

CHAPTER IV

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

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Introduction

The DPS¹ 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.

- 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 clientelism², 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 LCM³, emerged on the political scene following the December 1990 elections. It remained in power continuously from 1945 (unofficially) or 1990 (officially) to 2020,

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 rhetoric, 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 dependent⁴ 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

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 Party⁵ (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

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/ethnic 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 ethno-political 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), Montenegro⁶ 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

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” (Vujadinović 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 SFRY⁸ (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

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 breaking out 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 – DPS⁹. 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

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 successful 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 elections¹⁰ 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

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 (Spoljnotpolitički 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,

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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