DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN CHALLENGING TIMES:

Insights from Political Science and Beyond

conference

May 29—30th 2025
Podgorica, Montenegro

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Naučno tehnološki park

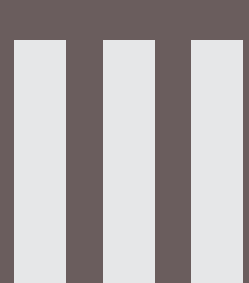| DAY 1	Thursday, May 29
TIME	
8:30-9:00	**Registration** of participants
9:00-9:30	**Opening** of the conference Prof. dr. **Olivera Komar**, president of MoPSA Mr. **Marko Vukašinović**, Director General, Directorate for International Cooperation, European Integration and EU Funds, Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation Ms. **Kirsten Schönefeld**, director of FES regional office for Montenegro and Serbia Dr. **Slaven Živković**, executive director of DeFacto Consultancy
9:30-10:30	Keynote speech by **Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Merkel** Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung - WZB & Democracy Institute, CEU Budapest **What is Democratic Resilience and How to Strengthen It?**

10:30 Coffee Break

TIME	SESSION	PANEL	ROOM
11:00-12:30	**I**	**Panel I** Comparative Politics: Backsliding	*201*
11:00-12:30		**Panel II** Comparative Politics: Resilience	*202*
11:00-12:30		**Panel III** International Politics	*203*

12:30 Lunch Break

TIME	SESSION	PANEL	ROOM
13:30-15:00	**II**	**Panel IV** Party Politics and Elections	*201*
13:30-15:00		**Panel V** Politics and Communication	*202*
13:30-15:00		**Panel VI** Behaviour, Values and Attitudes	*203*

15:00 Coffee Break

TIME	SESSION	PANEL	ROOM
15:15-16:45	**III**	**Panel VII** Online Panel	*201*
15:15-16:45		**Panel VIII** Behaviour and Gender	*202*
15:15-16:45		**Panel IX** Western Balkans Politics I	*203*

19:30 Reception Dinner

DAY 2			Friday, May 30
TIME	**SESSION**	**PANEL**	**ROOM**
9:00-10:00		Lecture by **Prof. Dr. Ruth Dassonneville** Faculty of Social Sciences at KU Leuven **Recent Changes in Political Behavior**	*202*
10:00-11:30	**IV**	**Panel X** Behaviour and Voting	*201*
10:00-11:30		**Panel XI** Western Balkans Politics II	*202*
11:30 Coffee Break			
12:00-13:00		Lecture by **Prof. Dr. Jan Zielonka** University of Oxford, University of Venice, Ca Foscari **Democratic Resilience, Erosion, or Muddling Through?**	*202*
Closing of the Conference			

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SESSION I

PANEL I 11:00-12:30	COMPARATIVE POLITICS: BACKSLIDING Panel chair: Ivan Vuković	
The effects of the Russia-Ukraine war: The erosion of democracy in Georgia: a "return to the past"?	Sandro Tabatadze	Tbilisi State University
Alternatives to liberal democracies (ALDs) and their consolidation in Central Eastern Europe	Radoslaw Markowski	Polish Academy of Sciences, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities
Populism and the Second Wave of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Balkans	Nebojša Vladisavljević	University of Belgrade
How Elections in 2024 Affected Democratic Resilience across the World and in the Western Balkans	Srđan Darmanović	University of Montenegro
Politics of Fear and the Rise of New Despotism	Milan Podunavac	University of Donja Gorica

PANEL II 11:00-12:30	COMPARATIVE POLITICS: DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE Panel chair: Nemanja Stankov	
Democratic Resilience in Armenia and Corruption	Harutyun Aleksanyan Marat Atovmyan	Yerevan State University
Can Deliberation Resolve Democratic Deficits in Divided Societies? The Case of the 2021 Mostar Citizens Assembly	Damir Kapidžić	University of Sarajevo

Building Resilience from Below: Evidence of Bottom-up Democracy Pleas in Two Protests Waves – Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014) and Macedonia (2016)	Ivan Stefanovski	University American College, Skopje
Who is willing to forgive undemocratic behaviour? Evidence from conjoint experiments in five European countries	Daphne Halikiopoulou Ludwig List Filip Milačić Sofia Vasilopoulou	University of York, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Central European University, Kings College
Where Democratic Resilience withers: The Dynamics of Multi-level Governance and Actor-centric Exclusion in the Western Balkans	Ermelinda Muçaj	Independent researcher, European Movement

PANEL III 11:00-12:30	INTERNATIONAL POLITICS Panel chair: Marko Savić

The Impact of EU Negotiations on Institutional Reforms and Democratic Governance in Türkiye	Burcu Miraç Diraor Aydin	Gedik University
The South Caucasus and the Western Balkans on the path to democratization: A comparative analysis	Roman Karapetyan	Yerevan State University
How the Citizens Voice can be (Over)Heard When Raised: Case of Serbia and Student Protests	Miljana Đurđević Cucić	University of Belgrade

Characteristics of the Georgian Orthodox Church's relations during the period of Soviet Union's collapse and the formation of an independent state in Georgia	Giorgi Pareshishvili	Caucasus International University
Democracy in Distress: The Psychological Consequences of Political Crises in Macedonia	Eleonora Serafimovska Marijana Markovikj Tea Koneska- Vasilevska	University Ss.Cyril and Methodius Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical research

SESSION II

PANEL IV 13:30-15:00	PARTY POLITICS AND ELECTIONS Panel chair: Slaven Živković	
Democracy Without Borders? Electoral Barriers and the Political Exclusion of Foreign Residents	Katerina Basel Michal Pink	Masaryk University
A Redistributive Issue in the Tan- Gal Party System: Public Attitudes on the Real Estate Taxation in Croatia	Goran Čular	University of Zagreb
Party System Changes in Montenegro: Between Polarization and Fragmentation	Gianluca Passarelli Zlatko Vujović	Sapienza Università di Roma University of Montenegro
Leveling the Electoral Playing Field in Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Macedonia	Marko Krtolica	Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
Regulating Party Financing and Electoral Competition: A Comparative Perspective and the Western Balkans	Chiara Fiorelli	Sapienza Università di Roma

PANEL V 13:30-15:00	POLITICS AND COMMUNICATION Panel chair: Sanja Orlandić	
Negative Campaign and Hate Speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina	Elma Huruz Memović Irena Praskač Salčin Selma Ćosić	University of Sarajevo
"For the Minds and Hearts": Analysis of Media Narratives as a Soft Power Instrument of Non-Democratic States	Marko Savić	Montenegrin Political Science Association (MoPSA)
Displacement, not Obstruction: Why Insecure Leaders Need Not Fear Free Media	Afiq bin Oslan Ipek Ece Sener	Max Plank Institute, Harvard University
Harnessing Digital Technologies for Youth-Led Anti-Corruption Movements in the Balkans	Layla Weiss Agim Selami	Georgetown University, ZIP Institute
Occupational variation in protest participation: The case of Serbias prodemocracy protests 2024/2025	Marko Žilović	University of Belgrade
PANEL VI 13:30-15:00	BEHAVIOUR, VALUES AND ATTITUDES Panel chair: Nemanja Batrićević	
The (Ill) Will of the People - Is there a Hidden Readiness to Subvert Liberal Democracy?	Åsa von Schoultz Jaakko Hillo Inga Saikkonen	University of Helsinki, Åbo Akademi University
Democratic Backsliding from the Bottom-Up: How Perceived Corruption Shapes Justification of Undemocratic Practices in the Western Balkans	Nemanja Stankov	University of Montenegro
In Democracy we Trust, BUT… Disillusionment and Inconsistencies in Individuals´ Democratic Commitments	Olga Gyarfasova	Comenius University Bratislava

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Perceptions of an Ideal Society: Evidence from the ESS-CRONOS Panel	Vladimir Mentus	Institute for Social Sciences, Belgrade
Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in Europe: Examining the East-West Divide	Aneta Cekikj Jovan Bliznakovski	Ss. Cyril and Methodius University

SESSION III

PANEL VII 15:15-16:45	ONLINE PANEL Panel chair: Nemanja Stankov	
The Emerging Polycentric Global Order	Siniša Vuković Giovanna Maria Dora Dore	Johns Hopkins: School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins: Krieger School of Arts and Sciences
Rethinking Democratic Defense - The Impact of Antidemocratic Actions in the Social Dimension	Peter Verpoorten	Central European University
The Not-So-Soft Power of Faith 2.0	Ljubomir Filipović	Arizona State University
Geographical Comparison of Voter Turnout Representation in the Republic of Croatia During the Super Election Year of 2024	Kristina Vrbek	University of Zagreb

PANEL VIII 15:15-16:45	BEHAVIOUR AND GENDER Panel chair: Zlatko Vujović	
Gender Gaps in Internal Political Efficacy Across Europe: A Comparative Exploration	Jovan Bliznakovski Aneta Cekikj	Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
Different Colors of the Same Rainbow? The Polarization of Gender Issues and its Campaign Potential	Melanie Dietz Sigrid Rossteutscher	Goethe University Frankfurt
Gender Attitudes and Party Preferences in Serbia: The role of Individual Authoritarianism	Bojan Todosijević Jovana Zafirović Branka Matijević	Institute for Social Sciences, Belgrade
The Gender Affect Effect: Are Men More Susceptible to Affective Polarization?	Olivera Komar Nemanja Batrićević	University of Montenegro

PANEL IX 15:15-16:45	WESTERN BALKANS POLITICS I Panel chair: Gianluca Passarelli	
Antipolitical Revolution - Student Protest in Serbia	Dušan Spasojević	University of Belgrade
Short-term Gain, Long-Term Risks: Montenegro's Battle with Populist Fiscal Policies	Mladen Grgić	University of Montenegro
Beyond the Classroom: Student Protests and Political Transformation in Serbia	Jelena Riznić	Institute for Social Sciences, Belgrade
Fasting democracy	Nikola Radunović	Independent researcher
Democratic Resilience in North Macedonia: Challenges, Reform and Future Prospects	Sofija Georgievska Dimitar Kovachevski Nataša Stanojkovska-Trajkovska Elena Kovacevska	Faculty of Philosophy, UKIM Skopje

SESSION IV

PANEL X 10:00-11:30	BEHAVIOUR AND VOTING Panel chair: Katharina Blinzler	
Special elections in a comparative perspective: A study of four democracies	Stephen Quinlan	GESIS institute
Suburbanization and Political Polarization: Voting Behaviour in the Suburban Areas of the Czech Republic and Slovakia	František Reitter Michal Pink	Masaryk University
Is there Anything Beyond Cleavage Politics? Economic Voting Experimental Evidence from Montenegro	Slaven Živković	DeFacto Consultancy
Democratic Resilience from Below: Voter Profiles of New Opposition Parties in Serbia and Croatia	Valentina Petrović	University of Zurich

PANEL XI 10:00-11:30	WESTERN BALKANS POLITICS II Panel chair: Srđan Darmanović	
Montenegro "Lost" in Transition: Ethnonationalism Overshadows Europeanization	Sajma Ademović	University of Donja Gorica
Fighting Anti-Romaism Within the Integration Model and the Invisibility of Structural Discrimination - the Case of Montenegro	Danijela Vuković-Ćalasan	University of Montenegro

Social Policy and Democratic Resilience in Montenegro: Between Welfare Populism and Sustainable Development	Uglješa Janković	University of Montenegro
From Overt Demonization to Subtle Delegitimization: Discursive Strategies of Contesting Montenegrin Independence	Sanja Orlandić	Faculty for Montenegrin Language and Literature
'Little Ukraine' in the Balkans: Montenegro seen from Belgrade	Ivan Vuković	University of Montenegro

PANEL I

Comparative Politics: Backsliding

The Effects of the Russia-Ukraine war: The Erosion of Democracy in Georgia: a "Return to the Past"?

Dr. Sandro Tabatadze, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Tbilisi State University

The Russia-Ukraine war has significantly impacted the EU and its neighboring countries. The EU's strong support for Ukraine and emerging economic and migration challenges have fueled Euroscepticism across Europe. Moreover, the extended duration of the conflict has posed significant challenges for EU candidate states in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Consequently, there has been an increase in political polarization within these regions, further exacerbating issues about the rule of law.

Georgia, the EU's newest candidate state, presents a compelling case. Nestled at the intersection of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, Georgia was once celebrated as a 'beacon of democracy' following the 2003 Rose Revolution. Its rapid modernization and Westernization seemed to set an irreversible trend. Despite grappling with challenges such as political polarization and the organization of competitive elections, both the public and political elite remained resolute in their commitment to pro-democratic institutional reforms. However, the commencement of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022 marked a pivotal turning point for Georgia. This event significantly heightened the risks of a potential regression to past conditions characterized by authoritarianism, civil strife, isolation, and a departure from a Western political trajectory.

Within the framework of democratic erosion, this paper proposal aims to investigate the Eurosceptic rhetoric that the Georgian government has fostered in the aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It also seeks to analyze the significant and ongoing public democratic resilience that has emerged since this 'turning point' in the government's stance. Based on longitudinal content analysis and in-depth interviews, the study will focus on three key cases: the implementation of the Foreign Agents policy, the unrecognized elections of October 2024, and the decision by the Georgian authorities to suspend negotiation talks with the EU. Additionally, the paper will scrutinize the strategies employed to undermine the democratic process in Georgia and the potential impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on this issue.

Alternatives to Liberal Democracies (ALDs) and their Consolidation in Central Eastern Europe

Prof. dr. Radoslaw Markowski, Polish Academy of Sciences & SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities

This paper examines the rise and impact of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism as alternatives to liberal Democracy in Central Eastern Europe, using data from the 10th European Social Survey. Liberal democracies (LDs) face many rivals today, notably populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism (collectively referred to as PIA). Each of these ideologies challenges liberal democracies on distinct fronts, exhibiting unique characteristics and evolving through specific trajectories. It focuses on the complex relationship between ideologies and political regimes, where citizens' attitudes act as mediating factors. The task of categorizing anti-liberal and non-democratic regimes is ontologically distinct from analyzing and understanding the essence of anti-liberal or non-democratic ideas. Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of either aspect requires an appreciation of both.

The study shows no strict correlation between regime type and public ideology, though some alignment is usually present. Findings reveal that populist and illiberal views often reduce political legitimacy, whereas authoritarian attitudes can unexpectedly enhance it. These findings indicate a complex interrelationship between political ideologies and regimes with political legitimacy, particularly in contexts marked by democratic regression and ascendant authoritarian inclinations. This nuanced interplay suggests divergent paths in democratic evolution across the region, with some countries moving toward stable illiberal regimes, while others face contested political climates. The study offers insights into the shifting dynamics of legitimacy and governance amid changing democratic ideals in Central Eastern Europe.

A key contribution of our study – and its certain novelty - is the exploration of a relatively uncharted area: the consolidation and institutionalization of these ALDs. A discernible skepticism exists within the scholarly discourse regarding the potential for illiberal regimes to achieve stability. Historically, ALDs have been predominantly perceived as ephemeral and transient phenomena anticipated to dissipate sooner rather than later.

Populism and the Second Wave of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Balkans

Prof. dr. Nebojša Vladisavljević, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

Two waves of competitive authoritarianism swept the Balkans (South-East Europe) after communism. The first wave, which originated from transition from communism, included Romania, Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. The second wave started with Turkey under Erdoğan while, after an interlude of democratization, competitive authoritarianism returned to North Macedonia under Gruevski, Serbia under Vučić and Bosnia, esp. Republika Srpska.

Unfair elections, the subversion of media freedoms and uneven playing field remained in place in the second wave but governments now relied principally on informal and sophisticated authoritarian manipulation. The second wave of competitive authoritarianism was distinctively populist. Vučić, Gruevski and Erdoğan used personal popularity as the main power resource to confront their opponents. They pursued inclusive economic policies, condemned corruption and promoted the causes of poorer and culturally marginalized groups.

Was populism the main cause of the second wave? Rare studies claim that populism subverted liberal rights in new democracies in Latin America and pushed them back to competitive authoritarianism. Yet, the studies build upon a narrow view of populism, according to which populists are political outsiders without experience of democratic institutions who confront the political establishment, which does not travel well outside Latin America.

The more widely accepted conception of populism, according to which populists are personalistic politicians who bypass political institutions when mobilising popular support is more productive. In the Balkans, populism has been spread by experienced politicians from political parties, including Turkey's AKP, Serbia's SNS, North Macedonia's VMRO and Dodik's SNSD, which provided material and other benefits to ruling elites, connected them to social bases and marginalized opposition forces.

Comparative historical analysis reveals that while soft and manipulative populism appeared as the soft face of competitive authoritarianism, tolerable to domestic audiences and acceptable to influential international actors, the main sources of competitive authoritarianism lay elsewhere: delegative democracy (or Turkey's secularist tutelary regime) and the failure of leadership incapable of dealing with economic crisis and which had lost commitment to democracy amidst global democratic recession. The takeover of power by semi-loyal right-wing opposition parties, led by populists, only accelerated democratic breakdown.

How Elections in 2024 Affected Democratic Resilience across the World and in the Western Balkans

Prof. dr. Srđan Darmanović, Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro

It has already been said repeatedly that 2024 was most probably the biggest election year in history. More than 70 countries, representing nearly half of the global population, went to polls in 2024. General elections were held in the most populated world's democracy India where authoritarian prone PM Narendra Modi barely won majority. Presidential elections in Mexico saw the rise to presidency of the first female in the history of that country. United Kingdom general elections witnessed triumphant come back of the Labor Party. Most consequential elections for sure happened in the United States where American voters brought Donald Trump back to the White House. Electoral battles in other countries too, were not drama-free and their stakes have been very high.

In our presentation in the conference we will offer an overview of these high-stakes events as well as analysis of what they mean for the democratic resilience globally, including an emphasis on the Western Balkans.

Elections in 2024 took place in the time of democracy backsliding or least to say democracy recession. Having in mind outcome of US elections there are voices about "the end of liberal democracy" and ushering in some new era, not yet defined what it can be. We will try to put elections of 2024 in this context.
Consequences of "the biggest election year in history" might also be of utmost importance for the Western Balkans countries and their fragile democracies, hybrid or authoritarian regimes. Global context have always spoken very loudly in our region and it might also be this time. Though Western Balkans is an EU backyard consequences of US elections might affect it very seriously. We will try to put countries of our region to that context.

Keywords: Elections, Liberal democracy, Democracy backsliding, Trump presidency, Western Balkans

Politics of Fear and the Rise of New Despotism

Prof. dr. Milan Podunavac, University of Donja Gorica

In the first part canonical thesis by Robert Dahl is recalled. Democracy is main product of modernity; it is universal principle of legitimacy and won all its enemies and alternatives, both premodern and modern. At the same time democracy is challenged by new opponents, in particular religious and ethnic fundamentalism and populism backed on the fear as „energetic principle" of order.

In the central part global crisis following by institutional dysfunction, confusion, impotence, poor leadership even „degradation of democracy" (Haberams) produces specific form of public dissolution of democracy. From different side public hostility to democracy is raising up. Political theory responds to such new trend and crisis with different mostly descriptive concepts such is „competitive authoritarian"; illiberal democracy", „hybrid political regime", „stabilocracy „ etc. that most serve as form of normalization of new authoritarianism.

In the concluding part the classical concept of (new) despotism backed on Alexis de Tocqueville and recent book of John Keane (New Despotism) is recalled as more fruitful tool for analysing different form of new authoritarianism in particular in the post-Yugoslav region.

PANEL II

Comparative Politics: Resilience

Democratic Resilience in Armenia and Corruption

Dr. Harutyun Aleksanyan, Yerevan State University, Armenia
Marat Atovmyan

After the Velvet Revolution in 2018 Armenia is struggling to carry out fundamental reforms that are in line with the values and democratic governance principles of the Western countries. The socio- economic and political situation of Armenia became more critical after COVID -19 and the second the 44-day war with Azerbaijan in 2020. Thousands of displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh, handicapped soldiers, the migration wave to Armenia as a result of the Russian invasion to Ukraine, recent corruption cases and scandals, caused tension of socio-economic relations between the government and society and brought new challenges for Armenian democracy.

Armenia's democratic resilience has been tested by persistent corruption, weak political accountability, and declining public trust in institutions. While the 2018 Velvet Revolution raised hopes for democratic reforms, the country continues to struggle with entrenched political polarization, erosion of democratic freedoms, and governance challenges that threaten its democratic trajectory. According to the Transparency International's 2024 corruption Perception Index (CPI) Armenia got 47 points out of 100.

One of the key issues undermining Armenia's democratic resilience is weak political accountability. Despite efforts to combat corruption and promote transparency, political elites often evade responsibility, and mechanisms for holding officials accountable remain ineffective. Corruption persists in various forms, including nepotism, cronyism, and abuse of power, leading to disillusionment among citizens. Public institutions, such as the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, remain susceptible to political influence, further weakening their credibility.

As a result, public trust in state institutions has significantly eroded. Many Armenians perceive the government as unable—or unwilling—to address systemic corruption and power abuses. This growing skepticism fuels civic apathy, reducing political participation and weakening democratic engagement. Political polarization has also deepened in Armenia, exacerbated by internal divisions and geopolitical tensions.

To restore democratic resilience, Armenia must strengthen political accountability, enhance transparency, and rebuild public trust. Ensuring judicial independence, protecting civil liberties, and fostering inclusive political dialogue are crucial steps in preventing democratic regression and securing a more robust democratic future.

Can Deliberation Resolve Democratic Deficits in Divided Societies? The Case of the 2021 Mostar Citizens Assembly

Prof. dr. Damir Kapidžić, University of Sarajevo

Divided societies often rely on elite consensus-based governance that excludes citizens from decision-making processes and may contribute to autocratization. This paper investigates whether deliberative citizens' assemblies can help bridge the democratic gap in divided societies. It also explores whether such assemblies can serve as a check on authoritarianism and undemocratic practices. The study focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically the local-level citizens' assembly held in Mostar in 2021. Mostar, a divided city within a divided country, went 12 years without holding elections, making it a relevant example of a community with a significant democratic deficit. The city's population is almost evenly split between two major ethnic groups, Bosniaks and Croats, with Serbs and other groups forming a minority. Ethnic political parties dominate Mostar's institutions, and decision-making typically follows ethnic lines. Between 2008 and 2020, no city-level elections were held due to political deadlock over electoral rules. In response to this stalemate, a concerted effort by local and international actors led to the launch of a citizens' assembly in July 2021, aimed at addressing long-standing and unresolved policy issues, repairing eroded democratic legitimacy that had occurred over time. To answer the questions about resolving democratic deficit and checking illiberal politics, this research draws on surveys, process tracing, and participant observation conducted over six months leading up to the assembly. A poll of a representative sample of Mostar residents was carried out before the assembly, and another survey of assembly participants was conducted one year after the event. The findings suggest that citizens' assemblies can help address democratic deficits and policy challenges stemming from power-sharing arrangements at the local level. However, as the process was a novelty and one-time initiative, its impact on countering illiberal politics and authoritarian tendencies remained limited.

Building Resilience from Below: Evidence of Bottom-up Democracy Pleas in Two Protests Waves – Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014) and Macedonia (2016)

Dr. Ivan Stefanovski, Adjunct Assistant Professor in Political Science and Constitutional Law at the University American College Skopje (UACS)

Popular protests in the Western Balkans throughout the last decade, have resulted in multiple societal rearrangements, and several illiberal yet democratic regimes felt the consequences of popular unrests. From Ljubljana to Athens, citizens channeled their democratization grievances through various repertoires of contention. This paper looks at similarities and differences in mobilizing for democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2014 and Macedonia in 2016. Both protest waves are characterized as anti-government, share similar movement claims such as corruption, government waste and breach of human rights, but the political outcomes largely varied, especially in regards to government resignations and major legislative structural changes, effecting, among other, the state of democracy. This work aims to reconstruct the major factors behind the varying democratic changes and analyze the main factors behind the two different outcomes. Based on theoretical notions by della Porta and Diani (2016), Tilly and Tarrow (2011), Amenta (2012) and Giugni, Bossi and Uba (2014), the collected data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and newspaper articles will be analyzed by applying qualitative discourse analysis (QDA), and applying a variant of process tracing methodology. Having in mind the temporal distance from the demobilizations, this work will also look at what could have gone different in terms of democratic gains/losses if certain tactics/repertoires have been adjusted.

Who is Willing to Forgive Undemocratic Behaviour? Evidence from Conjoint Experiments in Five European Countries

Prof. dr. Daphne Halikiopoulou, University of York
Dr. Ludwig List, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
Dr. Filip Milačić, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/Central European University
Prof. dr Sofia Vasilopoulou, King's College London

Who is willing to forgive undemocratic behaviour? This paper uses novel data from an online cross-country survey with an embedded conjoint experiment fielded in 2021 to test the causal relationship between certain predictors of undemocratic behaviour in Europe. Our theoretical expectations derive from the premise that citizens do not necessarily support undemocratic behaviour, but rather are willing to forgive undemocratic behaviour under certain circumstances. To offer a better understanding of these circumstances we identify three trade-off scenarios, i.e., interest representation; competence; party preference, and distinguish between the electoral and liberal components of democracy. We test our hypotheses on five countries, including Estonia, Spain, Germany, Poland and Sweden each as a representative of a specific European region. Our empirical analysis largely confirms our expectations. Specifically, our findings show that that the willingness to forgive undemocratic behaviour is not isolated to a small or marginal group of voters. Rather it is a widespread phenomenon associated with all three trade-offs including interest representation, competence and party preference, while voters are more willing to forgive violations to the liberal rather than the electoral component of democracy. Our results also reveal some interesting cross-country variations. The effects of interest representation and competence are strongest in Spain and Poland where non-incumbent supports forgive the least, while Swedish voters appear less likely to forgive democratic violations overall. Unlike voters in the other countries, Polish voters appear to value the liberal component of democracy more than the electoral component. The implications are significant as our study suggests that willingness to sacrifice democracy is a prevalent and pervasive phenomenon across Europe.

Where Democratic Resilience Withers: The Dynamics of Multi-level Governance and Actor-centric Exclusion in the Western Balkans

Ermelinda Muçaj, European Movement

In the light of upholding democratic norms rather than just merely 'democratising democracy', and amid encroachment of the illiberal order in the Western Balkans, the concept of democratic resilience has steadily woven itself into the discourse surrounding governance. Despite varying degrees of EU conditionality within the integration process context, the region remains entrenched in the governance centralisation trend coupled with political fragmentation, that lay bare the fractures in democratic resilience. This paper will intersect the multi-level governance deficiencies and actor-centric factors to disentangle the dynamics of democratic resilience and its repercussions in the region, where the tension between centralisation and decentralisation, alongside the juxtaposition of mobilisation and suppression, and the amplification of silent voice of democratic opposition and civil society, is exceedingly present. Through a process tracing and empirical based cases, it is revealed that, despite the continuous ventures in formal democratic frameworks and EU integration processes, the resilience of the Western Balkan countries is not only irreversibly stunted by political polarisation and institutional flaws, limiting the civil society capacity as a counterbalance to autocratic tendencies, but also from the malfunction of multi-level governance structures, an impairment that rigorously erodes the bedrock and bulwarks of democratic consolidation.

PANEL III

International Politics

The Impact of EU Negotiations on Institutional Reforms and Democratic Governance in Türkiye

Dr. Burcu Miraç Dıraor Aydın, Gedik University

This proposal examines Türkiye's institutional reforms in the context of its European Union (EU) accession negotiations, which began in 2005, and evaluates the implications for institutional transformation, and strengthening of democratic governance. The EU accession process has long been regarded as a transformative framework for candidate countries, particularly in strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing the rule of law, and ensuring governance aligns with EU norms and standards. Türkiye's experience offers a compelling case study to explore how external incentives, such as EU membership prospects and EU precession funds, shape political behavior and institutional change.

The paper will analyze key institutional reforms introduced during the negotiation process, focusing on public administration reforms and anti-corruption measures. It will assess whether these reforms have contributed to the consolidation of democratic resilience or merely served as compliance measures driven by external conditionality. By situating Türkiye's experience within the broader discourse of EU enlargement and democratic governance, this study aims to uncover the dynamic interplay between external and internal policy dynamics.

As a methodology, comparative evaluation will be adopted to highlight similarities and differences between Türkiye and other Western Balkan countries engaged in EU accession processes. This approach will provide insights into the specific challenges Türkiye faces as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, where geopolitical dynamics and internal sociopolitical complexities intersect.

The paper argues that while EU accession negotiations have triggered significant institutional reforms in Türkiye, their sustainability and effectiveness in strengthening democracy remain argumentative. The research will discuss the decline in EU-Türkiye relations in recent years and its impact on reform momentum, emphasizing the importance of re-establishing trust and dialogue for fostering democratic resilience in Türkiye. The paper will contribute to critical discussions on the role of institutional reforms in democratic governance, particularly in fragile contexts. By examining Türkiye's unique trajectory, the paper aims to offer broader lessons on the challenges and opportunities of utilizing external frameworks to foster democratic strengthening.

Keywords: Türkiye, EU Accession, Institutional Reforms, Democratic Governance, Rule of Law, Enlargement Policy, Conditionality, Comparative Politics

The South Caucasus and the Western Balkans on the Path to Democratization: A Comparative Analysis

Dr. Roman Karapetyan, Associate Professor in Political Science, Faculty of International Relations, Yerevan State University

The countries of the South Caucasus, especially Armenia and Georgia, which have chosen the path of democratic development, often face difficult challenges, mainly related to democratic dominance, internal stability, and regional geopolitical developments. Among regional countries, Azerbaijan is quite different from the last two, as it relies primarily on energy political behavior and is not particularly interested in democratization processes.

Democracy, of course, contributes to development in Armenia and Georgia, but it also needs to provide stability mechanisms, as the South Caucasus is fraught with numerous conflicts and is located in the vicinity of many of them. The war in Ukraine has presented new challenges to stability in the South Caucasus. At the same time, it has also provided an opportunity to further intensify the policy of security diversification. Armenia is now actively cooperating with Western power centers, trying to diversify its foreign and security policy.

The countries of the Western Balkans have a longer path in this regard. Therefore, studying their experience can be effective in terms of studying the democratization and integration policies of the countries of the South Caucasus region and assessing its effectiveness. These two regions, which have been in a zone of turbulence for many decades, have many similarities, common features, and even certain historical boundaries.

For several months now, I have been working on my research, which is dedicated to the comparative analysis of the EU integration policies of the countries of the South Caucasus and the Western Balkans. In this context, I have managed to hold field research in Skopje and have conducted a comparative analysis of the experience of Armenia and North Macedonia. I am currently working on the remaining part of the research, studying the experience of other countries of the Western Balkans.

How Citizens's Voice Can Be (Over)Heard When Raised: Case of Serbia and Student Protests

Miljana Đurčević Cucić, Faculty o Political Science, University of Belgrade

The Western Balkans (WB) political situation is occasionally described as non-democratic. According to the European Union's (EU) reports on accession negotiations with candidate countries from WB, there is backsliding in the rule of law, a disregard for human rights, and an opaque media system freedom. However, we have recently witnessed the unavoidable transformations in these delicate and fragile communities. This research demonstrates how the entrenched hierarchical structures may be gradually undermined by enhanced democratic resilience through the students' protests in Serbia from November 2024. The discourse analysis of the government representatives' statements and students' attitudes during the "plenum" is evaluated, revealing a temporal evolution in this narrative. Furthermore, the data collection prompted a significant inquiry: What implications does this hold for the future of democracy in Serbia and its trajectory towards EU membership? This research paper delineates the repercussions of the protests, the ongoing measures implemented by the government, the oppression and violence encountered by students and supportive citizens, the potential outcomes for political reform in Serbia, and the positive shifts in citizens' perceptions of freedom of speech following years of silence and repression, as reported by various media outlets. Moreover, it elucidates how democratic resilience could be strengthened once the efficacy of collective action is considered. Finally, countries like Serbia and others in the Western Balkans are perpetually monitored; thus, examining the acts of prominent international actors, such as the EU and the USA, is noteworthy. Their stance on students' protests and commitment to achieving justice and transparency in the judiciary and prosecution is highly significant and simultaneously captivating. The accumulation of data concludes that nurturing democratic resilience in societies in the WB countries is valuable, regardless of the governing individuals or potential conflicts with the interests of key stakeholders. Therefore, it shows how democratic resilience contributes to quality of life and accelerates the democratization of institutions.

Keywords: Democratic resilience, Discourse analysis, EU accession process, Western Balkans, Student protests

Characteristics of the Georgian Orthodox Church's Relations During the Period of Soviet Union's Collapse and the Formation of an Independent State in Georgia

Dr. Giorgi Pareshishvili, Caucasus International University

The period surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia's emergence as an independent state marked a critical transformation in the role and relations of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). During this transitional phase (1988-1995), the Church experienced a dramatic shift from a marginalized institution under Soviet rule to a central pillar of Georgian national identity and statehood. This research examines the complex dynamics of the GOC's relationships with various stakeholders, including the state apparatus, society, and other religious institutions.

The Church's revival coincided with the rise of Georgian nationalism and independence movements, allowing it to position itself as both a spiritual and national leader during a period of intense political and social upheaval. The study analyzes how the GOC navigated its relationships with the declining Soviet authorities while simultaneously building connections with emerging democratic institutions and nationalist leaders. Of particular interest is the Church's role in the peaceful transition of power and its contribution to maintaining social stability during the civil unrest of the early 1990s.

The research highlights several key aspects of this transformation, including the restoration of church properties, the reestablishment of theological education, and the renewal of international ecclesiastical relations. Special attention is paid to the GOC's relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church during this period, as centuries-old ties were redefined in the context of post-Soviet reality. The study also examines how the Church's enhanced social position influenced the development of Georgia's legal framework regarding religious freedom and church-state relations. This analysis reveals how the GOC successfully leveraged its historical role as a guardian of Georgian culture to establish itself as a crucial institution in the newly independent state, while also highlighting the challenges and contradictions that emerged during this transformation. The findings contribute to our understanding of religious institutions' roles in post-Soviet state-building processes and their influence on national identity formation.

Democracy in Distress: The Psychological Consequences of Political Crises in Macedonia

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Macedonia experience years of long term political events and crisis since its indipendence which have made the Macedonian society fragile, vulnerable, unstable and deeply polarized. The understanding of events happened during this timeline largely depends on individual perception created as a result of personal experience and experience mediated through media, offline networks and online networks.

This presentation is integrative structure of several research studies conducted in a timeline of almost a quarter of a century (2000-2024) which have been motivated by the potential influence of traumatic political events on some aspects of the personality, such as: personality traits, moral judgment competences, emotions, attitudes (towards morality, education, freedom of information, family, etc.), political ideology and political attitudes and values (authoritarianism, social dominance), identity (collective and individual) and cognitive domains (perception and reasoning).

The social threats in Macedonian society, which are on an upward scale over the time, reinforce the authoritarian attitudes of the Macedonian citizens, especially the aggressive component; the social conformism along with conservative attitudes and ideology prevails over autonomy; there is an absence of civic activities and participatory political behavior, an absence of willingness to compromise in order to achieve personal gain, reduced level of trust in others, inhibited social interaction, reduced altruistic feelings.

The results also illustrate the negative impact of political violence, or the threat of political violence on socio-moral reasoning, which actually means that in the situations of political violence- the affective orientation to perform altruistic behaviors and the ability to judge moral issues logically, will be lower.

The most dominate emotions provoked by the way how media present reality were mostly negative (fear, anger, rage,disgust); the dominantly provoked needs and motives were basic motives, motive for belonging and safeties and motive for justice. Political events reported through the media provoked also verbal aggression in cyber space, hate and interethnic intolerance.

The conclusion from longitudinal research interest is that the political motivated traumatic events disables the expression and development of the democratic potential of personality and raise also the question about media ethics and media influence on citizen's mental health.

PANEL IV

Party Politics and Elections

Democracy Without Borders? Electoral Barriers and the Political Exclusion of Foreign Residents

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As migration and mobility reshape contemporary societies, the political inclusion of foreign residents has become an important factor in sustaining democratic resilience. While many democratic states grant foreign residents certain voting rights, their actual participation remains exceptionally low, raising concerns about political representation, institutional legitimacy, and social integration. Therefore, the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons leading to the non-participation of foreigners in elections. This study also examines the barriers to electoral participation among foreign residents, highlighting the institutional, social, and psychological factors that contribute to their political disengagement.

Using a qualitative case study of foreign residents in the Czech Republic, semi-structured interviews were conducted, analysing respondents' perspectives through content analysis. Despite expressing interest in politics and recognizing the importance of elections, foreign residents rarely exercise their voting rights. Why it is so has not yet been sufficiently covered in the literature. The findings reveal that the main obstacles include low levels of awareness of voting rights, unfamiliarity with the political landscape, weak social integration, negative experiences with state authorities, and language barriers. Moreover, the study highlights the role of identity dilemmas, as individuals who were engaged voters in their country of origin become passive non-voters in their host country.

This research directly contributes to discussions on democratic resilience and understanding the fragility of democracy in transnational contexts, which are urgent issues currently. The broader implications are relevant especially for countries with large emigration and immigration rates and their democratic legitimacy, raising broader concerns about democratic backsliding even within established democracies. While many discussions on the quality of democracy focus primarily on citizen participation, this study argues that foreign residents are often an overlooked group in the democratic process, despite their increasing importance due to their growing population. Strengthening democratic resilience requires not only protecting electoral rights de jure but also ensuring that all the eligible voters are politically well integrated and that they know and exercise their rights de facto.

A Redistributive Issue in the TAN-GAL Party System: Public Attitudes on the Real Estate Taxation in Croatia

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The article traces the changes in public attitudes on real estate taxation – one of the most prominently exposed redistributive issue in electoral campaigns in Croatia – over the course of 17 years, since the issue was introduced in the electoral campaign in the 2007 parliamentary elections. During this period the party offers have changed: it started by strong advocating by left SDP and opposing by right HDZ; it has continued by relative silence of both parties on the issue in next elections; then the taxation policy has gradually been adopted in the HDZ election program while still supported by SDP, and eventually the real estate taxation was introduced by the ruling HDZ after the 2024 parliamentary elections. Such a constellation makes a nice in vivo experimental variation on the side of party supply in order to detect how the demand side (voters) has been responding accordingly. The case is even more interesting since the party system of Croatia has been from beginning prevalently structured along cultural and symbolic lines of competition (TAN-GAL), while the real estate taxation was a rare socio-economic redistributive issue that succeeded entering electoral campaigns in any clearer form. In this respect, the article has potential of a case-study for what happens when voters with rather strong and stable political and party identities rooted primarily in cultural, historical and symbolic dimensions are faced with a socio-economic redistributive issue with a clear individualist and egocentric aspect. The study relies on qualitative (party supply – documents, media, electoral programs, interviews with actors) and quantitative (demand side – longitudinal post-election survey in six time-points) methodology. After each election is classified according to the type of political supply, the analysis turns to voters' attitudes towards real estate taxation and their egocentric perceptions, trying to detect how different individual patterns of party identities, ideological attitudes and specific socio-economic interests react under different party supply.

Party System Changes in Montenegro: Between Polarization and Fragmentation

Prof. dr. Gianluca Passarelli, Sapienza Università di Roma
Prof. dr. Zlatko Vujović, Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro

This article examines the evolution of Montenegro's party system, focusing on its transition from a predominant-party model led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) to a fragmented and ideologically polarized structure. Using Giovanni Sartori's typology of party systems, the study identifies key phases in Montenegro's political development: the prolonged predominance of the DPS from 1990 to 2020, the transitional period following the 2020 elections that ended DPS's 30-year rule, and the current phase of fragmented pluralism since 2023, characterized by ideological polarization and ethnic segmentation. Quantitative measures, including fragmentation indices, volatility rates, and party nationalization, reveal a party system evolving toward moderate pluralism with increasing segmentation. Persistent ideological polarization, particularly between pro-Western and pro-Serbian/Russian blocs, underscores the fragile and transitional nature of the system. This study contributes to the understanding of party system evolution in Southeastern Europe, offering insights into the challenges faced by small post-communist states navigating democratization, nationalism, and external geopolitical pressures.

Levelling the Electoral Playing Field in Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Macedonia

Prof. dr. Marko Krtolica, Associate Professor at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

With the proclamation of independence in 1991, the Macedonian people began, for the first time, to create an independent country based on democracy. However, this transition was marked by numerous political and economic challenges, leading to significant disappointment among citizens regarding the process of building democracy in Macedonia. Riding on this wave, in 2006, VMRO-DPMNE and Nikola Gruevski came to power and gradually established an illiberal and hybrid regime in Macedonia. Gruevski's rule led to political crises, instability and polarization. The opposition organized protests, institutional boycotts and demands for reforms on multiple occasions but was unable to win any elections between 2006 and 2015. In 2015, the leader of the opposition began releasing wiretapped materials that allegedly revealed widespread government corruption and abuse of power. This triggered mass protests and a political crisis, ultimately resulting in the EU-US-mediated Przino Agreement between the government and the opposition. The agreement predicted the establishment of a Special Prosecutor to investigate potential crimes revealed by the wiretapping scandal, as well as, electoral reforms aimed at leveling the electoral playing field. It was predicted that the next elections would be organized by a caretaker government, which would not be led by Gruevski and would include opposition members with veto rights. Additionally, electoral provisions were introduced to ensure limiting the misuse of state institutions and resources for party purposes, equal opportunities in political campaigning, changes of the electoral model for diaspora voting and appointment of new members of the State Electoral Commission. The elections were originally scheduled for 24.4.2016, but were postponed to 5.6.2016, to allow time for creating fair electoral conditions. They were again postponed with same argument and finally were held on 11.12.2016. Although VMRO-DPMNE won the elections, the results were much closer than in previous years, allowing SDSM to form a government through a post-election coalition. In May 2017, after turbulent post-election period, a new government led by SDSM was formed, marking the end of Gruevski's 11 year rule. With this, Macedonia became one of the rare countries where the opposition successfully changed the government in a hybrid regime through elections.

Keywords: Political system, Democracy, Elections, Hybrid regimes, Illiberal democracy

Regulating Party Financing and Electoral Competition: A Comparative Perspective and the Western Balkans

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The regulation of political party financing plays a significant role in shaping electoral competition and political pluralism in democratic systems. While European countries have developed different regulatory approaches, variations in enforcement and oversight continue to influence the transparency and accountability of political financing. Established democracies tend to have more empirical evidence on legal frameworks governing party funding, while the lack of a comprehensive analysis in newer democratic systems—particularly in the Western Balkans—should be fill and taken under investigation.

Public funding mechanisms, often introduced to reduce reliance on private donations, vary in their impact on party competition. In some cases, allocation criteria reinforce the position of established parties, while in others, weaker regulatory frameworks leave room for unmonitored financial practices. Private financing, meanwhile, introduces different dynamics, including the role of business actors and foreign contributions in shaping political landscapes. The effectiveness of transparency measures and oversight institutions varies significantly across cases, affecting the degree of accountability in political financing.

This paper examines these regulatory differences through a comparative perspective, analyzing how legal frameworks, institutional enforcement, and political contexts interact in shaping party financing practices. By considering examples from both Western and Eastern Europe, the study outlines the structural conditions that influence the regulation of political financing and its implications for electoral competition.

This paper argues that the future of party democracy also in the Western Balkans is related to the implementation of effective and enforceable financial regulations. Increasing transparency and accountability will decrease the risks that party financing would undermine democratic strengthening. The comparative analysis of legal frameworks and financing practices across the region highlights the factors for possible adoption of comprehensive reforms that balance public and private funding with the goal of ensuring that money serves democracy rather than distorting it.

Keywords: Political party, Party financing, Party regulation, Electoral campaigns, Transparency

PANEL V

Politics and Communication

Negative Campaigning and Hate Speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-national groups play a central role in political processes, shaping election campaigns that are often based on ethnic divisions. The media, as a key factor in forming public opinion, often instrumentalize such divisions, which increases political and social tensions and hinders the process of reconciliation. Political representation, although formally ensured through electoral processes, is almost entirely limited by ethnic boundaries, which directs political dynamics towards divisions, rather than towards common interests and the implementation of political reforms on the path to the European Union.

Negative campaigning usually refers to tactics by which political candidates or parties seek to discredit their opponents by attacking their weaknesses, mistakes, or bad qualities, rather than focusing on their own strengths and policies. On the other hand, hate speech is a form of speech that incites violence, discrimination, or hatred towards certain groups of people, usually on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics. Although negative campaigning is not necessarily hate speech, when hate speech is used in political or other campaigns, it can lead to serious consequences such as violence, discrimination and further fueling social divisions. In some cases, a negative campaign may use hateful language, blurring the line between the two terms.

Hate speech and a negative election campaign represent a serious threat to democratic values, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina where inter-ethnic tensions are often exploited in political confrontations. A negative election campaign often manipulates the public by creating polarized attitudes that hinder constructive dialogue and free decision-making by voters. Hate speech and negative election campaigns, although effective in manipulating voters, have far-reaching consequences that destabilize democratic institutions and social values. In the long term, their use leads to an erosion of trust, a reduction in political participation and, ultimately, a dangerous democratic backsliding.

This paper explores how negative campaigning and hate speech through media reporting during the election cycle contribute to shaping ethnic relations and the citizenry as a whole on the one hand, and on democratic values, citizen trust, and social and political stability in BiH on the other, analyzing specific examples in the post-war social context.

"For the minds and hearts". Analysis of media narratives as a soft power instrument of non-democratic states: A case study of the soft power of Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans

Marko Savić, Montenegrin Political Science Association

The media serve as a central component of the soft power wielded by contemporary states. In the post-truth era, alongside the proliferation of diverse media channels, non-democratic states—often devoid of inherent ideological appeal within their own borders—are increasingly leveraging media narratives to influence public opinion in foreign states. The Joseph Nye's theoretical approach on soft power reveals significant analytical limitations, particularly in its lack of clarity regarding the indicators and variables necessary for assessing the soft power of individual states. Additionally, Nye's framework is predominantly tailored to the study of soft power in democratic, liberal states, thereby creating a conceptual gap when applied to non-democratic states. With our analysis we seek to address these analytical and conceptual deficiencies by analyzing media influence and narrative construction, with a particular focus on identity-related narratives. Through this approach, we explore the divergence of Russian and Turkish soft power from Nye's theoretical model, the mobilization of Pan-Slavic and Neo-Ottoman ideologies—both heavily influenced by religious elements—and the effectiveness of their soft power strategies within the ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse context of the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Soft power, Media, Russia, Turkey, Western Balkans

Displacement, not Obstruction: Why Insecure Leaders Need Not Fear Free Media

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Leaders from across the political spectrum are often accused of manipulating the media to their benefit. Contemporary developments have proliferated the number of media sources available to citizens. We argue that new, independent media sources may actually be a boon for vulnerable leaders. In a simple formal model, we give citizens a limited capacity for attention and allow states to expend effort to selectively obstruct information sources. We demonstrate a phenomenon of "displacement"—where the presence of alternative sources of information can actually reduce the required effort for states to succeed in obfuscating citizen learning. This is because alternative media sources mean that states only need to divert citizen attention without resorting to complete obstruction, reducing the necessary effort expended. This result advances our understanding of how contemporary states navigate increasingly complex media landscapes. We supplement the model with discussions of the media policies of Malaysian and Turkish governments.

Displacement, not Obstruction: Why Insecure Leaders Need Not Fear Free Media

Harnessing Digital Technologies for Youth-Led Anti-Corruption Movements in the Balkans

Layla Weiss, Georgetown University
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In an era where digital tools shape governance and political participation, youth in the Balkans face dual challenges: systemic corruption and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement. These challenges are exacerbated by the "brain drain" phenomenon, as young, educated individuals leave the region in search of better opportunities, weakening local efforts to combat corruption and build accountability.

This paper explores how digital technologies can empower youth in North Macedonia and neighboring countries to address cross-border corruption while fostering political activism in response to EU integration policies. Drawing on global case studies of youth-driven digital activism, it examines how digital platforms can amplify young voices, mobilize collective action, and overcome systemic barriers. Movements such as those during the Arab Spring demonstrate the potential of digital tools to bridge local and transnational activism, offering valuable insights into strategies that can be adapted for the Balkan context.

The central research question guiding this study is: How can digital technologies empower youth in the Balkans to combat corruption and foster political engagement, while addressing the challenges posed by brain drain? To address this question, the research employs a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from big data analytics, such as social media activity and online petitions, will map trends in youth-led digital activism. Qualitative methods, including interviews with youth leaders and policy experts, will capture the lived experiences of young activists. By situating global examples within the specific context of the Balkans, the research identifies strategies for mitigating brain drain and fostering local resilience through youth-driven initiatives.

By exploring how digital platforms can both facilitate and combat corruption, this paper underscores the transformative potential of technology in fostering transparency and accountability. It argues that young people, armed with digital tools, are key players in reshaping the anti-corruption landscape in the Balkans. The findings will offer practical recommendations for young citizens and international organizations to strengthen engagement, address brain drain, and bolster transnational anti-corruption strategies.

Occupational Variations in Protest Participation: The Case of Serbia's Pro-Democracy Protests of 2024/2025

Prof. dr. Marko Žilović, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade

The death of 15 people under the collapsed canopy of a recently reconstructed train station in Novi Sad – Serbia's second city – became the trigger for the ongoing wave of nationwide protests against Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian regime. Although the outcome of these protests is still uncertain, their strength confirms the remarkable resilience of democratic activism in Serbia's civil society, especially considering that the protests are taking place in an unfavorable international context characterized by the further retreat of democracy and normalization of authoritarian practices. Nationally, the structure of opportunities is similarly restrictive, not least because of the continued weakness of Serbia's parliamentary opposition and the government's tight clientelistic control over most career opportunities in Serbia's struggling economy. It is, thus, particularly surprising that the workplace has emerged as the main site of protest organizing for the opponents of the regime. The pace, intensity, and forms of protest participation, however, vary across occupational groups, as well as geographically within the occupational groups. Drawing on the established social movement theories, an original protest event dataset, and other novel empirical materials collected through interviews and participant observation, I explain why it was university students that emerged as the leading group in this unexpected protest wave, why certain professions – namely teachers, lawyers, and farmers – supported the students more quickly and more decisively than the members of some other professions such as medical doctors, engineers, and priests. I also tackle the question of geographical variation of protests within certain occupational groups such as university students and school teachers. I find that the variation across occupational groups is best explained through the differences in the degree of professional organizational autonomy, the history of recent occupational struggle with the regime, and relative deprivation of different professions in the political economy of Vučić's authoritarian regime. The dynamic of geographic variation within occupations is determined by the relative educational prestige of various educational institutions and by the history of recent struggle against the regime in the communities in which these institutions are rooted.

PANEL VI

Behavior, Values and Attitudes

The (Ill) Will of the People - Is there a Hidden Readiness to Subvert Liberal Democracy?

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Prof. dr. Åsa von Schoultz, University of Helsinki
Prof. dr. Inga Saikkonen, Åbo Akademi University

Liberal democracy, characterized by limitations on government power, the rule of law, and the protection of individual liberties, including minority rights, is under pressure worldwide—even in established democracies. In contrast, majoritarian democracy, which prioritizes the sovereignty of the elected majority with minimal constraints, appears to be gaining popularity. While the principle of majoritarian rule is foundational also in liberal democracy, it is practically always constrained and often directly at odds with other principles, such as constitutional restraints, rule or law or international obligations.

This study investigates democratic attitudes among the public in Finland, focusing on support for unconstrained majoritarian forms of democracy. Using a list experiment, we seek to identify latent support for majoritarian democracy in situations where liberal norms conflict with majoritarian rule.

A key premise of this research is that respondents may not always respond truthfully when asked about support for unconstrained majoritarian democracy, given its potential authoritarian potential and adverse implications for individual freedoms and minority rights. Since majoritarianism is a normatively charged issue with inherently conflicting democratic norms, social desirability bias (SDB), may lead to underreporting of overt support for unrestrained majoritarianism in conventional surveys. Identifying this bias is crucial for obtaining more accurate estimates of public attitudes toward democratic governance.

Additionally, we explore variations in both support for majoritarianism and the willingness to openly express such support across different population subgroups. The study hence aims to uncover potential hidden illiberal tendencies in Finnish society and examine heterogeneities in such patterns. The study is conducted on a probability based online panel with a total number of respondents of app. 1200. Although Finland has a long-standing tradition of liberal democracy and consensus-driven decision-making, recent political developments—including the electoral success of the right-wing populists and broader international shifts in international relations, including an emphasised security threat—have reshaped political discourse towards clearly less constrained executive powers.

Democratic Backsliding from the Bottom-Up: How Perceived Corruption Shapes Justification of Undemocratic Practices

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The majority of literature on democratic backsliding focuses on institutional arrangements that facilitate executive aggrandizement or the strategic manipulation of elections. Within this framework, political elites are seen as the primary drivers of institutional change, while the electorate is largely portrayed as a passive recipient of political decisions. However, this perspective captures only part of the picture, as democracies are also at risk when citizens engage in authoritarian and informal practices. To address this gap, I frame this exploration within theories of political culture—widely shared attitudes, beliefs, and practices that define acceptable and unacceptable political behaviour. Specifically, I argue that voters are more likely to tolerate undemocratic practices when they perceive corruption and informal behaviours as widespread features of the political system. To test this proposition, I analyse data from the INFORM survey, conducted in 2017 across six Western Balkan countries. The results of a structural equation path analysis indicate that as perceptions of bribery (e.g., paying doctors, police officers, judges, and teachers) and informal contacts as pervasive increase, so too does the justification for engaging in such practices, including giving and accepting bribes and using personal connections to achieve desired outcomes. In a broad sense, this study highlights the role of political culture in democratic backsliding and erosion of democratic norms.

In democracy we trust, BUT …
Disillusionment and inconsistencies in individuals´ democratic commitments

Oľga Gyárfášová, PhD., Associate Professor, Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University Bratislava

In the Central and Eastern European countries overwhelming majority of citizens share the view that democracy is the best and the most beneficial form of governance for their respective countries. However, there are several phenomena which challenge this rather optimistic picture. Firstly, what people see in practical life is very different from the ideal. On the one hand, they value the political freedoms, which are taken for granted and incontestable. On the other hand, greater emphasis is placed on social rights - equality, justice, fairness, compliance with the rules which the regimes are not delivering. This raises the disillusionment with democracy in everyday life and questions the ideal.

Secondly, despite almost four decades of democratic developments democratic values and commitments are not yet deeply enough anchored in people's minds. There are lot of inconsistencies, cognitive dissonances, seemingly paradoxical views, what makes public vulnerable to populist and authoritarian political appeals. Populists demonize liberalism, spread fear and in many countries (Slovakia is an excellent text-book example) "liberalism" is perceived as a threat to "traditional" values. Furthermore, as comparative surveys revealed (Globsec Trends, 2024), there is a strange bias in making the distinction between "liberal democracy and "just democracy".

All this makes democracy vulnerable and weakly resilient against the semi-authoritarian tendencies, national populism and extremism.

The paper aims to look beyond the general verbal commitments to democracy, to explore the roots of dissatisfaction and identify the inconsistencies in how democracy is understood by the public, what explains them and what are consequences for political behavior.

The paper primarily focuses on recent Slovakia using the data of the CSES post-election survey conducted after the 2023 parliamentary election. Slovakia is presented as a single country case study, however, with many generalizations to other newer democracies in the region and beyond.

Keywords: Support for democracy, Democratic commitment, Values, Resilience, Central and Eastern Europe, Slovakia

Perceptions of an Ideal Society: Evidence from the ESS-CRONOS Panel

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This paper examines the perceptions of an ideal society among European citizens, comparing them based on their relative priorities. These perceptions shape citizens' values and expectations, influencing social cohesion and political engagement. Consensus on the priorities of an ideal society fosters the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems. Our goal is to investigate these rankings in the context of the economic downturn caused by the financial and pandemic crises, the sovereign debt crisis, increasing inequalities and insecurities, the refugee crisis, and the rise of populist authoritarian movements across Europe. We use data from the fourth wave of the Cross-National Online Survey (CRONOS-2) of the European Social Survey from 2022, which includes 6,032 respondents (51% female, M_{age} = 47.31, SD_{age} = 17.01) across eleven European countries. Exploratory factor analysis was employed to identify the underlying constructs of 15 items measuring subjective priorities for an ideal society. The analysis revealed four distinct factors explaining 38.88% of the total variance. The first factor, named Democracy and Cohesion, encompasses items such as having a well-functioning democracy and strengthening social ties among people. The second factor we named Traditionalism, and it emphasizes ideals like emphasizing religious values and increasing birth rates. The third factor, named Financial Security, consists of priorities like getting rid of poverty and making life easier for families. Finally, fourth factor we named National Strength, and it captures items such as maximizing economic prosperity and having strong military power. The results also suggest that, on average, respondents place the most importance on Democracy and Cohesion (4.10 out of 5). Financial Security follows closely behind, remaining highly valued (3.98). NationalStrength comes next (3.33), while Traditionalism had the lowest mean (2.59) among respondents. The high value placed on democracy and cohesion can be viewed as a reflection of both the postmaterialist shift and the universalist values that remain highly prioritized in European societies. The relatively low prioritization of traditionalism and national strength further supports this claim. In conclusion, although the state of democracy has eroded in many countries, it remains the most valued ideal among the people.

Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in Europe: Examining the East-West Divide

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Prof. dr. Jovan Bliznakovski, assistant professor at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research

Attitudes towards homosexuality have been increasingly studied in recent social science literature, following the progress in the acceptance and promotion of LGBT rights in Western democracies. Previous studies have identified factors that determine homopositive and homonegative attitudes across populations as well as the influence of structural factors, like the legal contexts regulating the rights of LGBT people. At the individual level, a wide range of variables have been identified as important- religiosity, the frequency of practicing religion, gender, education, income, personal well being etc. Other studies have examined the importance of political, democratic and nationalist attitudes and the significance of general human values in shaping homonegative and homopositive attitudes.

Having in mind that homonegative attitudes are still persistent even in developed democracies and often constitute a factor of polarization in new democracies, we look closely into the determinants of homonegativity across these different contexts. Building on the previous literature we test the significance of the abovementioned factors on a larger set of countries, including for the first time the Balkan countries. This is made possible by the availability of European social survey data, particularly R10 data, which includes data on North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

By examining the significance of various variables and identifying similarities and differences across groups of countries, we hope to contribute to better understanding of homonegativity in different social contexts.

PANEL VII

Online Panel

The Emerging Polycentric Global Order

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The global landscape is undergoing a profound metamorphosis, moving beyond the relative predictability of the post-Cold War era. As the period of clear American unipolar dominance recedes, discussions about the future international system frequently invoke the familiar concept of multipolarity—a framework envisioning several major powers competing and balancing based primarily on material strength and national interest. While the diffusion of power is undeniable, focusing solely on this shifting distribution risks obscuring a deeper and arguably more consequential transformation: the fracturing of shared global norms and values. A more accurate lens through which to analyze the emerging world may be that of polycentrism. This concept describes an international system defined not simply by the number of powerful states, but by the rise of multiple, influential normative centers. These centers, typically anchored by major regional powers, actively cultivate, assert, and seek to enforce distinct regional orders based on their own specific sets of values, rules, governance models, and understandings of legitimacy. The defining characteristic of polycentrism, therefore, is the erosion of universal principles and the proliferation of diverse, often competing, regional normative realities. This essay will explore the contours, drivers, and volatile implications of this emerging polycentric system, highlighting how it differs fundamentally from simpler models focused purely on power distribution.

To grasp polycentrism, we must first clearly distinguish it from multipolarity. Multipolar systems, while characterized by rivalry, historically operated within a framework, however thin, of shared diplomatic language and certain tacit rules. Even during the Cold War, Washington and Moscow engaged in arms control and participated in multilateral forums, maintaining a baseline for managing competition. Polycentrism, conversely, posits that we are moving towards a system where multiple centers generate fundamentally different answers about what rules govern behavior and what values are legitimate. It describes a world where these centers actively shape distinct "normative realities" – the shared consensus within a region or bloc about societal organization, state-individual relations, economic purpose, and technological governance – often in direct opposition to universalist principles.

Several potent forces are driving this fragmentation, but a pivotal factor has been the volatile evolution of the United States' role as the traditional global hegemon. Hegemony often requires the leading power to accept certain relative costs – bearing disproportionate burdens for system maintenance – in exchange for the absolute gains of a stable global order. However, the impulse towards a more transactional foreign policy, vividly exemplified during the Trump administration, signaled a potential rejection of this logic. Actions such as initiating trade wars, questioning alliances, withdrawing from international agreements and organizations, and expressing deep skepticism towards the multilateral system, all pointed towards a preference for immediate, quantifiable national advantage over stewarding the universal system. This perceived retreat towards an "America First" calculus projected an image of unreliability. Such volatility from the system's anchor inevitably created a vacuum and encouraged others to hedge their bets or more assertively pursue their own regional agendas. When the enforcer of universal norms appears unwilling or unable to act consistently, it can embolden those who believe that power alone should dictate outcomes, fostering an environment leaning more towards "might makes right." While subsequent US policy might emphasize reinvestment in alliances, the questions raised about the long-term consistency of American global engagement persist as of March 2025, contributing to global uncertainty and the appeal of regional alternatives.

Simultaneously, the confident rise of other powers provides alternative poles of attraction and normative influence. China, for instance, actively promotes its model prioritizing state stability and collective well-being under strong party guidance. Its assertive behavior in the South China Sea exemplifies this polycentric dynamic vividly. By disregarding the universal principles of UNCLOS through expansive claims and militarization, and challenging Freedom of Navigation Operations, Beijing attempts to supplant international maritime law with a regionally defined order under its own primacy. It is a clear assertion that its regional power justifies rewriting internationally agreed-upon rules, effectively treating international waters as zones subject to its domestic normative control – a practical application of might attempting to define right in a crucial global commons.

Similarly, Russia aggressively asserts its claim to a distinct sphere of influence, often framed around "traditional values" and resistance to Western liberalism. Its illegal annexation of territories from sovereign neighbors, such as in Ukraine, followed by the imposition of its own legal and normative framework, represents a blatant rejection of universal principles like territorial integrity. This assertion of the right to define reality and rules within its claimed regional sphere purely based on its perceived power and historical narratives, overriding international law, is another stark manifestation of polycentric tendencies where regional fiat and the principle of "might makes right" seek to supersede global norms.

Furthermore, the seemingly cohesive "West" itself shows signs of differentiating into distinct normative centers within a polycentric framework. The United States, still the oldest modern democracy possessing unparalleled military power, displays ongoing internal debates about its global role. Its foreign policy can appear more unilateralist at times, heavily focused on strategic competition, and perhaps more willing to prioritize security interests or transactional advantages over consistent adherence to multilateral procedures, occasionally leading to friction even with close allies, especially Canada and The European Union. Faced with Washington's whimsical foreign policy, Brussels is vacillating if and how to become a distinct center, primarily leveraging normative and regulatory power. It focuses
on deep integration and projecting influence through standard-setting (like GDPR or the AI Act), emphasizing multilateralism. Its pursuit of "strategic autonomy" signals an ambition to act more independently, sometimes diverging from US preferences and marking it as a separate, albeit closely aligned, pole shaping its own regional normative reality.

Living in this polycentric world carries significant implications. Global governance becomes incredibly complex when core norms are actively contested, not just between adversaries but also subtly among allies. International forums risk paralysis when fundamental agreement on rules is absent, hindering collective action. Diplomacy leans more heavily on transactional bargains, potentially diminishing the role of international law and shared values. The "normative fault lines" – areas where these competing regional orders collide, such as Eastern Europe, the Indo-Pacific, or contested digital spaces – become increasingly volatile hotspots. Crucially, the erosion of faith in universal norms risks degrading the principle that right should determine might, potentially leading to a more dangerous international environment where raw power calculations become the primary determinant of state behavior and the arbiter of disputes.

In conclusion, the emerging world order is characterized less by a simple shift in power distribution (multipolarity) and more by a fundamental fragmentation of normative consensus (polycentrism). Driven by the rise of alternative civilizational models and catalyzed by shifts and uncertainties in the US approach to its global role, distinct regional centers – including increasingly differentiated US and EU poles – are defining their own rules and values. Actions by states like China in the South China Sea and Russia in Eastern Europe vividly illustrate this trend of regional normative assertion challenging universal principles, often underpinned by an implicit logic where might makes right. Navigating this fractured mirror world requires acknowledging the depth of these normative divides and developing new diplomatic strategies fit for an era where the common rulebook is increasingly contested and power politics potentially overshadows principled order.

Rethinking Democratic Defense - The Impact of Antidemocratic Actions in the Social Dimension

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Liberal democracy is in trouble. This democratic backsliding and the gradual return of authoritarianism is one of the defining political problems of our time. This political theory paper introduces a descriptive theoretical framework for analysis and policymaking addressing this democratic backsliding.

To formulate the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable political action, I propose that unacceptable political action in a democratic system should consist of actions which have for consequences that they threaten or degrade the democratic system.

Within democratic theorizing it is a given that the democratic socialization of a critical mass of citizens within society is necessary for the continuation of the democratic system. However, this socialization has not been conceptually introduced to date as a pillar of the democratic system, equivalent to the traditional institutional pillar. In this social dimension of the democratic political system, people are formed into democratic citizens through the multi-vector socialization process: by exercising their rights, by participating in elections, by following the media or by simply interacting with other citizens.

As Gramsci recognized, socialization processes are not limited to the ruling political system. Democratic socialization is possible in a dictatorship, and antidemocratic socialization is possible in a democracy. There is a permanent competition between these different socializations.

Antidemocratic socialization has for effect to undermine the social pillar of the democratic system. In the perception of antidemocratically socialized, there is no permanent policy debate. They see politics as a 'group-based power struggle', a zero-sum game. I define this framing and resulting actions as 'conflict'. Within political science, much attention is paid to the study of intra-state violent conflicts. This paper argues that these are only one extreme form of political conflict as a form of politics that corresponds with Carl Schmitt's friend – enemy distinction.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, Democratic stability, Competing socializations, Political polarization

The Not-So-Soft Power of Faith 2.0: Russo-Serbian Religious Constituency Building and Political Attitudes in Montenegro

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This working paper explores research possibilities on how Russia and Serbia employ religious soft power as a strategic tool for cultivating political constituencies among the selectorate and the general population in Montenegro. Specifically, it investigates whether and how religious institutions, narratives, and affiliations influence authoritarian and illiberal political attitudes, foreign policy preferences, and ethnic and national identity. While religious attendance itself may be difficult to manipulate experimentally, exposure to religiously framed political discourse—whether through media, elite endorsements, or religious leadership—provides a viable avenue for empirical investigation.

To examine these dynamics, this research proposes conducting a survey experiment to test the effects of exposure to religiously framed political messaging. Participants in the treatment group will be exposed to messages from Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) leaders supporting specific political stances, either through sermon excerpts or vignettes framing political endorsements in religious terms.

The independent variable is exposure to religious soft power messaging, operationalized through religious attendance, endorsements from religious leaders, religiously framed political discourse, and the visibility of Orthodox Church institutions in state-affiliated media. The dependent variables include attitudes toward foreign policy alignment (Russia vs. NATO), public trust in political leadership, and the perception of national and ethnic identity as intrinsically tied to religious heritage. Additionally, the study considers moderating factors such as prior religious commitment, political ideology, and demographic characteristics (e.g., age and education level) to assess variations in susceptibility to religiously framed political messages.

The central hypothesis is that exposure to politically articulated, pro-Russian, nationalist messaging from Orthodox Church leaders is positively correlated with an increase in authoritarian values and preferences among individuals exposed to it. Furthermore, the study aims to be expanded to other countries to ensure external validity and to understand why these tactics resonate more in some target countries while others display greater resilience to such influences.

By bridging political psychology, media effects research, and religious studies, this project contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious soft power operates as a mechanism of political persuasion in contemporary authoritarian and hybrid regimes, and how it affects democratic backsliding.

This presentation seeks feedback on the research design, particularly on the effectiveness of the survey experiment approach and the operationalization of religious soft power as an independent variable. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for assessing the broader impact of religious institutions on political attitudes in Orthodox Christian societies.

Geographical Comparison of Voter Turnout Representation in the Republic of Croatia during the Super Election Year of 2024

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This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of voters' turnout in Croatia during the super election year of 2024, which saw the holding of three major elections. The study explores the geographical variations in voter participation across the country, focusing on how different regions exhibited distinct patterns of turnout in the presidential, parliamentary and local elections. The research utilizes data collected from the Croatian State Election Commission, analyzing voter turnout at various administrative levels, including counties, cities and municipalities. By comparing these data, the paper aims to highlight regional disparities in electoral participation and explore the factors that may influence these differences, such as demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status. The findings indicate that larger urban areas, particularly in the capital and other major cities, demonstrated higher voter turnout rates, while rural regions showed lower levels of participation. These trends suggest that political awareness and accessibility to voting infrastructure might play a significant role in shaping electoral engagement. Through this geographical comparison, the study contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of voter participation in Croatia, while shedding light on the factors that influence turnout.

PANEL VIII

Behaviour and Gender

Gender Gaps in Internal Political Efficacy Across Europe: A Comparative Exploration

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Internal political efficacy is a key factor influencing political participation at both individual and group levels. Defined as one's confidence in their ability to engage in politics, internal political efficacy has long been recognized as a driver of the gender gap in political participation worldwide. Women consistently report lower levels of political confidence than men, a finding that is cross-nationally and temporally robust. However, the mechanisms underlying this disparity remain insufficiently understood, particularly in relation to other explanatory factors such as age, education, and socio-economic status.

This paper examines the impact of gender on internal political efficacy across European countries, analyzing its role in conjunction with other demographic and socio-economic variables. Using data from the 10th wave of the European Social Survey (2020–2022), which includes 31 European nations with diverse political, economic, and social contexts, this study explores the extent and variation of gender gaps in political confidence. Preliminary findings indicate that the gender gap in internal efficacy is present in 27 of the 31 countries, with statistically significant differences between men and women in their self-reported internal political efficacy. However, the magnitude of the gap varies considerably across nations, suggesting that contextual factors may shape political self-confidence.

By identifying patterns and disparities across Europe, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the gendered nature of internal political efficacy. The findings highlight the importance of further investigating structural and cultural determinants of political confidence and participation.

Different Colors of the Same Rainbow? The Polarization of Gender Issues and its Campaign Potential

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In general, support for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ has increased in the past decades. Current studies suggest a broad overall endorsement. However, gender-related issues have become increasingly politicized and publicly contested in recent years. Especially the political and media debate has intensified and right-wing populist and radical right parties campaign against a so-called "genderism". Against this backdrop, a common perception is that all kinds of issues revolving around gender conflate into a single, overarching discourse about gender and sexuality that is antagonistically polarized between a supportive and a dismissive camp. What remains unclear is whether this form of discursive polarization on gender-related issues resonates with public opinion. Based on data from the German Social Cohesion Panel from 2022, we can show that there is a need to differentiate the debate and conceptually separate two distinct dimensions of gender issues: while binary issues, i.e. issues that concern equality between men and women, receive overwhelming support from the German population, non-heteronormative issues, i.e. issues that concern LGBTIQ+, are viewed with great skepticism. Accordingly, due to the high support of binary gender issues, there hardly seems to be any room for political mobilization on them. This is completely different with regard to non-heteronormative issues. Right-wing populist parties like the German AfD stand out in attracting voters who oppose the promotion of equality for gender and sexual minorities.

Gender Attitudes and Party Preferences in Serbia: The Role of Individual Authoritarianism

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A number of recent studies indicate that sexist attitudes may exert a significant influence on political preferences and electoral behavior. Studies of recent elections in countries such as the USA and the UK show that sexist attitudes are increasingly important predictors of voting choices. This paper examines the influence of gender attitudes on political behavior and attitudes in Serbia. Serbia in the 2020s is an interesting to explore in this regard. Since the party in power (SNS) is outspokenly traditionalist and authoritarian, sexist attitudes are expected to be more prevalent among those supporting this party. At the same time, the Prime minister, occupying the position between 2017 and 2024 (currently occupying the office of President of the National Assembly of Serbia), is openly lesbian, thus possibly creating a cognitive-affective dissonance among the supporters of the ruling party and also possibly among the liberal opposition. In this context, examining how sexist attitudes relate to political preferences seems particularly interesting.

The Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade conducted a public opinion survey in Serbia in the spring of 2021, implementing the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems Module 6 questionnaire. This questionnaire includes a set of questions operationalizing sexist political attitudes, in addition to a broad set of indicators dealing with political attitudes and voting behavior. The results showed that supporters of the ruling traditionalist parties indeed demonstrate more sexist attitudes. Additional analyses showed that the individual level of authoritarianism is a factor determining both sexist attitudes and political preferences. The sexual orientation of the prime minister apparently hasn't affected the supporters' basic orientations.

The Gender Affect Effect: Are Men More Susceptible to Affective Polarization?

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Affective polarization (AP) has become a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary democracies. Typically defined as the tendency of voters to express positive feelings toward their own party while harboring negative sentiments toward opposing parties (Iyengar, 2012), AP has been documented not only in the United States but also across multiparty democracies in Europe and beyond (Reiljan et al., 2024). A growing body of research has suggested that heightened in-party favoritism coupled with out-party animosity can foster greater tolerance for undemocratic practices by political leaders (Kingzette et al., 2021; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018). AP is thus seen as a significant driver of democratic backsliding, as it strengthens partisan loyalty while weakening public commitment to democratic norms. This dynamic contributes to what Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay (2022) term "democratic hypocrisy," whereby citizens are more inclined to overlook democratic transgressions when committed by their preferred party. Consequently, AP emerges as a critical factor in explaining the public's tolerance for democratic deterioration (Orhan, 2022; Gessler and Wunsch, 2024).

This paper seeks to further investigate the sources of affective polarization by examining its gender dynamics. While literature has identified important role of gender stereotyping and male grievance in explaining electoral success of parties challenging democratic norms (RRW), systematic examination of the role of gender in emergence of affective polarization is still missing. Using data from 40 democratic countries in Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), we test the hypothesis that affective polarization varies significantly across genders. Contrary to the theoretical expectation that would suggest higher AP among men, preliminary findings indicate that polarization is more pronounced among women. Moreover, we find gender differences with respect to AP vary greatly across regions and candidates. Strongest gender differences are found in polities with higher level of gender equality and female representation.

Keywords: Affective polarization, Gender, Democratic resilience, Backsliding

PANEL IX

Western Balkans Politics I

Antipolitical Revolution – Student Protests in Serbia

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Since 2014, Serbia's political scene has been under the control of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which has governed from the position of a predominant party (Stojiljković & Spasojević, 2020), occupying all key positions in the state and controlling nearly all local governments since 2016. In contrast, the opposition is divided into two ideological blocs and further fragmented within them, making their position nearly untenable - especially in light of the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime (Bieber, 2018). Consequently, it is unsurprising that the biggest challenges and crises faced by the SNS government have emerged not from electoral or institutional processes, but from waves of protests.

Throughout these crises, the role of political parties and their relationship to the protests has been repeatedly questioned. Some protests were directly organized by the opposition (e.g., Serbia Against Violence), in others the opposition kept its distance while providing logistical support (1 of 5 Million), and some were led by students (Protest Against Dictatorship) or new political and civil society actors (such as the protests against Rio Tinto and lithium mining). Although the dilemma of the relationship between the political and the civic within Serbian protests was also present during the rule of Slobodan Milošević (Vujadinović, 1998), in the current waves of protest, the rejection of the opposition's role can also be interpreted through broader trends of democratic crisis, a crisis of representation, and a crisis of institutions (Mair, 2013).

The current wave of protests, which began after the demolition of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad and the death of 15 people, further highlights the practices of separating the political from the non-political in Serbia. Through analysis of the student movement's arguments used to establish distance from political parties as well as civil society organizations and activists, we gain a new perspective on how anti-political ideas and practices are being developed at the very heart of the largest student and civic movement in Serbia since the fall of Slobodan Milošević.

Despite distancing themselves from the political sphere, students managed to garner broad support from both citizens and political actors. In addition to strong anti-party sentiment, students have introduced participatory and deliberative ideas, along with plenary forms of organization, offering a simultaneous critique of existing political practices while opening space for new ones. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the reasoning behind the distancing from the political sphere, as well as the tactical challenges that such an anti-political position presents for the student movement.

Short-term Gains, Long-Term Risks: Montenegro's Battle with Populist Fiscal Policies

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This research explores how populist economic promises— exemplified by the Montenegrin government's pledge to raise salaries by 25% without increasing tax rates—can lead to fiscal policies that undermine long-term economic stability. By examining Montenegro's Fiscal Strategy for 2024–2027, the study identifies significant discrepancies, particularly with regard to transparency, risk assessment, and the introduction of new measures under the Europe Now 2 Programme. These measures focus on stimulating household consumption through wage increases, offering short-term gains but overlooking the structural reforms essential for sustainable growth, job creation, and convergence with the European Union. Moreover, they threaten the sustainability of pension funds by effectively drawing on future resources to finance present consumption.

Economic populism is facilitated by the EU's renewed appetite for enlargement and by the Growth Plan's financial support for Montenegro's expansive fiscal stance. Instead of leveraging EU grants to boost capital investments—critical drivers of long-term productivity—the Montenegrin government appears to use them merely to maintain existing levels of investment while expanding overall budget consumption. This approach risks exerting excessive pressure on public debt and spurring inflation, thereby eroding the short-term benefits of wage increases.

Ultimately, Montenegro's case highlights a broader challenge confronting democracies in a populist era: when governments favour easily marketable, short-term policies over balanced, evidence-based strategies, they compromise both economic resilience and democratic legitimacy. The resulting fiscal vulnerabilities can intensify social and political rifts, undermining the very promises these policies aim to fulfil. Hence, this study underscores the urgency of well-structured reforms—grounded in robust institutions, transparent governance, and prudent fiscal management—to safeguard both economic and democratic stability. By pursuing this path, Montenegro can better navigate the risks of populist policymaking and work toward a more inclusive and prosperous future.

Beyond the Classroom: Student Protests and Political Transformation in Serbia

Jelena Riznić, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

On November 1, 2024, the canopy of the newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia's second-largest city, collapsed, resulting in 15 fatalities and two severe injuries. This incident, along with the subsequent wave of protests and the regime's violent suppression of student demonstrations, prompted students to blockade faculties at four public universities in Serbia. Their demands focused on identifying and prosecuting those responsible for both the canopy collapse and the attacks on students. While the protests eventually expanded beyond the student population—drawing support from educators, farmers, lawyers, and cultural workers—student-led blockades have remained the movement's central element, positioning students as key agents of anticipated societal change. This study examines how students themselves perceive these protests: Do they see themselves as primary political actors and drivers of change? How do they interpret their blockades and their potential impact on Serbia's political and democratic future? Furthermore, the research explores whether these student actions introduce new perspectives on youth political engagement and participation. Can students' decision-making processes, grounded in direct democracy, have a lasting influence on Serbian institutions? The study is based on semi-structured interviews with students from the University of Belgrade and the University of Arts in Belgrade, University of Novi Sad, University of Niš and University of Kragujevac.

Beyond the Classroom: Student Protests and Political Transformation in Serbia

Fasting democracy

Dr. Nikola Radunović, independent researcher

After thirty years of rule by more or less monolithic political elites that emerged from the former League of Communists, Montenegro peacefully changed its power at the state-level elections in the middle of 2020. At that point, voters punished bad and non-democratic practices wishing new politicians to come to power. They voted for those who publicly pointed out all the anomalies in the state - political employment, protectionism and nepotism, corruption in the judiciary, healthcare, and the economic sector. Surprisingly for a leading country in the European Union integration process, the key role in forming the new government was played by the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose influence was only growing stronger ever since and which increasingly and openly has been interfering in political life. Unfortunately, the new government not only continued but also improved all the bad practices of its predecessors. Over the past few years, those in power have demonstrated a complete lack of principles and ethics on almost all important issues for society and the state, ready to do anything to remain in power. Through critical discourse analysis, this paper aims to show the actions of the political elite and points to numerous examples of their violations of all democratic principles, all that they allegedly fought against until they came to power. The strong influence of the church seems to have contributed to the fact that instead of religious purposes, "fasting" is now practiced in politics when it comes to the exercising of democracy. Namely, ruling parties often abstain from democratic principles.

Democratic Resilience in North Macedonia: Challenges, Reforms, and Future Prospects

Dimitar Kovacevski, Sofija Georgievska, Natasa Stanojkovska Trajkovska and Elena Kovacevska

Democratic resilience worldwide is under significant strain, with the Western Balkans experiencing acute challenges. North Macedonia presents a compelling case, navigating significant strides in democratic reform alongside persistent vulnerabilities. This paper examines the state of democratic resilience in North Macedonia, with a focus on critical dimensions such as rule of law, media freedom, and civic engagement.

Survey data from the 2024 Balkan Barometer reveal that 61% of citizens perceive corruption as a significant challenge, eroding trust in public institutions. Furthermore, 47% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with judicial transparency, underscoring the need for institutional reforms. Policy analysis highlights efforts like the Council for Media Ethics, established in 2021, which contributed to a 12% decrease in reported cases of media-related defamation by 2024. However, challenges persist, with 34% of journalists reporting political interference.

Civic engagement initiatives show promise, with the Ministry of Education's 2023 pilot program on civic education reaching over 15,000 high school students. The program saw 78% of educators reporting increased student participation in democratic activities. These efforts provide a foundation for bolstering democratic practices but require sustained support to address systemic corruption and promote judicial efficiency.

Using a mixed-methods approach, including survey data, policy analysis, and stakeholder interviews, this study provides insights into North Macedonia's strategies for managing internal and external pressures. The findings highlight the critical role of media independence, civic education, and targeted institutional reforms in strengthening democratic resilience. By addressing these areas, North Macedonia can enhance its democratic framework and offer valuable lessons for other transitional democracies in the region.

PANEL X

Behaviour and Voting

Special elections in a comparative perspective: A study of four democracies

Dr. Stephen Quinlan, GESIS Institute

By-elections, by-polls, elizioni suppletive, or special elections – all describe electoral contests to fill an open seat during a parliamentary term and are permanent fixtures of several democracies. Yet, while they generate much media interest, they have assumed Cinderella status among researchers, arguably stimulating less scholarly ventures than other non-general election contests generate. There has been a dearth of comparative analysis of special elections, with limited cross-national forays, while informative, now dated. Other gaps include explanations of government performance relying primarily on the referendum model (Tufte, 1975), but other potential mechanisms remain untested; the reasons for these contests being largely assumed but not lately examined, and investigations of the correlates of electoral participation being under-researched. Using an array of specially generated datasets, including data on over 1000 special elections spanning 60 years in Australia, Britain, Canada, and Ireland, this paper fills these voids by providing the most comprehensive comparative analysis of by-elections to date and the discovery of vital contextual differences in how special elections operate. The results reveal that the death of the incumbent member is sparked most by-elections, but this trigger has become less common over time. Turnout in special mirrors participation patterns observed more generally: lower in more recent contests and higher in districts and polities where it is traditionally higher. Government performance is associated with national unemployment conditions, support for the referendum model, and the timing of the contest vis-à-vis the most recent general election.

Suburbanization and Political Polarization: Voting Behaviour in the Suburban Areas of the Czech Republic and Slovakia

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Suburbanization is a process that significantly changes the social and political structure of regions, which can lead to deepening political polarisation and weakening democratic stability. Although this process might seem to have ended in Central Europe, it is still ongoing and influences voting behaviour in municipalities located in the more distant surroundings of large cities. This paper focuses on the relationship between suburbanization and voting behaviour in newly defined suburban areas where there is a clash between the indigenous rural political culture and the newly arrived urban electorate. Based on an analysis of electoral trends in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, we identify how suburbanization contributes to polarization in these dynamic localities.

After conducting a quantitative regression analysis, the results show that while stabilized suburban areas are no longer subject to significant changes in voting behaviour, in new suburbanized localities, there is a shift towards urban parties, i.e. parties elected by the population with higher education, and at the same time a weakening of support for populist and traditionally left-wing formations. This trend can be explained by the arrival of a younger, better educated and more economically active population, which differs socio-economically from the original inhabitants regarding media preferences and political orientation. These changes may increase political polarisation and weaken social cohesion in suburban areas.

The research further analyzed voting preferences in established suburban areas. The results show systematic differences between the political preferences of voters in urban centres and their suburban hinterlands. Parties with dominant support in urban areas tend to weaken in suburban areas, while parties with rural electoral backgrounds strengthen there. Other political actors confirm this phenomenon and reflect the deeper dynamics of urban-rural transition zones.

These findings suggest that suburban zones function as a transitional political zone between urban and rural political cultures. This phenomenon may have important implications for political polarisation and overall democratic dynamics in the Central European context. The growing political fragmentation and diversification of preferences in these areas pose a challenge to traditional models of voting behaviour and require new approaches to analyzing political developments in the region.

Is There Anything Beyond Cleavage Politics? Economic Voting Experimental Evidence from Montenegro

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Many pundits remain skeptical about the relevance of alternative explanations for voting behavior in Montenegro, arguing that cleavage politics—particularly those centered around attitudes toward Montenegrin statehood—continue to dominate the country's political life. While numerous public opinion surveys consistently show that citizens care deeply about economic issues, often identifying the economy as the most important problem facing the country, this concern does not always translate into electoral choices. Instead, voters often appear to rely more on identity-based cues when casting their ballots.

This study challenges that prevailing narrative by arguing that economic factors represent a powerful determinant of voting behavior in Montenegro. Through a survey experiment, I test how voters respond to information about the country's economic performance, manipulating the content to present either positive, negative, or neutral economic data. Central hypothesis is that exposure to positive economic information will increase support for the governing coalition and main incumbent party, while negative information will reduce it.

The experiment further investigates whether these effects vary across different cleavage groups and whether political interest and economic knowledge moderate the relationship between economic perceptions and vote choice.

By examining these dynamics in Montenegro—a country characterized by entrenched identity politics, low trust in political parties, and ongoing democratic backsliding—this study contributes to the broader literature on economic voting. The findings offer new insights into how economic information can shape political preferences even in contexts where identity-based divisions have historically overshadowed material concerns.

Democratic Resilience from Below: Voter Profiles of New Opposition Parties in Serbia and Croatia

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This paper examines the socio-economic and cultural profiles of the average voter supporting new opposition parties in Serbia and Croatia, which have emerged as pivotal actors in advancing democratization processes in both countries. In both cases, these new opposition parties arose following prolonged periods of protests and social movements driven by grassroots mobilization and demands for political change, addressing the widespread public dissatisfaction with the state of democracy.

Relying on original survey data from 2021 and 2024, this study recodes occupation into class categories based on Oesch (2006) and examines the cultural and economic attitudes of voters. By linking class positions to attitudinal dimensions, it sheds light on how socio-economic and ideological factors shape support for these new opposition parties. While both countries share a history of Yugoslav socialism, a period of authoritarianism, and political instability, their trajectories diverge in terms of institutional reforms, EU integration, and to a certain degree, socio-economic transformations. Using descriptive analyses and binary logit regressions, this paper finds that voters for new opposition parties in Croatia are more homogeneous, predominantly middle-class based, urban, and culturally liberal. In contrast, voters for new opposition parties in Serbia are more diverse, representing a broader cross-section of society. This difference underscores the role of localized socio-political contexts in shaping voter bases for democratic opposition movements in the two countries, suggesting that in Croatia, voters may have been more consistently mobilized by specific opposition narratives or political issues. The findings contribute to insights about the relationship between voters, opposition movements, and democratic resilience in similar fragile democracies beyond the Western Balkans.

PANEL XI
Western Balkans Politics II

Montenegro "Lost" in transition:
Ethnonationalism Overshadows Europeanisation

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This paper regards Europeanisation as a process in which states adopt European Union rule, as a groundwork for "moving" Montenegro from its position in the European outskirts to the centre of the European community. Although Montenegro has proclaimed commitment to European reforms, ethnic divisions and nationalistic rhetoric are becoming an even more dominant characteristic of this state's political reality which challenges democracy. Due to the specificity of the historical legacy of Montenegro, the political reality is dominated by ethnonational narratives and the dispute around sensitive issues which divide society and create a paranoid feeling of ethnic communities being under threat. Therefore this paper applies Horowitz's theory- about ethnically divided societies having a special version of democratic problem of assuring adequate treatment of the opposition- in Montenegrin political narrative where ethnically differentiated opposition can be defined as consisting of historical enemies who do not accept current states identity, enemies who plan to "steal" the state for the domination of their own group. This paper puts forward the claim that cost-benefit calculations, especially those concerning ruling elites' political interests, play important role in the process of Europeanisation and conclude that the process of moving the Montenegro from the European periphery shall not be easy. It explains that ethnic issues can be well combined with established leadership's domestic interest to pass up opportunities to democratize. In other words, political leadership will always resist change in democratic processes which can bring their ethnic opponents to power. This paper seeks to improve understanding of relation between two issues: ethnonationalism and Europeanisation. It uses ethnic theoretical framework in order to show that ethnic differences do not depend on cultural differences but on the relationship between groups and to present that the relevance of ethnic identity in political life depends of wider social context.

Fighting Anti-Romaism Within the Integration Model and the Invisibility of Structural Discrimination - the Case of Montenegro

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The presentation will be dedicated to the analysis of the integration approach in the context of the fight against anti-Romaism as a specific form of racism against Roma people. Under the influence of integration policies, which are partly developed by the institutions of the European Union, the discourse on anti-Romaism is depoliticized and the struggle to change the position of Roma is reduced to particular dimensions of integration. The so-called "world of Roma projects", the paternalistic approach that often exists in the relations of institutions and social actors towards Roma, as well as the inadequate treatment of deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes in the rest of the population, make the scope of integration policies quite limited. The consequence of insufficient recognition of anti-Romaism as the root of the problem of inclusion and acceptance of Roma people is that members of this community permanently remain outside the socio-economic and political arena and in the status of a "vulnerable group". In such circumstances, there is a danger of developing the so-called rejection-identification model and disidentification in relation to the wider political community. The existing power relations and the problem of structural discrimination are at the core of critical multiculturalism, which should be promoted as a type of multicultural policies towards Roma people. In this way, it would be avoided to reduce multiculturalism to the currently dominant, so-called folkloric multiculturalism in relation to the aforementioned ethnocultural community and its members.

Social Policy and Democratic Resilience in Montenegro: Between Welfare Populism and Sustainable Development

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Social policy in Montenegro is shaped by socioeconomic instability and the challenges of democratic consolidation. While it is expected to function as a stabilizing mechanism within democratic governance, social policy is often instrumentalized for political purposes, undermining institutional trust and democratic resilience. This paper examines the interconnection between social policy and representative democracy, with a focus on the political exploitation of welfare benefits.

By analyzing official data on poverty, social exclusion, and social assistance beneficiaries, this study explores how ad hoc socio-economic interventions reinforce clientelistic structures rather than fostering sustainable development. The absence of structural reforms addressing social exclusion and inequality further deepens economic vulnerability, increasing citizens' dependence on the state as a political rather than a social mechanism.

This study contributes to the debate on welfare populism in post-socialist democracies, emphasizing the need for evidence-based policies that strengthen social cohesion and enhance democratic governance. Ultimately, the paper highlights the importance of institutional resilience in mitigating the effects of socio-economic populism, ensuring that social policies serve as mechanisms for long-term democratic stability rather than instruments of political survival.

From Overt Demonization to Subtle Delegitimization: Discursive Strategies of Contesting Montenegrin Independence

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After the breakup of the SFRY, the question of Montenegrin independence became one of the key issues in political and media discourse, with strategies for challenging it changing in accordance with socio-political circumstances. In the early 1990s, in the context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the rise of Serbian nationalism, the Montenegrin press propagated the narrative of a "natural community" with Serbia, while advocates of independence were portrayed as "traitors" and "separatists." The demonization of Montenegrin statehood was achieved through argumentative tropes such as "historical delusions" and "foreign conspiracies," aiming to delegitimize Montenegro's right to political autonomy.

In the contemporary context, the challenge to Montenegrin independence manifests through more subtle strategies. Instead of outright denial, right-wing narratives employ euphemisms and implicit arguments to question the legitimacy of Montenegrin statehood. One of the key strategies is associating symbols of Montenegrin independence with crime and corruption. State symbols, such as the Montenegrin flag, coat of arms, and anthem, are often presented in public discourse as symbols of illegitimate authorities and criminal elites, thereby equating independence with institutional degradation and social crisis. This narrative overlooks the fact that corrupt structures are present throughout the region, including in Serbia, and is used selectively to paint the image of Montenegro as a failed state in need of a political and economic tutor.

This paper analyzes the continuities and changes in the discourse of challenging Montenegrin independence from the early 1990s to the present through a discourse-historical approach and critical discourse analysis. The focus is on strategies of nomination, argumentation, and the use of tropes, with special emphasis on how corruption and criminalization are used to delegitimize independence. By linking state symbols with criminal structures and social crises, the aim is to create the impression that Montenegrin independence is historically and politically unjustified, and socially harmful, thus paving the way for its future contestation.

"Little Ukraine" in the Balkans: Montenegro seen from Belgrade

Prof. dr. Ivan Vuković, University of Montenegro

Next year will mark two decades since the state union of Serbia and Montenegro ceased to exist. While officially recognizing Montenegro's state independence, Serbian political elite continues to question its national and cultural distinctiveness. The ensuing hegemonic identity campaign intensified following the 2020 electoral changes in Montenegro which brought to power political parties endorsed by Belgrade and, in particular, by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

This article analyzes political narrative framing such campaign. It points to the worrying similarities between the political portrayal of Montenegrin identity in Serbia and the way in which the regime of Vladimir Putin interprets Ukraine's political history and the "true" character of its nation.