Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the party faced accusations of war crimes and corruption, leading to internal divisions and a weakening of its influence. The SDS program, with its emphasis on national interests and decentralization, is often interpreted as support for "state capture." By maintaining control over institutions in Republika Srpska, SDS had the opportunity to use public resources for party interests, which is one of the key aspects of state capture.

The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) is the dominant political party in Republika Srpska and one of the most influential parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was founded in 1996, with Milorad Dodik as its leader. SNSD declares itself a social democratic party, but in practice, it often behaves as a national

party advocating for the interests of the Serb people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The SNSD's program is based on the protection of Serbian interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the preservation of Republika Srpska as an entity with a high degree of autonomy, cooperation with Serbia and Russia, and the advocacy of a decentralized Bosnia and Herzegovina while safeguarding the special status and identity of Republika Srpska. SNSD has been the dominant party in Republika Srpska since 2006. It has frequently been accused of corruption and authoritarian behavior. The SNSD's political program, which emphasizes national interests and decentralization, is often linked to practices that can be considered forms of "state capture." By dominating institutions in Republika Srpska, the party has had the ability to use public resources for political and party gain, which is a key characteristic of this phenomenon. At the same time, SNSD's actions frequently undermine the territorial integrity and constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina, challenging the competencies of state institutions and advocating for greater autonomy for Republika Srpska.

Party of Democratic Action (SDA) declared itself as a political center party. It was founded in 1990 before paramilitary Serbs units waged the war against Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the war, SDA and Social democratic Party (SDP) were the only parties from Bosnian block in defending the country. After the war, several political parties were founded from these two political units. Discontented with political leaders, Haris Silajdžić founded Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH) in 1996 and closely cooperated with SDA on state's issues. SBiH has been the most important political party stemmed from SDA although several politicians left SDA and founded own parties. On the other side, the most important party stemmed from SDP is Democratic Front (DF), whose leader has been sitting in the chair of Presidency for the third time. His election in Presidency sparked controversies by the leader of HDZ Čović who considers Komšić as illegitimate because Croat people do not vote for him. But Constitution and Election Law allows Komšić to be elected as Croat in the Presidency who lives in Federation of BiH. On that account, HDZ and parties gathered around NGO Croatian People Assembly (HNS) require amendments to the Election Law. The amendment for Croatian member of Presidency would prefer votes from territories where Croats are majority in the south leading to discrimination of Croat people from other cities like Sarajevo, Tuzla, and so on.

HDZ '90 and SBiH are political parties who reached peak in 2006 refusing April package reform. Since then, two parties have been marginalized and did not take significant part in assemblies' seats. HDZ '90 assimilated with other political parties from Croat background and joined HNS in requesting legitimate

representation. In that way, two HDZ's are on the same track showing no difference in ideological stances. HDZ'90 requires more transparent work accusing HDZ for corruption. In 2005, Čović had been indicted for some criminal behavior but in transport from one building to other papers lost. On that account, Ćović has become clear before and ruled since 2005 when ascended power in HDZ.

The Bosniak political landscape is similar to the Croat ones. SDA lost the only election in 2010 but also formed coalition with winner, SDP. Paradoxically, in 2022 SDA won the election and occupied most number of seats in Parliament from Bosniak/Bosnian component but stayed out of power. SDA advocates for EU and NATO integration and strengthening state's competence. They succeeded to compromise with SNSD to transfer some competence from entities which are considered controversial in RS at this moment. On the other side, corruption spreads in SDA as the have ruled for many years. Bosnian Court sent to jail former minister of Defense Suljo Cikotić and Prime Minister Fadil Novalić. There are some controversies in the case of Novalić who are accused for breaking the procurement law during the COVID-19.

SBiH, which stemmed from SDA, has been marginalized since its president Haris Silajdžić withdrew from politics after the loss of seat in Presidency by the leader of SDA Bakir Izetbegović in 2010. Since then, only two candidates have won the parliamentary seats in mandate 2010-2014. SBiH political program based on entities abolishment. Former leader Silajdžić advocates for particularly abolishment of RS because it is grounded on genocide. On that account, Silajdžić did not accept April package who, in his mind, deprives state from its core competencies. On the other side, SBiH firmly advocates as no other party for state property. It is the party who in-depth analyze this issue and includes specific numbers on state property in its political program. Based on that analyze, we know that 53,26% belongs to state and 46,74% to private entities.

The Social Democratic Party (SDP) was founded in 1909 as the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina and has operated under its current name since 1990. SDP defines itself as a multi-ethnic, center-left party that advocates for the interests of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. The SDP's program is based on principles of social justice and economic equality, the development of a civic society, and a multi-ethnic state. SDP has participated in government at all levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a multi-ethnic party, the SDP theoretically opposes "state capture," which is often associated with national parties. However, in practice, its participation in coalitions with national parties has sometimes led to compromises that weakened the fight against corruption and clientelism.

The Role of Ethnonationalism in Perpetuating State Capture

Political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina use ethnic nationalism as a key mechanism to mobilize voters and maintain their power. This process unfolds through three main dimensions:

Control of Legislative and Administrative Mechanisms: Political elites exploit veto rights and the decentralized political system to obstruct reforms that could undermine their position. Consociational democracy mechanisms, such as the protection of vital national interests, enable elites to block reforms and maintain the status quo. For example, judicial system reforms and conflict-of-interest laws are regularly sabotaged under the pretext of protecting ethnic interests.

Manipulation of History and Historical Narratives: Ethnonationalist elites use historical narratives to justify their policies and marginalize civic identities. "The grand-state projects of Serbian and Croatian nationalism aim to separate the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina from their Bosnian identity, while the past is reinterpreted to justify the dominance of ethnic politics." This involves creating myths of heroism and victimhood, which serve to perpetuate ethnic divisions.

Ethnic Monopoly over Resources and Institutions: Political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina function as dominant actors in resource distribution. Parties use public resources to reward loyalists, which not only undermines the rule of law but also further fragments society. This is evident in public administration hiring practices, where ethnic affiliation often outweighs meritocratic principles.

This governance model has created a complex political system in which power is distributed across multiple levels. While this often slows decision-making, it has, on the other hand, allowed all key political actors to feel included in shaping the country's future. In the long term, this decentralization was intended to preserve a delicate ethnic balance and build trust among communities.

One of the most problematic aspects of the Dayton Agreement is the Preamble to the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which prioritizes the collective rights of ethno-national communities over individual rights. "The Preamble of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina prevents the state from creating a legal environment in which the power-sharing system would be organized within civil society, while at the same time it favors ethno-nationalism and collective rights of ethno-national-religious communities at the expense of the individual or the citizen" (Annex 4, Dayton Peace Agreement)" (The Dayton Peace Accords: General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1995). Instead

of promoting integration and building a unified civic state, this constitutional framework has entrenched ethnic nationalism as the dominant political force, creating a society divided along ethnic lines.

Political elites exploit these divisions to consolidate power and block reforms that could threaten their positions. The principle of "constituent peoples" is a major source of discrimination, where individual rights are subordinated to collective interests. Dayton introduced a consociational democracy system in which central institutions are organized based on ethnic keys to ensure the protection of the "vital interests" of constituent peoples. The principle of protecting "vital interests" gives ethno-national elites nearly unlimited opportunities to block legislation or regulations whenever they perceive them as a threat to the national interest of one of the constituent peoples.

For example, the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of three members—one Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb—elected from their respective ethnic groups. If a citizen wants to win a Presidency seat, he has to fulfill some prerequisites. Bosniak and Croat members have been elected from Bosnia and Herzegovina entity Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina but Serb one from Bosnia and Herzegovina entity Republic of Srpska. It is important to emphasize that Bosniaks and Croats from the Republic of Srpska and Serbs from the Federation were deprived of the rights to be elected to the Presidency based on their territorial principle. On that account, several citizens appealed to the European Court of Human Rights who decided that this political system is old-fashioned and does not meet democratic values.

Each member can block a decision of the Presidency by invoking the protection of their people's vital interest, making the decision subject to voting in entity bodies. Any member of the Presidency can block a decision by raising the issue of "vital national interest" within three days of the decision's adoption, creating political paralysis and dependency on international arbitrators such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR). The international community, through the Office of the High Representative (OHR), has played a significant role in implementing the Dayton Agreement. While this was necessary to stabilize post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, excessive reliance on international actors has weakened domestic decision-making capacities. Giovanni Sartori warns that constitutions must primarily serve as instruments of governance that "limit, restrain, and allow for the control of the exercise of political power" (Sartori, 1994). However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, international intervention has often replaced domestic political processes, further eroding the accountability of local leaders.

Towards Functional Democracy: Overcoming Structural Challenges

The Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into the House of Peoples and the House of Representatives, where the ethnic key dominates decision-making procedures. In the House of Peoples, decisions must gain the support of all constituent peoples, while the right to protect vital interests allows any ethnic group to block legislative processes. This contrasts with the principles of efficiency and functionality in legislative bodies. Sartori warns that "aspirational constitutions," which aim to satisfy too many divergent interests, can become dysfunctional because they overload institutional capacities. "We must beware, therefore, of 'aspirational constitutions'… Aspirational constitutions are, in the end, a deviation and an overload of constitutional capacities that results, in turn, in their failure to function"(Sartori, 1994).

The veto right, designed as a protective mechanism, is often used to block key reforms. For example, in the Parliamentary Assembly, any decision considered a threat to a "vital national interest" can be blocked and sent for review to the Constitutional Court. This process delays decision-making and creates political instability. "The more we lose the notion that constitutions must be incentive-monitored and incentive-sustained, the more it must be underscored that the crafting of constitutions is an engineering-like task"(Sartori, 1994).

Elite intransigence and refusal to cooperate became the norm. Political elites use veto power to paralyze the system even if their rights are not at stake. The most striking example is bet taxation. HDZ Bosnia and Herzegovina under the leadership of Dragan Čović stopped bet taxation justifying it as a national interest of Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other side, Bosniak politicians and those who represent themselves as Bosnian ones use this veto institution to defend the country. For example, appeal to the Constitutional Court in the case of state-owned property issue who decided that the state is titular of that property saying the country is in charge of managing this kind of property.

Although the Dayton Peace Agreement implemented a form of consociational democracy intended to preserve peace and ethnic balance, this model has revealed many weaknesses. As Arend argues, "The weakest links in the chain of arguments on which the recommendation of consociational engineering is based are that it cannot claim to be either a necessary or a sufficient method for achieving stable democracy(Lijphart, 1977). This is particularly evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the model is used not only for stabilization but also to perpetuate political blockades and paralysis, hindering the creation of functional

institutions. Constitutional engineering is crucial for state stability, but poor architecture can cause paralysis and dysfunction. The institutional weaknesses of the Dayton Agreement undermine the state's functionality and encourage political divisions. Decentralization of power, domination of ethnic interests, and dependence on the international community have created a system that does not meet the needs of a modern democratic society.

The Republic of Srpska has the ability to block any legislation at any reading if two thirds or more MPs do not support the law. The same ability has been in the hands of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unlike the vital interest, this mechanism is not subject to a mediation process and review of constitutional court. Thus, 52.3% of all legislative acts in the Bosnian parliament between 1996 and 2007 failed due to the "entity veto" (Bieber, Reconceptualizing the Study of Power-Sharing, 2012).

A key aspect of state capture in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the dominance of party interests over citizens' interests. The political system, defined by the Dayton Peace Agreement, enables parties to use decentralized institutions as tools for consolidating power. Parties create an uneven political playing field at subnational levels, exploiting institutional weaknesses to maintain control while professing support for democratic values.

This model further allows party leaders to centralize decision-making within their parties, with representatives at various levels of government voting according to party hierarchy directives rather than citizens' needs. Political parties manage their members' votes through centralized party structures, where voting often follows leaders' orders instead of serving community interests. This creates a situation in which parliaments and legislative bodies function as extensions of party politics rather than forums for discussion and decision-making in favor of citizens. Legislative bodies become arenas of political conflict, where parties use every possible mechanism to preserve the status quo.

The political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on "consociational democracy, the country enshrines principles of power-sharing among political parties representing the main ethnic groups in a way that emphasizes accountability towards one's own group rather than to citizens of the country as a whole" (Kapidžić, Subnational Competitive Authoritarianism and Power-Sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). Such a system not only hinders state functionality but also provides a basis for institutional capture by political parties. Furthermore, the consociational model allows parties to establish an uneven political playing field at the subnational level, using institutional structures and economic resources to

maintain political monopolies. "Bosnian and Herzegovinian political parties use illiberal politics to gain control of state resources, most notably SOEs, with the aim to create long-lasting forms of relational patronage that can be used in electoral contests on an uneven playing field" (Kapidžić, Subnational Competitive Authoritarianism and Power-Sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). These practices demonstrate how political elites use state capture to consolidate their power, often at the expense of the rule of law and democratic institutions.

The dominance of political parties in legislative bodies is further reinforced through nationalist rhetoric, which obstructs the development of a civic political space, mobilizes the electorate, and preserves their power. Specifically, narratives about war crimes and victimization are frequently used to cement the ideology of belonging to a particular ethnic group.

The stories of war crimes and victimization (regardless of whether they are true or not) cement the ideology of belonging as that which constitutes the deepest essence of any individual member of an ethnic community, as well as their highest duty (Dvornik, 2018).

Misrepresentations and reinterpretations like this represent a typical pattern of narratives, with which political actors have been keeping the societies of the former Yugoslavia on their toes since the end of the Balkan wars: Facts are denied, in order to circulate one's own interpretations, in order to manipulate, to exert power, to cement power. In this way, the societies are kept frozen in combat mode (Kraske, 2018). This narrative enables leaders to justify their decisions to citizens by exploiting fear of "the other" and creating the illusion that protecting ethnic interests is more important than social justice or economic development. Party-controlled media often use polarizing rhetoric, labeling opposition voices as "traitors" or "threats to national interests." For example, during election campaigns, political parties often use the media to spread fear of "other" ethnic groups, further mobilizing their electorate. This process weakens public trust in media impartiality and democracy as a system.

Moreover, the party system operates through a deeply entrenched patronage network, wherein "through effective capture of public administration all three parties are able to control economic resources and redistribute them to loyal supporters" (Kapidžić, Subnational Competitive Authoritarianism and Power-Sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019: 10). This obstructs reforms that could strengthen the rule of law and institutional efficiency. In this way, parties ensure the stability of their positions while simultaneously deepening institutional dysfunction.

One of the most important mechanisms through which parties maintain this narrative is media control. Political parties use the media to shape public perception, branding critical voices as traitors while promoting their propaganda as the sole truth. This continuous exposure to one-sided information deepens divisions and undermines the potential for developing an inclusive civic policy.

Practical examples show how political parties use state resources and institutions to consolidate their power, often at the expense of democratic principles and citizens' interests. A specific example comes from Republika Srpska, where the ruling party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), restricted freedom of assembly during the 2018 "Justice for David" protests, which called for government accountability following the death of David Dragičević. The police banned further gatherings, while media controlled by political elites downplayed the protests' significance and labeled participants as "traitors of the Serbian people." This situation illustrates how ruling parties use repressive measures and media control to suppress criticism and ensure their political survival.

Political parties are key players in the process of identity politicization. They not only articulate the interests of their ethnic communities but also actively manipulate those interests to maintain their dominance. Political parties in contemporary democracies often turn into closed oligarchies, where the leading elite uses membership and the electorate as tools to achieve their personal interests (Delić, 2010). Lavić, in his work *Discourse on Bosnianhood*, further analyzes how ethno nationalist elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina use historical narratives and ethnic symbols to fragment society. Ethnopolitics in the Balkans insidiously employs religion, art, science, and history for its dangerous interpretations of social relations, preventing identification with Bosnia as a political entity. Lavić emphasizes that the ethnic-religious concept of the nation is a tool for exclusion and domination, reducing collective identity to a rigid structure with no room for pluralism or political inclusion. This approach not only leads to stagnation but also directly undermines the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state (Lavić, 2020).

As Lavić notes in *The Forgetting of Difference*, the education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina has also fallen victim to ethnonationalism, where knowledge and critical thinking are marginalized in favor of ethnic narratives. The politicization of education and the hegemony of ethnic discourse undermine society's intellectual development and sustain a status quo dominated by mediocrity and political oligarchies. This process is not isolated but extends to media, culture, and public discourse, where nationalist narratives are used to mobilize support and eliminate opposition voices.

An example of ethnic nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the education system, deeply fragmented along ethnic lines. Education has become an instrument of political domination, where mediocrity and politically loyal personnel occupy key positions. Through ethnically shaped curricula and segregated schools (e.g., "two schools under one roof"), youth are taught narratives that cement ethnic differences instead of promoting inclusion and shared values (Lavić, Zaborav razlike, 2018). For instance, history and literature are often taught from the perspective of a particular ethnic group, while the contributions of other communities are ignored or marginalized. This process not only perpetuates ethnic divisions but also hinders the development of critical thinking in students.

One of the most harmful consequences of ethnic nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the continuous erosion of social cohesion. Instead of fostering a shared identity, political elites exploit ethnic divisions to mobilize support, thereby undermining trust among communities. Senadin Lavić emphasizes that ethnopolitics deliberately excludes identification with Bosnia as a historical, cultural, and political fact, intentionally fostering fragmentation. This fragmentation has led to the creation of isolated social spheres where citizens rarely have opportunities to interact outside their ethnic group (Lavić, Zaborav razlike, 2018). A practical example of this division is the education system, where students are often segregated along ethnic lines. Through such structures, young people grow up without any contact with peers from other communities, deepening stereotypes and mistrust. This segregation not only undermines social cohesion but also hinders the development of a shared political and civic identity.

Civic identity, which could serve as a bridge between different ethnic communities, is suppressed through political and media narratives that prioritize collective ethnic interests over individual rights. The consociational model of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not promote inclusion or shared values but instead entrenches separate political and social pillars.

Role of OHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Settling political issues

OHR is an institution created by the Dayton Peace Agreement which oversees the civilian aspect of agreement. It is supported by the Peace Implementation Process (PIC) composed of 55 countries and agencies. PIC provides political guidance to OHR through the Steering Board composed of key countries and institutions, including the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Canada, Japan, Turkey, and the EU Commission. OHR's power extended in December

1997 during the conference in Germany when the international community granted them well-known "Bonn powers". Such powers provide breaking deadlock in internal affairs. On that account, the High Representative has been able to remove officials and impose legislation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the first seven years after the war, OHR had done more than any other institution. During that time, OHR adopted 757 decisions: removal from office 119 persons including prime ministers and ministers and imposition 286 laws or amendments to laws (Arvanitopoulos & Tzifakis, 2008).

First High Representative Carl Bildt did not have Bonn powers to influence political issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the Berlin conference in 1997, international actors decided to grant additional powers to the High Representative as he may facilitate and help building the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since Westendorp's term as a High Representative, Bonn powers have been used. He imposed over 45 decisions and removed 16 high-ranking officials from their office. By doing so, High Representative Westendorp helped standardise a national flag, currency, telecommunication laws and common license plates. His successor Wolfgang Petritsch followed suit, aiming to build a state and institutions. His order restructured Constitutional Commission of Republic of Srpska, established memorial for the victims of Srebrenica genocide, established Independent Judicial Commision and econmic and social legislation (Beglerović, 2022).

International actors also helped Bosnian politicians to occupy seats. At the end of last century, Milorad Dodik, supported by the Western allies, became the Prime Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, Republic of Srpska. After the 1998 Presidential election, his seat was at stake. Newly elected President of the entity Republic of Srpska, Nikola Poplašen wanted to unseat Dodik due to his moderate and more pro-Western policies. Then, High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch removed Poplašen from the office and in the aftermath of the 2000 election allowed SDS to participate in a governing coalition on the condition that the new government would be composed of independent experts, with no political affiliation (Tzifakis, 2007).

The High Representative did, however, establish two constitutional commissions for both entities in January 2001, which are charged with safeguarding the interests of the three constituent nations, and the 'others'. Both commissions contain four members from each of the four groups and the majority of each group can object to a proposed regulation, law or decision of the entities, if it determines that to be against their group. The commission is charged with resolving the claim, and, if it cannot agree, refers it to the High Representative. The

commission, a provisional institution, pending the incorporation of the Constitutional Court decision on the constituent people in the entities (see above), provides for protection of citizens who are not members of the three national groups (Bieber, 2002).

In 2002, Paddy Ashdown took up the position of High Representative. His tenure may be regarded as the most fruitful owing to achievements during that time. Main achievements include reformation and centralization of Bosnian armed forces under the joint command; reformation of tax system (VAT and establishment of Indirect Tax Administration) and partial police reform which did not meet initial expectations and were weakened by the strong opposition of the Serbian side (Bagatskyi, 2016).

In 2004 the number of removal from positions reached a peak. More than 130 officials had been removed from or banned from public positions emphasizing two "extreme" cases". In one day Ashdown removed 58 officials but on the other side Wolfgang Petrich on 29 November 1999 dismissed 23 persons from public positions. Dismissed persons obstructed return of refugees or displaced persons as well as supported or hid war criminal Radovan Karadžić (Orosz, 2023).

After the resignation of Ashdown, Christian Schwarz-Schilling became his successor. He reduced activities to interfere in domestic issues although it was his competence. Since then, OHR has lost its credibility and political leaders return to protect their interests and nationalistic rhetoric has become political discourse.

High Representtaive Christian Schwarz-Schilling was asked by PIC to decrease use of power and in 2008 announced Agenda 5+2, a set of criteria for the closure of OHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Orosz, 2023) The PIC has agreed to close OHR after five objectives have been met. These include a decision on ownership of state property, a decision on defense property; implementing the Brčko Final Award (which made the town of Brcko a self-governing unit within Bosnia); ensuring fiscal sustainability; and entrenching the rule of law (Representative, 2008).

Politicians in the Republic of Srpska utilized this situation and refused to recognize decisions made by the High Representative. In 2007 Miroslav Lajčak tried to limit obstruction of the Council of Ministries and Parliamentary Assembly by a decree. But president of the Republic of Srpska Dodik's response was blocking up the work of the Council of Ministries (Bagatskyi, 2016). This attitude has been continuing whenever Dodik's politics is at stake. He would withdraws his loyal ministers attempting to achieve his goal. Bosnian political parties in that case

try to find a compromise that Bosnia and Herzegovina goes forward on its way to democratic and Euroatlantic state. Unfortunately, this appeasement has not succeeded and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been stuck in politics by Dodik. Additionally, the police reform supported by the High Representative, did not adopt the largest Serbian political parties opposed to the reform itself and abolition of the Republic of Srpska ministry of internal affairs. By doing this, state police reform has stalled and politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina entity Republic of Srpska continued their behaviour to the High Representative.

All laws imposed by Inzko in 2009, mostly linked to Brčko District, were publicly rejected by Milorad Dodik at the time prime minister of Republic of Srpska. The Official Gazette of Republic of Srpska did not publish these laws breaching the law. Unfortunately, none was fined and it had smoothly passed. The National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska adopted a referendum plan on the OHR role in the country regarding law imposition with the following question.

"Do you support the unconstitutional and unauthorized imposition of laws by the High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the imposed laws on the Court and Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the implementation of their decisions on the territory of Republika Srpska?" (Beglerović, 2022).

The National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska carried out unconstitutional and anti-Dayton action. The National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska adopted a resolution to review all powers transferred to state level. It said the Republic of Srpska will launch legal challenges to return competencies to the Republic of Srpska. After the Republic of Srpska parliament had not retracted resolution until June 11 demanded by High Representative Valentin Inzko, he annulled the resolution on June20 (Woehrel, 2010).

The High Representative Valentin Inzko kept on his duties. Although parties did not accept his law's imposition, Inzko never removed officials from the office. At the end of mandate, he imposed amendments in the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina criminalizing genocide denial. This move enraged Serb politicians specially Republic of Srpska president Milorad Dodik whose narrative has become harsher. They responded by adopting the Law on the Non-Applicability of the Decision of the High Representative Enacting the Law on Amendment to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This law has been proclaimed unconstitutional by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitutional Court.

It could be said this amendment had been late because Inzko's mandate lasted for 11 years. Even victims of genocide and other war crimes requsted much

earlier for this imposition. Even the Criminal Code in Bosnia and Herzegovina includes genocide denial amendments, it is hard to see indictments against genocide denial.

Appointment of the current High Representative Christian Schmidt had been dramatic. PIC appointed Schmidt except Russia and China are at odds. They contend the High Representative has to be appointed by the UN Security Council or a President's letter. Until that day, Russia and its proxy Dodik did not accept Schmidt as a High Representative.

For the first time, Schmidt used Bonn powers on May 11, 2022 stressing that the state is a titular of Immovable State Property. Decision came after years of Dodik's assurance that the property's owner's right belongs to entities. Few months later, in June 2022, he imposed a decision on financing Bosnia and Herzegovina election scheduled for October 2. The issue came to the fore when finance minister Vjekoslav Bevanda (HDZ) tried to delay election justifying that 'the budget needs to be voted in a regular procedure'. High Representative made a decision to interfere in consultation with PIC because Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to „operate under the rule of law and with free and democratic elections' to hold free, fair and democratic elections, representing people's basic rights." (Beglerović, 2022). This decision allowed permanent election financing.

Although secession policy is underway in Bosnia and Herzegovina entity Republic of Srpska, Schmidt decided to intervene in the Federation on the election eve. After the polls closure, he amended Election Law increasing the number of seats to constituent people from 17 to 23 in the Federation House of People. It favors HDZ Bosnia and Herzegovina position what had been seen by Croatia PM Andrej Plenković reaction. He stated this decision is Croatia's win helping Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina in exerting their rights. But, the High Representative justified his move saying it would fasten coalition establishment and proper functioning of the entity.

Constitutional Reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Rejection of April Package Provisions

On its way to join the EU Bosnia and Herzegovina had to reform its police department. Thus the OHR sponsored police reform package that met three minimal EU requirements: 1) securing exclusive state-level competencies over police; (2) the elimination of political interference from police; and (3) ensuring that police regions are determined on the basis of technical and professional criteria (Toal, O'Loughlin, & Djipa, 2006).

1. Governance questions, which revolve around making the Council of Ministers a Governance functional and effective government for the state. There is general agreement to expand the Council of Ministers from nine to eleven Ministries (adding the ministries of Agriculture and of Science, Technology, and the Environment) and to grant the Chair the power to hire and fire cabinet ministers, something not currently possible.

2. Human rights questions, which concern strengthening individual and minority Human rights rights in line with the European Charter on Human Rights.

3. The office of the Presidency, which is currently a Yugoslav-style rotating presidency with one Bosnian Serb elected from the territory of the Republic of Srpska, and one Bosnian Croat and Bosniak elected from the Federation. This exclusivist ethnoterritorial system of election means that non-Serbs who may have returned to the Republic of Srpska or Bosnian Serbs living in the Federation cannot vote for a candidate of their own ethnicity (or, for example, a Bosnian Jew). Agreement is emerging on a single president and two vice presidents, and with a reduced portfolio of powers. The rotation issue is yet to be resolved.

4. The Bosnia and Herzegovina parliament currently comprises a 42-member House of Representatives Bosnia and Herzegovina parliament and a 15-delegate upper House of Peoples. The former is directly elected, whereas the latter is appointed by the Federation House of Peoples and the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska. The House of Peoples has the power to block legislation that passes the lower House of Representatives by evoking a "vital national interest" clause. Current proposals are to change how this House is assembled, focus discussion on the "vital national interest" to this body, and carefully circumscribe its use (Toal, O'Loughlin, & Djipa, 2006).

The Council of Europe's Venice Commission suggested on March 11, 2005 that such constitutional reform did not match democratic values and was neither efficient nor rational. The European Commission followed suit and issued a resolution to establish effective functioning of administrative structures. In general, Bosniak and Croats leaders did not oppose such reforms but Serbs agreed upon reforms that would not touch upon the Republic of Srpska and its competencies. After Bosnian parties had formed a constitutional working group several issues concluded such as transfer of powers from Presidency to the Council of Ministers, relegation of authorties relevant to the EU accession to the State level. Two votes were missing to adopt such 'April package' reform. Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH) rejected reforms saying it is decorative but HDZ '90 opposed such reforms because it deprived Croats of some rights (Arvanitopoulos & Tzifakis, 2008).

Conclusion

The chapter offered an in-depth analysis of how the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established by the Dayton Peace Agreement, has become the foundation for systemic manipulation of institutions by the ruling elites. These elites exploit institutional weaknesses, the decentralized constitutional framework, and ethnic nationalism to secure their political dominance, rather than working to advance democratic principles and the interests of citizens. Nationalist rhetoric, often used as a tool to mobilize voters, not only perpetuates political and social divisions but also undermines any attempts at reforms that could lead to a more functional state. Mechanisms such as vetoes based on the protection of vital national interests, the misuse of legislative bodies for political competition, and patronage networks within public administration contribute to the obstruction of key legislative processes and reforms. These challenges are further exacerbated by the role of the international community, which, despite good intentions and significant interventions, has often reinforced the dependency of local decision-makers instead of fostering their accountability and independence.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina's future, the key question is how to overcome these deeply entrenched structural challenges. Move away from the current state of political paralysis and towards a functional democracy, it is necessary to redefine the constitutional and institutional framework while promoting an inclusive civic identity that transcends existing ethnic divisions. The international community can play a crucial role in this process, but only through strategies that encourage local political actors to take responsibility and cooperate. Bosnia and Herzegovina stands at a crossroads between a past shaped by war and divisions and a future that could bring stability and prosperity. However, this future requires bold decisions and a willingness to change. It is essential to recognize that no ethnic or political interest can outweigh the interests of the citizens as a whole. This is the critical step toward overcoming the current state: building a political system that serves the people, not political parties or ethnic groups. As long as systemic priorities remain focused on preserving ethnic divisions and political power, Bosnia and Herzegovina will remain a hostage to its own past. But if a vision of collective progress emerges and efforts are made to achieve it, Bosnia and Herzegovina has the potential to become an example of how to overcome deeply rooted divisions and build a sustainable future for all its citizens.

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