

# DEMOCRATISATION AND STATE-BUILDING

conference

May 26—27th 2026  
Budva, Montenegro



**MoPSA**  
Montenegrin Political  
Science Association

UNIVERZITET CRNE GORE  
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FAKULTET POLITIČKIH NAUKA

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# DEMOCRATISATION AND STATE-BUILDING

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May 26—27th 2026  
Budva, Montenegro

Hotel Splendid  
/ Academy of Knowledge

**DAY 1**

**Tuesday, May 26**

TIME		VENUE	ROOM
8:30 - 9:00	<b>Registration</b> of participants	Hotel Splendid	Petrovic Room
9:00 - 9:30	<b>Opening</b> of the conference  <b>Prof. Dr. Srđan Darmanović</b> Chair of the International Advisory Board, MoPSA  <b>Nikola Jovanović</b> President of the Municipality of Budva  <b>Mr. Marica Melović</b> Director General, Directorate for Scientific Research, Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation  <b>Dr. Ena Grbović</b> Vice-Dean for International Cooperation, Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro		

TIME		VENUE	ROOM
9:30 - 10:30	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Keynote speech</b> by <b>Prof. Dr. Kenneth Greene</b> University of Texas at Austin</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Resilience from Below: Voters and Democratic Backsliding</b></p>		
10:30 - 11:30	<p style="text-align: center;">Introductory Panel: <b>Democracy in the Post-liberal International Order</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Daniel Serwer</b> Professor and Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Zsolt Enyedi</b> Professor at the Political Science Department of Central European University (CEU)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Kenneth Greene</b> Professor at the University of Texas at Austin</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Panel Chair: <b>Srdan Darmanović</b> Professor at the University of Montenegro</p>	Hotel Splendid	Petrovic Room

## 11:30 — Coffee Break


TIME	BOOK PRESENTATIONS	VENUE	ROOM
12:00 - 13:00	<b>Abandoning Democracy for the Nation</b> by <b>Filip Milačić</b>	Hotel Splendid	Petrovic Room
13:00 - 14:00	<b>Chinese infrastructure diplomacy in the Balkans</b> by <b>Mladen Grgić</b>		

## 14:00 — Lunch Break



Following lunch, MoPSA will organize transportation for all participants to the Academy of Knowledge, where the conference will continue.

**A transfer will be provided at 15:10 in front of Hotel Splendid.**

TIME	SESSION	PANEL	VENUE	ROOM
15:30 - 17:00		<b>Panel I</b> Who Shapes Democracy? Parties, Voters and System Design	Academy of Knowledge	C8 <i>(2nd floor)</i>
15:30 - 17:00		<b>Panel II</b> Contesting Democracy: From Nationalism to Hybrid Threats		D8 <i>(3rd floor)</i>
15:30 - 17:00		<b>Panel III</b> Rethinking State-Building in an Era of Global Uncertainty		D10 <i>(3rd floor)</i>

TIME	SESSION	PANEL	VENUE	ROOM
17:00 - 18:30		<b>Panel IV</b> Formative Rifts and Democratic Backsliding in Montenegro	Academy of Knowledge	C8 <i>(2nd floor)</i>
17:00 - 18:30		<b>Panel V</b> Populism, Polarization, and Power		D8 <i>(3rd floor)</i>
17:00 - 18:30		<b>Panel VI</b> Protest, Repression, and Political Mobilization		D10 <i>(3rd floor)</i>

**DAY 2****Wednesday, May 27**

TIME	SESSION	PANEL	VENUE	ROOM
9:00 - 10:30		<b>Panel VII</b> Voting Behaviour, Ideology, and Democratic Support	Academy of Knowledge	C8 <i>(2nd floor)</i>
9:00 - 10:30		<b>Panel VIII</b> Foreign Influence and Democratization		D8 <i>(3rd floor)</i>
9:00 - 10:30		<b>Panel IX</b> Social Structure, Inequality, and Historical Legacies		D10 <i>(3rd floor)</i>
10:30 - 12:00		<b>Panel X</b> Postgraduate panel		C8 <i>(2nd floor)</i>

**Closing of the Conference**

## SESSION I

### PANEL I

15:30 – 17:00

Academy of Knowledge

### WHO SHAPES DEMOCRACY? PARTIES, VOTERS AND SYSTEM DESIGN

Panel Chair: **Zlatko Vujović**

**Democracy captured  
- only if it is “our” game:  
state-building and  
dominant party systems**

**Srđan  
Darmanović**

University  
of Montenegro

**How Parties and Party  
Competition Shape the  
Process of Democratization:  
The Case of Croatia**

**Goran Čular and  
Dario Nikić Čakar**

University  
of Zagreb

**Peripheralization of electoral  
support for political parties  
in the Czech environment**

**Michal  
Pink**

Masaryk University

**Born into Dispossession:  
Inherited Wealth and  
Extreme Voting in Reunified  
Germany**

**Evelyne  
Brie**

Université  
de Montréal

**Gender Quotas versus  
Preferential Voting:  
Lessons from Kosovo’s  
Open-List System**

**Luka  
Pavičević**

Centre for Monitoring  
and Research

## PANEL II

15:30 – 17:00

Academy of Knowledge

## CONTESTING DEMOCRACY: FROM NATIONALISM TO HYBRID THREATS

Panel Chair: **Olivera Komar**

**The nationalism-and-democracy symbiosis and its legacy: the role of independence nationalism**

**Daniel Bochsler and Andreas Juon**

Central European University  
University of Fribourg

**Exploring the Democratic Potential of Digital Gen Zs in Southeast Europe**

**Borjan Gjuzelov**

Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' Skopje

**Contested Places of Memory in Montenegro: "The Battle over Mount Lovćen"**

**Ivan Vuković, Milivoj Bešlin and Nemanja Batričević**

University of Montenegro  
University of Belgrade

**Democracy Shield and Hybrid Threats in Montenegro**

**Đorđe Krivokapić**

Faculty of Organizational Sciences, University of Belgrade

**PANEL III**

15:30 – 17:00

Academy of Knowledge

**RETHINKING STATE-BUILDING  
IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY**

Panel Chair: **Slaven Živković**

**State and Nation Building:  
Post-Yugoslav Perspective**

**Milan  
Podunavac**

University  
of Donja Gorica

**Post-totalitarianism  
in a Globalized World**

**Sonja  
Tomović Šundić**

University  
of Montenegro

**Is Diplomacy Still  
a Significant Ally in the  
Reconfigured Global Order?**

**Miljana  
Đurčević Cucić**

University  
of Belgrade

**Post-Soviet Georgia in  
Transition: Navigating  
Between Regional Integration  
Models and National  
Interests in Contemporary  
International Relations**

**Giorgi  
Pareshishvili**

Caucasus  
International  
University

## SESSION II

### PANEL IV

17:00 – 18:30

Academy of Knowledge

### FORMATIVE RIFTS AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN MONTENEGRO

Panel Chair: **Nemanja Batričević**

**Backsliding Through Formative Rifts: Two Decades of Montenegro's Democratic Journey**

**Olivera Komar**

University of Montenegro

**Varieties of Polarization and Democratization: Trajectory of Montenegrin political development since 2006**

**Nemanja Stankov**

University of Montenegro

**Elites, Formative Rifts, and Democratic Backsliding in Montenegro**

**Zlatko Vujović**

University of Montenegro

**Formative Rifts, State Weakness, and Democratic Backsliding in Montenegro: The Interplay of Internal Structural Vulnerabilities and Foreign Influence**

**Marko Savić**

Montenegrin Political Science Association

**Social Policy, Poverty Reduction and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Independence Montenegro (2006–2026)**

**Uglješa Janković**

University of Montenegro

**Gospel 2.0 – How to Make State Sovereignty Meaningless with the Help of the Cross**

**Nikola Radunović**

Independent researcher

**PANEL V**

17:00 – 18:30

Academy of Knowledge

**POPULISM, POLARIZATION, AND POWER**

Panel Chair: **Ivan Vuković**

**From Protest to Power: Populist Radical Right Governance at the Local Level in Czechia**

**Michal Pink and Sárka Pittnerová**

Masaryk University

**Populism in a post-ideological context: The transformation of political legitimacy in the Western Balkans and Central Europe**

**Filip Denda**

University of Donja Gorica

**The Rise of Eastern European Geopolitical Polarization**

**Ivan Pokatilov**

HSE University

**Why Contested Identities Resist Absorption: Hegemonic Nationalism, Institutional Pressure, and the Limits of Identity Politics**

Ljubomir Filipović

Arizona State University

**Geopolitical Orientation as a Political Divide: Explaining Support for Protests in Serbia (2024-2025)**

Sofija Ljubišić

Institute of Social Sciences

**PANEL VI**

17:00 – 18:30

Academy of Knowledge

**PROTEST, REPRESSION, AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION**

Panel Chair: **Srđan Darmanović**

**Strategic repression in hybrid regimes: State responses to student protests in Serbia**

Jelena Lončar

University of Belgrade

**Zbor as an alternative form of political organizing in Serbias competitive authoritarian context**

Dušan Spasojević and Jelena Kleut

University of Belgrade  
University of Novi Sad

**Deliberation After Violence: Citizens' Assemblies and Deliberative Quality in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Damir Kapidžić

University of Sarajevo

**Public Preferences  
for Democracy Aid  
in Post-Conflict States**

**Leonie  
Reicheneder and  
Magnus  
Lundgren**

University  
of Gothenburg

## **SESSION III**

### **PANEL VII**

9:00 – 10:30

Academy of Knowledge

### **VOTING BEHAVIOUR, IDEOLOGY, AND DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT**

Panel Chair: **Nemanja Stankov**

**Importing Urban Politics:  
Suburbanization and  
Electoral Behavior  
in Central Europe**

**František  
Reitter**

Masaryk  
University

**Demslide or Republican  
Resilience? A political  
history forecast of 2026  
US congressional elections**

**Steven Quinlan  
and Michael  
Lewis-Beck**

GESIS Institute,  
University of Iowa

**Party Targeting with Electoral  
Clientelism: Vote Buying  
during the 2024 Elections  
in North Macedonia**

**Jovan  
Bliznakovski**

Ss. Cyril and  
Methodius University  
in Skopje

**Regime Performance and Democracy Support in Central-Eastern Europe**

**Andrija Henjak and Bartul Vuksan-Čusa**

University of Zagreb

**Between class conflict and culture war. How left-right self-positioning reflects elite conflict and social-economic context**

**Simon Othes, Slaven Živković and Alexia Katsanidou**

Leiden University, DeFacto Consultancy, GESIS Institute

**PANEL VIII**

9:00 – 10:30

Academy of Knowledge

**FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND DEMOCRATIZATION**

Panel Chair: **Marko Savić**

**Abandoning the Stability Myth: Democratic Backsliding as a Strategic Liability for the EU**

**Anđela Mićanović**

European Strategy Institute Luxembourg – ESILUX

**Rethinking EU Enlargement Policy in a Geopolitical Era – Gradual Integration v. Staged Accession**

**Nemanja Purić**

University of Belgrade

**Enlargement as Security Policy: Montenegro's EU Accession Between Democratic Consolidation and Geopolitical Urgency**

**Nenad Koprivica**

Independent Researcher

**Political Conditionality  
or Geostrategic Choice?  
Explaining Divergent EU  
Accession Outcomes  
in Post-Communist Europe**

**Momčilo  
Radulović**

University  
Mediteran

**New black knight in the  
region: China's interference  
in Montenegro**

**Danilo  
Kalezić**

University  
of Montenegro

**PANEL IX**

9:00 – 10:30

Academy of Knowledge

**SOCIAL STRUCTURE, INEQUALITY,  
AND HISTORICAL LEGACIES**

Panel Chair: **Uglješa Janković**

**The socio-economic and  
ideological predictors of  
national and European  
attachment in comparative  
perspective**

**Bojan  
Todosijević,  
Emilija Mijić and  
Ljubomir Hristić**

Institute of Social  
Sciences, Belgrade

**The Ethno-Economy of Roma  
in Montenegro: A Vicious  
Circle of Exclusion**

**Danijela  
Vuković-Čalasan  
and Rajka  
Đoković**

University  
of Montenegro

**Variation of Democratic Belief System (DBS) Across Europe: The Role of Network Structure in Democratic Resilience**

**Nemanja Batrićević**

University of Montenegro

**Important Demographic Changes for Social Policy Planning in Montenegro: Based on Last Three Censuses**

**Mehmed Đečević**

University of Montenegro

**Why Some Post-Communist Countries in Europe Punished While Others Forgave: Explaining Divergent Approaches to the Communist Past**

**Marko Krtolica**

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

## **SESSION IV**

### **PANEL X**

10:30 – 12:00

Academy of Knowledge

### **POSTGRADUATE PANEL**

Panel Chair: **Mehmed Đečević**

**Democratic Backsliding and the Welfare State: Friends or Enemies? Case Study: Viktor Orbán's Hungary**

**Vedran Vujisić and Maša Jovanović**

University of Montenegro

**Economic Statecraft and Democratic Resilience: The Political Consequences of Tariff Policies**

**Marina Todorović**

University of Belgrade

**Between Subjection and Participation: An Analysis of Youth Trust in Institutions and Civil Society in the Process of Montenegro's Democratization**

**Nina Krivokapić Bakrač**

University of Montenegro

**De-Montenegrification of Montenegro: Content and Narrative Analysis of the Serbian Orthodox Church According to the portal "Vijesti"**

**Jakov Popović**

Catholic University of Croatia

# PANEL I

Who Shapes Democracy?  
Parties, Voters and System Design

## Democracy captured - only if it is “our” game: state-building and dominant party systems

Prof. Dr. Srđan Darmanović

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro*

Transitions to democracy of the 1990s produced different models of regime change and subsequent democratization. Transition models mattered for the further success of democratic consolidation. More peaceful and negotiated transitions initially guaranteed more successful cases. Spain, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Baltic states have been role models for that. Even conflictual and turbulent transitions like in Portugal, Romania, Croatia, etc. resulted in relatively democratic outcome, albeit with intermediary turbulent periods of hybrid regimes.

But, by time some of the role-model cases of successful democratic transitions ended up in hybrid, competitive authoritarian regimes (Hungary) or suffered periods of serious democracy backsliding (Poland, Slovakia). Others have been struggling to establish proper democracy moving pendulum back and forth from hybrid regimes to electoral democracy (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Moldova...). In some countries transitions just failed sinking to (almost) fullfledged authoritarian regimes (Serbia, Georgia) or never happened (Russia, Belarus).

Democratic transition in several of the mentioned countries as well as in many others have been overlapping with the state-building or even nation-building process. Democratization and state-building is a tense combination and far from being guaranteed success. Subversion of democratization process or

establishment of long standing hybrid regimes have always been in the cards and in the reality.

It has long been noticed that nation and state-building endeavors in the past made a fertile ground for the development of one-party systems. Socialist revolutions of XX century and subsequently decolonization process resulted in the installment of many one-party regimes. In the “democracy era” after 1989 one-party systems have mostly gone into the history, though with some still relevant exceptions as China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba and several others.

In post-Berlin Wall period notable number of cases of democracy backsliding or tendencies toward authoritarianism have taken the form of dominant party systems. Dominant party systems are not one-party regimes. But, in the “democracy era” they might be understood as a kind of their successors, or the closest cousin in the effort to monopolize power in favor of one of the competitors. Tendencies to establish dominant party systems or their successful implementation is not an exception in democratic transitions. Typical examples among many others are Montenegro, Turkey, Hungary, Serbia (twice), Mexico, etc.

Interestingly enough, dismantling of dominant party system is not necessarily a one-way ticket in democratic direction. Serbian case testifies on re-establishing of dominant party system after relatively short-lived democratic system. Mexico under MORENA today seems to be on the way toward new dominant-party cycle. Bulgarian GERB is constantly going back to power in one or another form. In Montenegro new dominant-party cycle is not looming on the horizon, but democratic process after dominant-party system is based on weak institutions with strong partitocracy pattern of politics.

This complex of state-building, democracy backsliding and dominant party systems will be a topic of our presentation.

**Keywords:** democratic transitions; democratic consolidation; democracy backsliding; hybrid regimes; dominant party systems

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## How Parties and Party Competition Shape the Process of Democratization: The Case of Croatia

Prof. Dr. Goran Čular

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb*

Prof. Dr. Dario Nikić Čakar

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb*

The role of political parties and party competition in different phases of the democratization process (liberalization, transition, consolidation) is a commonplace in democratization theory. However, far fewer studies analytically and precisely demonstrate, through concrete examples, how this role actually unfolds. This text is an attempt to clearly describe and document, using the case of Croatia, the impact of developments within political parties and between parties (party competition) that decisively influenced the processes of democratization in its various phases. The analysis follows the Croatian case from the very beginnings of democratic transition, through the construction of a hybrid regime in the 1990s, democratic consolidation after 2000, and the first signs of democratic deconsolidation over the past decade. It examines specific “episodes” in the development of institutions, elite consensus, the (in)stability of the political order, political polarization, as well as impacts

at the level of citizens' attitudes. In particular, it analyzes how internal relations within the League of Communists of Croatia (SKH) influenced the type of Croatian transition; how the institutionalization of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) as a charismatic movement party largely coincided with the institutionalization of a specific type of regime in the 1990s; how party competition in the late 1990s produced a national consensus on the type of electoral system; how party institutional choices and the moderation of ideological positions contributed to democratic consolidation in the 2000s; how the entry of new parties since 2015 affected changes in the type of party system and, consequently, the instability and deconsolidation of Croatian democracy; and how parties contributed to ideological and political polarization within the system. The analysis does not assume that political parties acted autonomously in all these processes. Rather, it seeks to determine analytically to what extent party action in particular "episodes" was autonomous, to what extent it consisted of adaptation to newly emerging social and political circumstances, or whether it was limited and determined by the structure of inherited political cleavages.

**Keywords:** democratization, political party, party competition, political institutions, Croatia

## Peripheralization of electoral support for political parties in the Czech environment

Prof. Dr. Michal Pink

*Faculty of Social Studies Department of Political Science,  
Masaryk University*

The presented paper will focus on the analysis of the electoral support of the main political parties in Czech political environment through the prism of the cleavage "center - periphery". Based on the distance of the monitored units from the center (Prague), or the secondary center (Brno), the mutual association/influence of distance and voter support of political parties will be analyzed. In addition to monitoring the support of the parties themselves, the election results will be divided into two groups, government and opposition political parties, and thus the spatial location of the source of legitimacy of the two main competing camps on the floor of the lower house of the national parliament will be clearly defined. The capital city (Prague) will be designated as the center and the second, largest city (Brno) as the secondary center. These are the two largest cities, where central authorities (government, parliament, ministries) and key cultural institutions are located. Brno, which is the center of judicial power, is home to the highest judicial authorities, the Public Defender of Rights „Ombudsman“ and the Constitutional Court. In addition, both cities have key educational centers, universities, where science and research are concentrated. The electoral results themselves, including voter turnout, will be presented at the level of 209 units and each will also have its own peripherality index, expressed as a kilometer distance from both centers. Based on the above, regression analysis will be used to determine the effect of distance from the center. (Prague and Brno) has on the electoral

support of political parties. This will better describe the region, the source of legitimacy of elected deputies of individual parties, and the motivation in the spatial distribution of the performance of national politics itself, especially the different distribution of material goods, will be described more.

**Keywords:** electoral support, center, periphery, political parties, distance

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## Born into Dispossession: Inherited Wealth and Extreme Voting in Reunified Germany

Dr. Evelyne Brie

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,  
Université de Montréal*

What explains the growing support for political extremism in post-communist societies despite extensive fiscal equalization? This paper addresses this question in Eastern Germany, where communist expropriation destroyed the basis for private capital accumulation across four decades. Financial insecurity is among the strongest predictors of far-right voting, yet equalization transfers after reunification did not rebuild the asset base through which material security is transmitted across generations. Despite two trillion euros in transfers and significant income convergence, the East-West far-right gap has grown and is widest among those born after reunification. We argue this pattern operates not through the mechanisms of socialization or income, but through the intergenerational transmission of accumulated capital that expropriation permanently disrupted. Using the German Socioeconomic Panel (1984–2020,  $n = 569,823$  person-years), we exploit the exogenous timing of inheritance receipt via an event-time

regression discontinuity design, complemented by dose-response and mediation analyses. Findings show that inheritance receipt produces a significant discontinuous reduction in financial worry and in support for the Alternative für Deutschland in western Germany, while it produces no detectable effect in the East. We demonstrate that this gap does not reflect differential responsiveness to wealth, but rather the far smaller amounts eastern Germans receive. Indeed, eastern inheritances typically fall below an effective threshold, and eastern recipients of West-comparable amounts respond similarly than western counterparts. Robustness tests rule out the dominant socialization account, showing that far-right gap rises monotonically among younger cohorts least exposed to communist institutions that are most subjected to inheritance disparities. Findings suggest that inherited wealth functions as a vehicle of democratic integration: where historical wealth deficits exclude citizens from this mechanism, political resentment deepens in ways income redistribution alone cannot repair.

**Keywords:** Wealth inequality, far-right voting, post-communism, redistribution, Germany

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## Gender Quotas versus Preferential Voting: Lessons from Kosovo's Open-List System

Luka Pavičević, MA

*Centre for Monitoring and Research*

Elections constitute the institutional foundation of representative democracy, yet the relationship between institutional design and inclusive representation remains contested. Within proportional representation (PR) systems, a

long-standing debate concerns the interaction between gender quotas and ballot structure. One school of thought argues that gender quotas are most effective under closed-list PR systems, where party elites control candidate ranking and can ensure women's placement in electable positions. In contrast, open-list systems with preferential voting are often viewed as less favorable for women, as voter choice may disrupt quota intentions. For many years, scholarship emphasized the mechanical advantages of closed lists, while comparatively neglecting the possibility that open lists might produce similar or even comparable outcomes under certain conditions.

More recent research, however, suggests that preferential voting does not necessarily undermine women's representation and may, in some contexts, generate autonomous electoral support for female candidates. Scholars also debate about the imposition of gender quota rules and their impact on the perceived legitimacy of elected candidates, regardless of whether the electoral system is closed or open list. Preferential voting has often been viewed as less favorable for women's inclusion, and yet the effects of a system that combines preferential voting with mandatory gender seat quotas, such as in Kosovo, on both women's representation and their electoral legitimacy remain underexplored.

This study examines these debates in Kosovo, a country that employs PR list system with preferential voting, where voters may select up to ten candidates within party list. Kosovo represents a unique case because, in addition to requiring parties to include 30% women on candidate lists with every third candidate of a different gender, the system also ensures a 30% minimum of women in parliament through post-election seat allocation. This corrective mechanism directly interacts with the distribution of preferential votes. Furthermore, this raises an important empirical question: to what extent

does women representation reflect autonomous voter support rather than quota-driven adjustments, and what implications does this have for the perceived legitimacy of elected women?

Using candidate-level data from parties that entered parliament across the last three election cycles, the study analyzes individual preferential vote counts and party-level seat allocation outcomes. The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, mean comparison tests evaluate whether female candidates receive significantly fewer preferential votes than male candidates within the same party lists. Second, party-level reconstruction of seat allocation identifies how many women entered parliament based purely on preferential ranking and how many required quota-based adjustment.

The study aims to provide empirical insight into whether women candidates in Kosovo gain parliamentary seats primarily through voter endorsement or through quota-driven allocation. By examining the interaction between preferential voting, placement mandates, and gender representation, the research may offer evidence on how preferential voting system influence both women's representation and their electoral legitimacy. This contributes to broader debates on electoral system design, inclusive representation, and democratic consolidation in hybrid regimes.

**Keywords:** electoral system, placement mandates, gender quotas, women's representation, legitimacy

# PANEL II

Contesting Democracy:  
From Nationalism to Hybrid Threats

## The nationalism-and-democracy symbiosis and its legacy: the role of independence nationalism

**Prof. Dr. Daniel Bochsler**

*Central European University (CEU) and the University of Belgrade*

**Dr. Andreas Juon**

*SNSF Ambizione Fellow Researcher, University of Fribourg.*

Nationalism, especially its ethnic type, is considered one of the main impediments for the consolidation of democracies. In the literatures on historical transitions (Snyder 2000) and on the recent wave of populism and autocratisation (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Panzano 2023), it is regarded as a key catalyst of autocratisation. The lessons learned about nationalism and democracy primarily come from countries with a long history of statehood.

What role does nationalism play in countries that have recently gained independence? This paper scrutinises the impact of nationalism on the formation and long-term stability of democracy in newly independent states, and in comparison to established countries. In brief, it argues that nationalism can provide democratic political institutions with legitimacy in newly independent countries. We hypothesise that the impact of nationalism changes over time. In newly independent countries, the presence of a nationalist independence movement promotes democratic institutions, and, in the long term, independence nationalism stabilises democratic rule. However, in countries that gained independence in a more distant past, nationalist governments turn from a facilitator of democratisation to a threat to democracy.

Empirical tests are based on a new global dataset on nationalist movements and governments in multi-ethnic countries and panel data analysis. Several V-Dem indicators are used to measure democracy.

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## Exploring the Democratic Potential of Digital Gen Zs in Southeast Europe

**Dr. Borjan Gjuzelov**

*Senior Researcher, Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' Skopje*

This paper examines the democratic potential of young adults working as freelancers, IT professionals, and digital entrepreneurs in Southeast Europe (SEE). Despite formal commitments to European integration, countries in the region continue to exhibit features of hybrid governance, including clientelism, weak rule of law, and institutional fragility (Gordy et al., 2025). Existing scholarship and survey data often portray young people as politically apathetic, distrustful of institutions, and inclined toward emigration (FES, 2024; Weiss, 2021). This paper, however, investigates whether their growing financial independence translates into new democratic potential. It explores the tension between disengagement from formal politics and the expanding opportunities arising from Gen Z's integration into the global digital economy.

The study addresses two central questions: How does participation in the global digital economy shape the lived experiences and political imaginaries of Gen Z in Southeast Europe? What forms of democratic agency or disengagement emerge from these imaginaries in contexts characterized by institutional weakness and contested political legitimacy?

Conceptually, the paper draws on the notion of social and political imaginaries (Taylor, 2004; Adams et al., 2012) to analyse how young people envision authority, collective action, and democratic futures under hybrid regimes. Methodologically, it combines analysis of quantitative secondary data with qualitative fieldwork. The research is based on 20–30 in-depth interviews with young digital workers and participatory workshops conducted in Croatia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, enabling comparison between EU and non-EU contexts. Through narrative and interpretative analysis, the study examines how economic autonomy derived from digital labour intersects with attitudes toward meritocracy, governance performance, and political agency.

By bridging scholarship on youth political culture, digital democracy, and post-communist transformation, the paper challenges deficit narratives about Balkan youth and offers an empirically grounded account of emerging democratic agency, contributing to debates on democratic sustainability and institutional resilience in Southeast Europe.

**Keywords:** democratization; hybrid regimes; Generation Z; digital economy

## **Contested Places of Memory in Montenegro: “The Battle over Mount Lovćen”**

**Prof. Dr. Ivan Vuković**

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro*

**Dr. Milivoj Bešlin**

*Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory  
at the University of Belgrade*

**Prof. Dr. Nemanja Batričević**

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro*

Scholarship of nationalism and culture has long recognized symbolic importance of material forms in the process of nation-building. However, much less attention has been given to the role of monuments in the context of competing nationalisms that often reject nationally bounded narratives of the past. Collapse of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia has left millions of people on the “wrong” side of the border to contend with mutually antagonistic (nationalizing/homeland) nationalisms. Here, the importance of monuments in collective memory is enhanced by a need to “negotiate” past not within a single ethno-national group, but between multiple groups lacking shared concept of the past and often not recognizing each other as historically legitimate. This article utilizes the case of Mount Lovćen, resting place of the ruler-poet Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, to examine relationship between monument’s physical transformation and competing nation-building agendas in Montenegro. As the critical place of collective memory, the site endured multiple material

transformations in line with political and ideological programs of the three distinct nations/states – Montenegrin, Serbian, and Yugoslav. Article demonstrates current discursive threats to change its appearance once again, can be interpreted as efforts to de-secularize national identity and blur the group boundaries between ethnic Montenegrins and Serbs.

**Keywords:** nation-building, collective memory, monuments, Montenegro, Yugoslavia

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## Democracy Shield and Hybrid Threats in Montenegro

Dr. Đorđe Krivokapić LL.M.

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This presentation examines the growing exposure of Montenegro to hybrid threats and foreign influence in the context of democratic resilience, electoral integrity, and the country's accelerated European Union accession process. Positioned as the most advanced EU candidate state in the Western Balkans and a NATO member since 2017, Montenegro represents a strategically significant but institutionally vulnerable political environment in which democratic processes increasingly intersect with geopolitical competition. The analysis is situated within the emerging European Democracy Shield framework and explores how hybrid threats operate through the interaction of information manipulation, cyber operations, proxy political and religious structures, media influence, and institutional fragility.

The presentation argues that democratic institutions, electoral processes, and the information space in Montenegro should be understood as critical national assets exposed to coordinated external pressure, particularly during politically

sensitive periods such as elections and key EU integration milestones. Special attention is devoted to the 2027 parliamentary elections, widely perceived as the final major electoral cycle before Montenegro's targeted EU accession in 2028. Through a comparative analysis of recent developments in Romania, Moldova, Georgia, and Serbia, the presentation demonstrates how hybrid operations increasingly rely on digital platforms, coordinated online manipulation, opaque financial flows, and cross-border media ecosystems capable of undermining institutional trust without direct physical intervention.

Methodologically, the research combines comparative case-study analysis, institutional mapping, and policy-oriented risk assessment. The presentation identifies the principal external actors shaping malign influence operations in Montenegro, while also analysing the role of domestic vulnerabilities, including political polarisation, institutional paralysis, weak digital governance, and the influence of proxy actors such as politically aligned media and religious networks. Particular emphasis is placed on the convergence between cyber insecurity, disinformation, and democratic erosion.

The presentation will conclude by proposing a set of institutional and regulatory reforms aligned with the European Democracy Shield approach, including enhanced electoral safeguards, stronger cooperation with online platforms, cyber resilience mechanisms, transparency in media and telecommunications markets, and the establishment of a national hybrid-threats coordination framework. It argues that Montenegro represents a relevant case study for understanding how small and highly polarised states should strengthen democratic resilience under conditions of sustained geopolitical and hybrid pressure.

**Keywords:** Hybrid Threats, Democratic Resilience, Foreign Influence, Electoral Integrity, Montenegro EU Accession

# PANEL III

Rethinking State-Building  
in an Era of Global Uncertainty

## State and nation building: Post-Yugoslav Perspective

Prof. Dr. Milan Podunavac

*University of Donja Gorica*

State and nation are the Siamase twins which moulded modern politics. Together they constitute the contemporary political communities and order. Borne in Europe (nation-state is European innovation) they proliferating all over the world. State is basic form of political integration; nation, core of collective identity. All human beings with political aspiration want to build state and nation.

The paper I announce consists of three steps. In the first general plan of state and nation building will be analysed and basic formative principle of such modernizing process (citizenship, nationality, sovereignty) indicated. Second step will point basic characteristic of political dynamic of the post-Yugoslav societies. The third one introduces in the debate concept of „negative politics“ and „negative political regimes“ which override post-Yugoslav region and produce huge democratic deficit.

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## Post-totalitarianism in a Globalized World

Prof. Dr. Sonja Tomović-Šundić

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro*

This paper analyzes how globalization influences the consolidation of democracy in post-totalitarian societies, while also creating space for new forms of control, populism, and hybrid regimes. Special attention is devoted to the re-

relationship between totalitarianism and contemporary challenges related to information technologies, political polarization, and economic dependencies, as well as to the tensions between democratization and authoritarian tendencies, as discussed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and David Held. The paper particularly examines the phenomena upon which a sophisticated post-totalitarian ideology is constructed, one based on the transformation of classical values, fluid identity, and digital technologies.

**Keywords:** post-totalitarianism, globalization, hybrid regimes, surveillance, authoritarianism, digital control

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## Is Diplomacy Still a Significant Ally in the Reconfigured Global Order?

**Dr. Miljana Đurčević Cucić**

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University of Belgrade*

Is diplomacy still a significant ally in the reconfigured global order? This paper commences with this principal research question. Over the past century, significant transformations have occurred in the actors and methodologies employed in diplomacy as a means of altering post-authoritarian and post-communist political, social, and cultural landscapes. While rulers and leaders have changed, has the methodology of governance and leadership evolved accordingly? The unavoidable transformations impacting societies and states in their quest for survival and democracy have similarly changed the methods of their diplomatic endeavors. Moreover, these alterations have affected individuals acknowledged as diplomatic agents, who are deemed significant in this capacity. The study argues that diplomacy is not a universal-

ly defined notion used uniformly by all actors; rather, it is a highly changeable phenomenon shaped by necessity and crisis. Thus, delineating and examining the distinctions between diplomacy and global governance is a crucial foundation for comprehending the processes of democratization and state-building in the 21st century, particularly in the Western Balkans. Recognizing the European Union as both a significant diplomatic actor and a crucial participant in global governance will elucidate its contributions to positive changes in the region and evaluate its potential effect on the future. European integration exemplifies a unique diplomatic strategy for the region, employing the 3D (diplomacy, defense, and development) framework. This approach will clarify the uncertainty surrounding diplomacy and global governance, particularly on the important actors in each category and the fundamental approaches they employ in their practices. By comprehending these strategies, one acquires insight into the significant outcomes that diplomatic practice has achieved in dismantling authoritarian structures that compromised the social and political potential of the Western Balkan countries lately. Finally, the paper examines whether the Western Balkans' states still "receive so much benefit" from diplomacy, as Cardinal Richelieu - the founder of the first-ever professional diplomatic service - claimed centuries ago.

**Keywords:** diplomacy, global governance, European Union, diplomatic practice, Western Balkans.

# Post-Soviet Georgia in Transition: Navigating Between Regional Integration Models and National Interests in Contemporary International Relations

Dr. Giorgi Pareshishvili

*Associate Professor, Caucasus International University*

This paper examines Georgia's critical positioning between a European future or a return into Russia's orbit, analyzing how this geopolitical dilemma has placed the country on the new international agenda. The central research question asks: How does Georgia navigate between competing regional integration models—European and Eurasian—while pursuing national interests in an era of renewed great power competition? The study argues that Georgia's transitional position reflects the tension between its constitutional commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and the persistent structural pressures drawing it back toward Russia's sphere of influence, making it a pivotal case study in contemporary international relations.

The research demonstrates that Georgia's trajectory is determined by three critical factors: first, domestic political developments that either advance or undermine European integration prospects; second, the European Union's evolving enlargement policy and its conditionality mechanisms in the South Caucasus; and third, Russia's multifaceted strategy to maintain influence through economic leverage, security pressures, and soft power instruments. The paper examines how these competing forces create a contested space where Georgia's future orientation remains uncertain, positioning the country as a focal point in broader debates about post-Soviet transitions and the limits of European transformative power.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative analysis combining examination of official foreign policy documents, EU-Georgia relations frameworks, and bilateral agreements with analysis of recent political developments and their implications for Georgia's strategic orientation. The research utilizes comparative analysis with other Eastern Partnership countries, particularly Ukraine and Moldova, to contextualize Georgia's unique challenges. Additionally, the study incorporates discourse analysis of domestic political debates to understand how competing visions of Georgia's future are articulated and contested.

The findings reveal that Georgia occupies a precarious position on the new international agenda, where its symbolic importance as a democracy between Europe and Russia confronts the reality of geopolitical pressures and domestic political transformation. The paper concludes that Georgia's case offers critical insights into the viability of European integration in contested post-Soviet spaces.

**Keywords:** Georgia, European integration, Russian influence, regional integration models, South Caucasus, post-Soviet transitions;

# PANEL IV

Formative Rifts and Democratic  
Backsliding in Montenegro

## Backsliding Through Formative Rifts: Two Decades of Montenegro's Democratic Journey

Prof. Dr. Olivera Komar

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro*

This paper examines two decades of Montenegro's democratic development following the restoration of independence in 2006, asking why democratic consolidation has failed despite seemingly favorable structural conditions. As a small state with strong Western linkages, peaceful interethnic coexistence, early international recognition and sustained economic growth, Montenegro appeared to be well positioned to build stable and accountable democratic institutions. Yet, after years of dominant-party rule and a historic alternation of power in 2020, the country has experienced continued democratic backsliding and is now classified as a hybrid regime.

Moving beyond conventional explanations such as corruption, institutional weakness and the legacy of one-party dominance, the paper advances an alternative argument centered on the activation of formative rifts - deeply embedded and historically rooted identity divisions originating in the state-building process. Unlike static notions of political cleavages or the traditional "state-ness problem," formative rifts emphasize the dynamic interaction between structural legacies and elite agency. In Montenegro, these rifts (ideological, symbolic, religious and geopolitical) have been repeatedly mobilized, undermining institutional legitimacy and stimulating zero-sum politics.

The Montenegrin case suggests a distinct trajectory of democratic backsliding. Rather than culminating in authoritarian consolidation through executive ag-

grandizement, backsliding in contexts marked by activated formative rifts may lead to institutional fragmentation, weakened state authority and challenges to the very coherence of the state. By situating Montenegro within broader debates on democratic resilience, polarization, and state formation, the paper contributes to comparative scholarship on regime trajectories in unconsolidated democracies during the current era of global democratic recession.

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## **Elites, Formative Rifts, and Democratic Backsliding in Montenegro**

**Prof. Dr. Zlatko Vujović**

*Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro*

This paper examines how political and clerical elites in Montenegro have strategically activated historically embedded societal divisions—formative rifts—to advance partisan interests and shape the trajectory of democratic development since independence in 2006. It asks: to what extent has elite-driven politicization of identity cleavages contributed to democratic backsliding in the context of post-authoritarian state-building?

Building on elite theory, the paper conceptualizes Montenegro's democratic stagnation as a supply-side phenomenon rooted in elite fragmentation rather than mass-level democratic disillusionment. In unconsolidated polities, the absence of normative consensus among elites on democratic rules of the game often incentivizes the strategic mobilization of identity-based conflicts. In Montenegro, unresolved tensions related to national identity, religion, language, and geopolitical orientation have repeatedly been instrumentalized by competing elite networks to legitimize political authority and weaken institutional accountability.

The analysis identifies four mechanisms linking elite competition to democratic fragility. First, post-independence institutional development has often served elite consolidation rather than state capacity-building. Second, rival elite recruitment pathways—party-based patronage networks and church-affiliated mobilizational structures—have generated parallel sources of political legitimacy. Third, agenda-setting strategies centred on emotionally resonant identity issues have redirected political competition away from governance performance toward symbolic polarization. Finally, patterns of ethnic outbidding and unstable cross-ethnic coalitions have undermined the emergence of durable democratic cooperation.

Empirically, the paper draws on three waves of the Comparative Candidate Survey conducted in Montenegro (2012, 2016, 2023), complemented by public opinion data to assess elite attitudes toward identity, governance, and democratic norms. This triangulated approach allows for a systematic evaluation of elite-level polarization during both the long-term dominance of the Democratic Party of Socialists and the fragmented post-2020 transition period.

The findings suggest that Montenegro's democratic backsliding is closely linked to elite strategies that prioritize identity-based legitimation over institutional consolidation, offering broader insights into the challenges of democratization in divided post-communist states.

**Keywords:** democratic backsliding; elite fragmentation; state-building; political polarization; identity cleavages

## Varieties of Polarization and Democratization: Trajectory of Montenegrin political development since 2006

**Dr. Nemanja Stankov**

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University of Montenegro*

This chapter examines the evolution of polarization and democratization in Montenegro through the lens of the formative rifts framework, focusing on how social and political processes since independence have produced dynamics of pernicious polarization. The central premise is that the process of nation and state building following the 2006 referendum created the necessary conditions for the emergence of formative rifts. In other words, political plurality and party competition gradually came to be organized along a single, deeply divisive line (McCoy and Somer, 2019). Within this process, several dimensions of polarization including ethnic, ideological, and ultimately affective, merged together reinforcing its pernicious character. These developments were further amplified by discursive frames that increasingly depicted politics as an “us vs. them” struggle (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018), and by mobilization strategies grounded in collective grievances (McCoy and Somer, 2019). While it is not novel to argue that societies gripped by polarization experience democratic erosion, some degree of polarization can, in certain contexts, have positive democratic effects. For example, by structuring competition around identifiable social differences and encouraging inclusive minority representation (Somer and McCoy, 2018). This chapter argues that this latter scenario broadly characterized Montenegro’s initial post-independence years. How-

ever, pernicious polarization more commonly unfolds in ways that escape opposition constraints, gathering a self-sufficient momentum, and ultimately lead to democratic erosion (Somer and McCoy, 2018) or political stalemate rather than democratization. Once opposition parties succeed in capturing power, McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) suggest, among others, an alternative scenario in which democratic backsliding under new elites occurs, as they gradually consolidate authority and exclude previously dominant groups or dissenters. This chapter posits that this latter trajectory aptly describes Montenegro after the alternation of power in the 2020 election.

The formative rifts literature emphasizes that whichever trajectory unfolds, democratization or erosion, polarization remains an elite-driven process (Stavrakis, 2018), though its effects manifest at the individual level as well. Holding the assumptions on the nature of the process in Montenegro constant, this chapter situates the question of pernicious polarization and democratization at the level of individual attitudes. Rather than mapping party competition or elite discourse over time, the analysis tests whether the presumed wave of democratization following independence, and the subsequent wave of erosion intensified after 2020, are reflected in polarization at the individual level and citizens' orientations toward democracy.

Empirically, the chapter proceeds in three steps. It first examines the ethnic dimension of polarization by tracing changes in the distribution of dual versus consolidated ethnic identities over time. For the purposes of this exploration consolidated identities will be viewed as those where individuals achieve full convergence on all identity layers (ethnic, religious, language) to form a Montenegrin or a Serbian identity. It then turns to the ideological and affective dimensions of polarization, before finally assessing attitudinal backsliding in terms of support for and perceptions of democracy. Here the chapter will

explore the link between the ethnic identity polarization, and its association with the ideological perception of close and distant parties, as well as its affective dimension in the like vs. dislike evaluations of parties and party leaders across ethnic and party lines. The analysis draws on data from three waves of the Montenegrin National Election Study (MNES)—conducted in 2012, 2016, and 2023—as part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).

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## **Formative Rifts, State Weakness, and Democratic Backsliding in Montenegro: The Interplay of Internal Structural Vulnerabilities and Foreign Influence**

**Dr. Marko Savić**

*Montenegrin Political Science Association, MoPSA*

Two decades after the restoration of independence, Montenegro is yet to agree on what the state represents and to whom it belongs. Unresolved cleavages around statehood, national identity, religious affiliation, and geopolitical orientation are not placed on the margins, but at the heart of the political battlefield. At the same time, external actors, primarily Russia and Serbia, deploy instruments of soft power such as media influence, cultural practices, and religious networks, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, to challenge the legitimacy of the secular state, statehood, and pro-Western orientation.

This paper relies on a combined theoretical framework to explain how formative rifts and external influences interact to undermine Montenegro's democratic trajectory. First, it relies on Somer and McCoy's (2019) concept of formative rifts, which they defined as structural and historically rooted divisions that limit political competition to the struggle for legitimacy and con-

trol over collective memory. Second, building on Linz and Stepan (1996) and Mann (1984), democracy is seen here as a system that cannot survive without a state capable of being an impartial mediator in social conflicts. When the state lacks autonomous and professional institutions, political contests lose their democratic character and are reduced to rivalry between identity camps. Third, Nye's (2004) concept of soft power and the framework of linkage and leverage offered by Levitsky and Way (2010) explain how external actors choose not to coerce, but to exploit existing identity and institutional weaknesses, through cultural, religious, and informational channels.

The paper addresses the following research question: How do external influences interact with formative rifts and state capacity to contribute to the decline of democracy in Montenegro?

The paper applies a qualitative case study. The analytical strategy includes: discourse analysis of media narratives and political speeches to identify how existing formative rifts are mobilized and reframed through narratives, institutional analysis using secondary indicators from the Freedom House, V-Dem, WGI to understand how institutional weakness correlates declining state cohesion, and network analysis of foreign influence channels to trace how external actors utilize soft power mechanisms and whether they reinforce existing formative rifts or create new divisions.

This paper seeks to shift the focus from interpretations that see democratic decline in Montenegro solely as a consequence of internal illiberalism, towards a perspective that emphasizes the interplay of internal structural vulnerabilities and external strategies. This challenges the linear model of democratic decline that assumes a movement towards authoritarian consolidation. Instead, Montenegro emerges as an example of self-sustaining erosion in which neither democracy nor authoritarianism is consolidated.

## Social Policy, Poverty Reduction and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Independence Montenegro (2006–2026)

Dr. Uglješa Janković

*Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Science,  
University of Montenegro*

This paper examines the relationship between poverty reduction policies and democratic consolidation in Montenegro during the first twenty years of independence (2006–2026). In post-socialist settings, social policy represents a key arena of state-building, as governments seek to reduce inequality, manage social risks, and reinforce political legitimacy. The central hypothesis guiding this paper is that the effectiveness and adequacy of anti-poverty measures are positively associated with democratic consolidation, as they strengthen citizens' perceptions of state responsiveness and institutional credibility.

Drawing on official statistical indicators (MONSTAT, EU-SILC, World Bank), the analysis traces longitudinal trends in at-risk-of-poverty rates, child poverty, income inequality (Gini coefficient), social expenditure, and the number of beneficiaries of means-tested minimum income schemes. The data show that while poverty rates declined significantly in the early post-independence period (2006–2010), subsequent years were marked by stagnation and structural vulnerability, particularly among children, unemployed persons, and low-educated households. Simulation estimates indicate that without social transfers poverty rates would more than double, confirming the stabilizing function of redistribution mechanisms.

However, the limited adequacy of minimum income benefits, narrow coverage, and weak activation policies suggest that Montenegrin social policy has operated largely as a residual, compensatory framework rather than a transformative instrument of social investment. While anti-poverty measures have mitigated extreme deprivation and contributed to short-term social stabilization, their constrained redistributive capacity limits their broader impact on structural inequality and democratic resilience.

The paper argues that in Montenegro's post-independence trajectory, social policy has functioned as a buffer against socio-economic instability, but its limited transformative scope raises important questions about the depth of democratic consolidation and the long-term strengthening of state capacity.

**Keywords:** social policy, democratic consolidation, poverty reduction, state capacity, redistribution, Montenegro

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## Gospel 2.0 – How to Render State Sovereignty Meaningless with the Help of the Cross

Dr. Nikola Radunović

*Independent researcher*

Following the fall of communism, the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro have become increasingly visible. However, what has largely characterized the SOC's engagement, particularly in the period preceding and following the 2020 parliamentary elections, is its overt involvement in Montenegro's political life, rendering the SOC an unavoidable actor in virtually every political debate today. Senior representatives of the SOC publicly

comment on political developments on a daily basis, offer guidance to political actors, influence appointments and nominations within various state institutions, and, as evidenced in the public sphere, church representatives themselves have been considered candidates for positions in certain state bodies.

By pointing to the numerous activities of the SOC over the past two and a half decades, as well as the official responses and attitudes of relevant state authorities toward the Church's actions across different segments of Montenegrin society, this paper aims - through a critical discourse analysis - to demonstrate how the SOC has positioned itself as a "state within a state," while Montenegrin institutions have simultaneously assumed a subordinate role, thereby enabling the Church to acquire such influence. De facto, Montenegro has yet to find a way (and it remains an open question whether it is willing to do so) to assert the strength of its institutions in cases where the most prominent representatives of the SOC, without respect for Montenegrin laws and in contravention of them, pursue their own agenda - an agenda that many claim is directed toward the erosion of Montenegro's sovereignty as an independent state.

**Keywords:** democracy, Serbian Orthodox Church, Montenegro, sovereignty, EU integration

# PANEL V

Populism, Polarization, and Power

## From Protest to Power: Populist Radical Right Governance at the Local Level in Czechia

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Šárka Pittnerová

*PhD. candidate, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University*

This paper examines the local-level governance of the populist radical right in the Czech Republic, focusing on the Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) and its participation in municipal executive bodies following the 2022 local elections. The topic has gained renewed relevance in light of the recent inclusion of SPD in a national governing coalition, marking the first time since the democratic transition of 1989 that a populist radical right party has become part of the executive at the national level. This development raises important questions about how SPD may behave in government and whether its prior experience with executive power at lower tiers of governance can provide meaningful indications of its future conduct.

While SPD long remained excluded from national coalition politics, it has already participated in governing arrangements at the municipal level, particularly in socially and economically disadvantaged municipalities. These local cases therefore offer a valuable empirical opportunity to examine how a populist radical right party operates once it moves from opposition rhetoric to the practical responsibilities of governance. The paper investigates whether SPD representatives adopt pragmatic and cooperative governing strategies when holding executive office, or whether they continue to act primarily as pro-

test-oriented actors even while exercising political power.

Methodologically, the study relies on a comparative case study of selected municipalities in which SPD gained representation in municipal councils and executive boards. The analysis combines coalition agreements, council meeting records, voting behaviour, and municipal budgetary decisions with a qualitative assessment of policy priorities advanced by SPD representatives.

By examining the everyday practices of local governance, the paper contributes to broader debates on the institutionalisation and behavioural adaptation of populist radical right parties. At the same time, it critically reflects on the limits of drawing straightforward conclusions from local experiences to national-level politics, acknowledging that participation in executive power may produce both moderation and continued confrontational strategies depending on political context.

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## **Populism in a post-ideological context: The transformation of political legitimacy in the Western Balkans and Central Europe**

**Filip Denda**

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University of Donja Gorica*

In the immediate aftermath of communism, political legitimacy in post-communist Europe was grounded in strong ideological claims. Democratisation, market reform and European integration provided a coherent normative framework through which governing elites justified their authority. Three

decades later, this transition-based legitimacy has largely lost its mobilising force across Central and South-Eastern Europe. In its place, new forms of political legitimation have emerged, increasingly centred on populist appeals rather than structured ideological competition.

Rather than relying on the notion of “stabilocracy”, this paper situates these systems within what Ivan Krastev has described as “grey-zone regimes”, actually polities in which democratic procedures formally endure while their substantive meaning is gradually hollowed out. In such contexts, electoral victory is frequently interpreted as plebiscitary authorisation for unconstrained rule, and institutions operate less as autonomous checks on power than as instruments shaped by governing elites.

The paper asks: how has political legitimacy in post-communist Europe shifted from ideology-driven transition narratives to post-ideological populist claims, and what does this transformation imply for democratic consolidation? Drawing on Cas Mudde’s conceptualisation of populism as a thin-centred ideology, it argues that populism functions as a flexible framework of legitimation in settings where ideological structuration is weak. In the absence of clear programmatic divides, elites increasingly justify their rule through three interconnected strategies: performance-based claims emphasising economic growth and stability; personalised leadership built around direct identification between leader and citizens; and moralised discourses framing politics as a struggle between a virtuous people and corrupt elites.

Through comparative qualitative analysis, the study traces the gradual shift from reformist and integration-based legitimacy towards personalised, moralised and performance-oriented claims to authority. Rather than treating populism solely as a by-product of democratic backsliding, the paper concep-

tualises it as a structural response to the erosion of ideology-based legitimacy in post-communist state-building. By foregrounding legitimacy transformation as a central dimension of regime evolution, the study contributes to debates on democratisation, institutional resilience and regime endurance in post-communist Europe.

**Keywords:** populism, legitimization, post-ideological politics, post-Communist Europe, democratic consolidation

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## The Rise of Eastern European Geopolitical Polarization

Ivan Pokatilov

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The phenomenon of political polarization has attracted substantial attention of many scholars and pundits in recent years. Nowadays it is a commonplace to say that political polarization is increasing in Western and some non-Western (Brazil, Turkey, Venezuela, etc.) countries. However, another phenomenon of comparable importance, geopolitical polarization, remains almost unexplored by political scientists and international relations scholars. This paper aims to shed light on geopolitical polarization on the example of Eastern Europe, which will shape the future of the European Union, Europe and possibly even the world order.

This paper defines geopolitical polarization as a divergence of political attitudes of some regions or groups of countries towards political extremes, which eventually increases a likelihood of a conflict between these and other

opposing regions or groups of countries. In particular, there emerged 2 such clusters in Eastern Europe: Poland and the Baltic states on the one hand and Hungary, Slovakia and to a lesser extent Czechia on the other hand. The former group holds a favorable opinion towards Ukraine, while considers Russia and by extension China as threats. On the contrary, the latter group has a positive attitude towards Russia and China, while a negative one towards Ukraine. Actions, which are undertaken by the members of various groups, can range from strictly symbolic ones like the attendance of the Moscow Victory Day Parade in 2025 by Robert Fico (who was the only EU leader to do so) to economic (e.g., number of sanctions), political (de facto severed relations with Russia by the former group), societal (refusal of visas) and cultural (for example, closure of the Russian House by the Czech government in 2023) ones. The same framework can be applied towards the analysis of other external parties, be it Ukraine, China or the USA, in lines with every group's preference.

The paper also discusses that although government changes can produce short-term changes, in the long term these diverging trajectories of respective groups remain rigid just like the Biden Administration was unable to change the overall US trajectory. The paper concludes with speculations about the future of geopolitical polarization in Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** Geopolitical polarization, Eastern Europe, Russia, political polarization

## Why Contested Identities Resist Absorption: Hegemonic Nationalism, Institutional Pressure, and the Limits of Identity Politics

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Why do some contested national identities differentiate from the larger hegemonic identity that denies their existence, rather than being absorbed by it? This paper develops a theoretical framework to explain variation in outcomes among identities that share a distinctive feature: they are claimed, denied, or subordinated by a hegemonic nationalism that has built a stronger “primordial case” for its own historical and cultural precedence — Montenegrin vis-à-vis Serbian, Ukrainian and Belarusian vis-à-vis Russian, Macedonian vis-à-vis Bulgarian, Moldovan vis-à-vis Romanian, Austrian vis-à-vis German. In each case, the contested identity is not simply competing with a larger one — it is being told it does not really exist as a separate ethnic and national identity.

I argue that outcomes depend primarily on the level and mode of pressure applied by the hegemonic sponsor state and its affiliated institutions, particularly but not only religious organizations. The relationship between pressure and absorption is nonlinear, producing three distinct scenarios. When sponsor-state infrastructure is absent or externally contained, differentiation occurs organically and without major conflict — the contested identity quietly fills the institutional vacuum, as Austria after 1945 and Macedonia under Yugoslav rule both demonstrate. When the sponsor state operates through institutional channels — parishes, media, education — without visible po-

litical assertion, an equilibrium phase emerges in which absorption appears to progress: the contested identity loses numerical ground while overt political conflict remains low. Montenegro between 1990 and 2019 and eastern Ukraine before 2014 represent this phase most clearly, while Belarus illustrates how the equilibrium can persist when the sponsor state infrastructure operates with sustained consistency and without major political spikes. When the sponsor state overshoots — asserting the nationalist project visibly and politically — the equilibrium breaks and differentiation accelerates through identity shock, producing the opposite of the intended outcome. Montenegro after 2020, Ukraine after 2014, and Macedonia under sustained Bulgarian pressure all illustrate this dynamic.

The paper tracks variation both across cases and within cases over time, treating discrete shock events as analytical junctures that allow before-and-after comparison of identity outcomes. Drawing on six cases — Montenegro, Ukraine, Belarus, Macedonia, Moldova, and Austria — and combining process tracing with census and survey data, the paper offers both a theoretical model and a measurement strategy for studying hegemonizing nationalism comparatively. The central finding is that both absence of pressure and excess of pressure produce differentiation — suggesting that the window for successful absorption is narrow, temporary, and structurally undermined by the very political forces that motivate the hegemonizing project.

# Geopolitical Orientation as a Line of Political Cleavage: Explaining Support for the Protests in Serbia (2024–2025)

Sofija Ljubišić

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The aim of this paper is to explain the relationship between attitudes toward student and civic protests in Serbia and citizens' geopolitical orientation. In this study, geopolitical orientation is not understood merely as a narrow foreign policy preference, but rather as a symbolic framework through which individuals interpret and assess the legitimacy of political actors and political systems.

The empirical analysis, conducted within a research project of the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, is based on survey data and the application of binary logistic regression ( $N = 3,436$ ), with support for the protests used as the dependent variable. The results show that classical sociodemographic characteristics have limited explanatory power (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.036$ ), whereas the inclusion of geopolitical orientation variables significantly increases the explained variance of the model (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.422$ ). Pro-European and regional orientations significantly increase the likelihood of supporting the protests, while orientation toward Russia and China substantially increases the likelihood of rejecting them. The effects of age and employment status are statistically significant but substantively weak, whereas gender, education, and region of residence are not significant predictors. The findings indicate that political behavior is not primarily determined by classical sociodemographic characteristics, but rather by geopolitical orientations. In the context of contemporary political polarization in Serbia, geopolitical preferences function as

indicators of belonging to one of two categories: (1) a participatory-democratic orientation, symbolically associated with European integration and regional cooperation, and (2) a sovereigntist orientation that glorifies stabilocracy and is politically associated with Russia and China.

The paper contributes to the understanding of the transformation of political cleavages and demonstrates that geopolitical orientation in Serbia represents an important dimension of contemporary political polarization.

**Keywords:** protests, political behavior, geopolitical orientation, binary logistic regression

# PANEL VI

Protest, Repression,  
and Political Mobilization

# Deliberation After Violence: Citizens' Assemblies and Deliberative Quality in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina

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This paper examines the societal impact of citizens' assemblies as a democratic innovation in post-conflict and unconsolidated democracies. While deliberative theory emphasizes enhance knowledge, mutual understanding, and collective identity, little is known about the effects of such innovations where trust is low, institutions are weak, and historical experience of violence remains salient. The paper analyzes two citizens' assemblies held in 2024 in the cities of Mostar and Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina, using pre- and post-assembly surveys (n=119) and interviews (n=131), and qualitative transcript analysis. It assesses how deliberation affects knowledge, support for collective action, willingness to compromise, perceptions of societal division, and views of post-conflict governance. The findings show limited gains in factual knowledge but substantial shifts in political attitudes. Most importantly an increased optimism about compromise, stronger support for collective action, and a reduced focus on wartime legacies in favor of present governance challenges. Past exposure to violence does not significantly affect deliberative quality. Instead, low democratic trust emerges as the main constraint, while societal diversity plays an ambivalent role. The paper concludes that citizens' assemblies can generate meaningful democratic learning at the individual level after conflict, even when systemic impact remains institutionally constrained.

**Keywords:** Deliberative Democracy, Ethnic Conflict, Democratic Innovations, Trust, Citizens' Assemblies

## Zbor as an alternative form of political organizing in Serbia's competitive authoritarian context

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Since the 2017 presidential elections, Serbia has experienced gradual democratic backsliding under the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Electoral conditions have deteriorated through clientelism, vote-buying, biased administration, and misuse of state resources. Beyond institutional dominance, the SNS has created an uneven playing field in media and civil society. This prompted democratization challenges to emerge through non-institutional and contentious politics, particularly social movements (Bunce and Wolchik 2013).

Contemporary competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2020) have developed tactics of attrition that deflect challenges which brought down earlier authoritarian governments, including Milošević's (Spasojevic and Loncar 2023). Even sustained protests in Serbia, such as the Serbia Against Violence movement (2023) and the ongoing student movement (2025-), have ultimately sought formalized extensions toward institutional politics.

The November 2024 Novi Sad railway canopy collapse, killing 16 people, triggered an unprecedented student movement demanding transparent investigation and accountability. Students organized through plenums emphasizing direct democracy and leaderless structure, contrasting with traditional Serbi-

an political organizing. Following six months of university blockades and the largest protest in Serbian history, the government consolidated power after a March 2025 protest gathering 350,000 in Belgrade. Students recognized the need to sustain pressure and invest support in other political forms.

Distrusting existing political actors, students proposed zbor (community gatherings) as a mode of citizen engagement. Numerous zbor emerged throughout Serbia, maintaining ties with the student movement while addressing neighborhood issues. These gatherings combine digital tools with in-person meetings in public spaces, building on trust in the student movement despite lacking initial infrastructure.

This paper investigates zbor as a novel form of political organizing that functions both as autonomous local engagement and as an extension of the student movement. We examine how zbor mobilize community participation to discuss local issues and organize actions. Based on interviews with zbor members and “leaders”, we analyze their novelty and contribution to broader debates on changing political participation and the crisis of established parties in competitive authoritarian contexts.

**Keywords:** democratic backsliding, competitive authoritarianism, social movements, political participation, Serbia

## Strategic repression in hybrid regimes: State responses to student protests in Serbia

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Protests pose a significant threat to regime legitimacy in nondemocratic contexts. Regimes in between democracy and autocracy are particularly cautious in their responses to challenges from below, as they seek to maintain at least the appearance of democratic credibility. Existing research shows that Serbia's competitive-authoritarian regime has, until recently, largely ignored protests, responding primarily by framing protest organizers as enemies of the state. However, during the most recent 2024/25 wave of student-led protests, the regime deployed a broader repertoire of strategies aimed at delegitimizing and suppressing dissent, including the use of police violence—a tactic less commonly associated with new competitive-authoritarian settings. This paper examines the Serbian case to identify and classify these evolving strategies and understand under what conditions hybrid regimes escalate to the use of coercive force. It also investigates how such regimes seek to justify repressive measures while continuing to cultivate a favourable self-image. Methodologically, the study combines process tracing with discourse analysis of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's press conferences during the 2024–2025 protest cycle. Process tracing illuminates the contextual factors shaping regime responses, while discourse analysis helps to understand the discursive legitimization of these actions.

**Keywords:** competitive authoritarian regimes, protests, autocratization, contentious politics; regime response, Serbia

## Public Preferences for Democracy Aid in Post-Conflict States

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Democracy aid is increasingly given to countries with a history of war and political violence, however with limited success. Backsliding. In 2023 for example, 40 percent of European donors' democracy aid was channeled to post-conflict societies, including many in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. To increase the aid's efficacy in supporting democratization, democracy assistance must align with local needs and preferences, yet we lack knowledge about which types of foreign and democracy aid citizens in these settings prefer. To what extent do they prefer democracy assistance over other forms of support, such as security or humanitarian aid? If democracy aid is provided, which targets, delivery channels, and donors enjoy the highest public legitimacy? And how does variation in post-conflict trajectories and individual conflict exposure shape these attitudes?

We argue that recipient publics have clear preferences over the disbursement and design of democracy aid and expect these to be guided by trade-offs between security concerns, institutional trust and perceived donor legitimacy. At the country level, preferences for democracy aid likely vary with conflict characteristics, such as the intensity or the duration of the conflict, and the post-con-

flict recovery process since these should inform security concerns as well as institutional trust. At the individual level, we expect preferences to vary with the extent of conflict exposure which should shape citizens security concerns.

This project investigates recipient public attitudes towards democracy aid in four post-conflict countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus: Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and North Macedonia. Using conjoint survey experiments with 6,000 respondents, we will identify which donors, aid types and delivery channels recipient publics in post-conflict states prefer. The findings will offer guidance on how to design democracy aid in a way that aligns with local preferences, strengthens public legitimacy of external actors and supports the aid's efficacy in promoting democratization in post-conflict states.

**Keywords:** democracy aid, democratization, post-conflict societies, conjoint survey experiments

# PANEL VII

Voting Behaviour, Ideology,  
and Democratic Support

## Regime Performance and Democracy Support in Central-Eastern Europe

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**Bartul Vuksan-Ćusa**

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Over the past decade, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have experienced notable political transformation, marked by the emergence of new political actors challenging the political and economic systems established after the collapse of communism in the 1990s. These actors range from anti-establishment reform parties aiming to improve liberal democracy and market economies to populist movements contesting the broader political and economic order. These developments reflect not only shifts in political supply but also changes in citizens' demand, as expressed in their evaluations of democratic governance and market-based economic systems.

The paper investigates how public support for democracy and the market economy has evolved across CEE countries and assesses the extent to which this support is shaped by macro-level regime performance and individual-level socioeconomic outcomes. It begins from the premise that citizens' attitudes are influenced by how effectively post-communist political and economic systems perform. In the early transition period, citizens often evaluated democracy and markets by comparing them to prior communist regimes. Over time, however, such comparisons are expected to diminish, replaced increasingly by

assessments based on the current performance of democratic institutions and economic systems.

Generational differences play a central role in this process. Because experiences under communism vary, younger cohorts, who have little or no direct memory of the previous regime, are less likely to rely on historical comparisons. For them, support is expected to depend more strongly on contemporary evaluations of regime effectiveness and personal socioeconomic outcomes. Even among older generations, reliance on past comparisons is likely to fade, giving way to performance-based judgments.

The paper further argues that the influence of individuals' socioeconomic positions is conditioned by national economic growth and governance quality. Countries with stronger economic performance and better governance are more likely to generate broader regime support and reduce disparities in support across social groups. Using multilevel analysis of survey data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and European Values Study (EVS), combined with macro-level indicators, the study examines regime norms, performance evaluations, institutional support, and links to populist appeals.

**Keywords:** Central and Eastern Europe, Populism, Political Support, Democracy Satisfaction, Regime Performance

## Demslide or republican resilience? A political history forecast of the 2026 US Congressional elections

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Prof. Dr. Michael Lewis-Beck

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The history book on the shelf is always repeating itself,” an oft-cited line from ABBA’s song Waterloo, captures the intuition that politics often show persistence and are governed by identifiable patterns or “laws.” Building on this, we take a structural approach to election prediction, moving away from the customary focus on short-term rational choice explanations, and instead incorporate a perspective rooted partly in Historical Institutionalism, emphasizing long-term party performance and governance trends, to see if Political History (PH) offers reliable guidance on the Democratic Party’s prospects in U.S. congressional races. We demonstrate that ex-post models relying on PH provide credible, accurate forecasts for both party control of Congress and Democratic seat counts in each chamber from 1946 to 2024, including a notably accurate ex ante prediction of the 2024 outcome, reinforcing the idea that historically grounded structural patterns provide meaningful predictive signals. We extend the PH model to forecast the 2026 elections, a contest unfolding amid ongoing partisan conflict, persistent geopolitical tensions, a visible groundswell against the Trump administration exemplified by the “No Kings” protests, and disillusionment with the Democratic Party, to assess whether PH indicates conditions for a Democratic structural advantage (“DemSlide”) or potential Republican overperformance over baseline expectations.

**Keywords:** Forecasting; Political History; Campaign 2026; Historical Institutionalism;

## Party Targeting with Electoral Clientelism: Vote Buying during the 2024 Elections in North Macedonia

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Electoral clientelism — the party mobilization strategy of securing votes, turnout, or abstention in exchange for material benefits during elections (Gans-Morse et al. 2014) — is a widespread phenomenon globally (Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020) and particularly prevalent in the societies of the Western Balkans (Bliznakovski 2020; 2024). The comparative literature advances several theoretical arguments, with mixed empirical support, regarding who is targeted with vote buying: the materially disadvantaged, residents of smaller, often rural communities where the monitoring capacity of political parties is greater, and — in a central debate in the field — either core or swing supporters (Brusco et al. 2004; Stokes et al. 2013; Nichter 2018; Mares and Young 2018). This study tests these arguments in the context of the 2024 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia. Party mobilization in the country combines electoral and relational clientelism — the latter entailing sustained material exchanges beyond election periods — with descriptive representation based on ethnicity, charismatic linkages, and limited programmatic differentiation (Kitschelt et al. 2026). This breadth of strategic repertoires makes North Macedonia a theoretically informative case, where the availability of alternative mobilization strategies may narrow the profile of those targeted with vote buying. Data are drawn from an election study module fielded alongside the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) Module 6, conducted after the 2024 elections. The survey includes an experiential item on vote-buying offers during the campaign and a range of variables suitable for testing established predic-

tors of clientelistic targeting. Using rare events logistic regression, the study assesses the relative explanatory power of competing targeting hypotheses in this underexplored post-communist, semi-consolidated democratic context.

**Keywords:** clientelism, vote buying, elections, North Macedonia, Southeast Europe

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## Importing Urban Politics: Suburbanization and Electoral Behavior in Central Europe

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This paper analyzes the impact of ongoing suburbanization on the dynamics of electoral behavior in the post-communist space, focusing on the metropolitan areas of Czechia (Prague, Brno) and Slovakia (Bratislava, Košice). More than three decades after the democratic transition, these states face challenges of political polarization and shifting societal cohesion, which are significantly influenced by the changing spatial distribution of the population. The research explores how internal migration reshapes electoral geography and alters the sources of political legitimacy for major competing parties.

The study primarily responds to the finding that the traditional definition of suburban zones—defined by a minimum 30% share of residents commuting daily to the center—no longer fully captures current demographic and political shifts. In these long-established areas, net migration has no major effect, as their electoral patterns have been stabilized for more than 20 years.

To capture ongoing transformations, the paper introduces a new methodology for identifying active suburbanization areas based on a comparison of census data from 2001 and 2021. The newly defined zone includes municipalities where the share of commuting economically active residents increased by more than 5%. A regression analysis using a robust set of socioeconomic control variables—such as education, age structure, and employment status—is subsequently applied to this specific sample.

The analysis tests the electoral support for parties with a primarily metropolitan electorate (SPOLU, PIRSTAN, PS, SaS) and parties anchored predominantly outside large urban centers (ANO, SPD, SMER). The regression results demonstrate that with increasing net migration in the newly defined suburbs, political subjects with a core voter base in the centers strengthen, while parties traditionally scoring on the periphery weaken.

These findings empirically prove that new residents do not change their electoral behavior upon relocation. Instead, voters transfer their established political preferences from the city to the suburb. This movement of the population beyond traditional city borders spatially expands metropolitan electoral patterns, directly shaping the new political geography of Central European democracies.

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## **Between class conflict and culture war. How left-right self-positioning reflects elite conflict and social-economic context**

**Prof. Dr. Simon Otjes**  
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**Dr. Slaven Živković**

*DeFacto Consultancy, Montenegro*

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The meaning of left-right ideology has been changing in European democracies. The left-right conflict has been traditionally understood in economic terms, pitting those who favour a more equal income distribution against those who believe that economic inequalities incentivize performance. Scholars have recently suggested that the terms “left” and “right” have taken a more cultural meaning relating to issues including immigration, the civic integration of migrants and national identity. Under what circumstances the left-right is understood by citizens in economic or cultural terms is less well known. In this article, we test top-down context (the framing of issues by politicians) and bottom-up context (economic and social circumstances) as correlates of this change. We conduct a cross-country regression analysis using eight waves of the European Social Survey for 26 European countries. We show that both the framing of issues by politicians social and economic circumstances predict citizens’ left-right self-placement.

**Keywords:** economic issues, immigration, left-right, party competition, public opinion

# PANEL VIII

Foreign Influence  
and Democratization

## Abandoning the Stability Myth: Democratic Backsliding as a Strategic Liability for the EU

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The paper examines the divergence between the European Union's formal commitment to democracy and the operational logic of its security policy in South-East Europe (SEE). Although EU strategic documents define democracy, the rule of law, and institutional accountability as core security interests, policy implementation in the Western Balkans has increasingly prioritized short-term stability, regime cooperation, and crisis management over democratic consolidation. Drawing on securitization theory, the paper argues that democratic fragility in SEE has been systematically depoliticized, while migration, geopolitical competition, and regional instability have been framed as primary security concerns, legitimizing stability-oriented policy choices.

The paper contends that this emphasis on “authoritarian stability” has not strengthened European security. Instead, it has contributed to institutional stagnation, reinforced patterns of state capture, and reduced the adaptive capacity of political systems exposed to external influence. By accommodating democratic backsliding in exchange for functional cooperation, the EU has tied its security strategy to personalized power structures whose durability depends less on institutional strength than on elite bargaining. Such arrangements generate short-term predictability but undermine long-term institutional resilience and state-building outcomes.

Situating EU practice within the broader transatlantic debate on democracy and security, the paper argues that democratic integrity is not a normative add-on to security policy but a structural precondition for sustainable stability. If security is conceptualized as systemic resilience and institutional credibility rather than crisis avoidance, democratic erosion constitutes a strategic liability rather than a tolerable trade-off. A more consistent application of democratic conditionality thus emerges not as a moral imperative, but as a rational adjustment to the structural requirements of long-term European security.

**Keywords:** Democratic backsliding; EU external governance; stabilitocracy; institutional resilience; Western Balkans

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## Rethinking EU Enlargement Policy in a Geopolitical Era – Gradual Integration v. Staged Accession

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The EU Enlargement Policy underwent fundamental changes at the outset of the War in Ukraine. Following years of institutional development emphasizing the primacy of the rule of law, the political dimension has gained equal importance through the requirement that candidate states align with the decisions of the CFSP. In addition to this vertical evolution, the “enlargement” of Enlargement Policy has also encompassed new candidate states, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The heightened importance of the political dimension, combined with the institutional focus on new candidate states has created the

need to rethink the approach toward the Western Balkans. This has resulted in a differentiation along two reform trajectories. Gradual Integration reflects the demands of Western Balkan economies for faster and more efficient integration into the Single Market. Materialized through the New Growth Plan, it introduces institutional mechanisms of integration prior to full accession. Conversely, given the geopolitical context and the Union's absorption capacity to integrate a large number of new members, the concept of Staged Accession introduces innovation both to EU law and to the law of international organizations - membership with a reduced spectrum of rights over an extended period. Still under debate, this idea raises questions of compatibility with EU law, particularly regarding the capacity of the Lisbon Treaty to legalize such a status for new members. It also raises concerns about the future political relations between new and current member states. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the concepts of Gradual Integration and Staged Accession, examining their institutional aspects and divergent political outcomes. Methodologically, the author analyzes Gradual Integration through the New Growth Plan, the tasks of regional cooperation initiatives in the Western Balkans, and the Reform agendas of the economies. The theoretical concept of Staged Accession is analyzed through the lens of international institutional law, as well as the potential of individual accession treaties to legalize this idea as primary EU law without necessitating reform of the Lisbon Treaty. Finally, the paper assesses the current state of the EU's enlargement policy and its capacity as a transformative instrument toward candidate states.

**Keywords:** EU Enlargement, Staged Accession, Gradual Integration, Western Balkans

# Enlargement as Security Policy: Montenegro's EU Accession Between Democratic Consolidation and Geopolitical Urgency

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The war in Ukraine has fundamentally reframed EU enlargement, shifting it from a technocratic process based on democratic conditionality toward a tool of geopolitical stabilization. This transformation raises a critical question: can accelerated accession driven by security imperatives produce genuine democratic consolidation, or does it risk embedding institutional fragility? Montenegro – the most advanced candidate and a NATO member – offers a revealing case for examining this tension. While EU leaders have signaled informal integration timelines by the end of the decade, internal crises and episodes of transatlantic friction raise new questions about the Union's coherence and its long-term attractiveness as a political anchor.

The paper examines three interlinked dimensions: (1) how EU signaling and informal integration timelines have evolved in response to geopolitical pressure since 2022; (2) whether Montenegro's reform trajectory reflects genuine institutional resilience or symbolic compliance driven by external incentives; and (3) the consequences of prioritizing accession speed over democratic depth for long-term state capacity and regime legitimacy. Empirically, the analysis employs qualitative process-tracing of EU–Montenegro relations since 2012, examining European Commission progress/country reports (2012–2025), Council conclusions, high-level political statements, and domestic indicators of judicial independence, corruption perception, and media freedom.

Theoretically, the paper integrates Europeanization scholarship (Schimelfennig & Sedelmeier) with geopolitical realism and democratic resilience frameworks (Levitsky & Ziblatt), asking: does Montenegro's trajectory illustrate "shallow" compliance driven by external incentives, or deeper institutional embedding? The analysis traces the evolution from merit-based conditionality to what scholars have termed "geopolitical enlargement," examining whether this shift undermines the transformative power of EU leverage.

The paper argues that Montenegro's case reveals a troubling paradox: while geopolitical urgency has accelerated formal accession timelines, it has simultaneously weakened the EU's leverage over domestic reform, risking the institutionalization of hybrid governance structures. This challenges the assumption that membership itself drives democratic consolidation. By connecting Montenegro's experience to broader debates on post-authoritarian transitions in post-communist Europe, the paper contributes to MoPSA discussions on the interplay between external conditionality, institutional endurance, and regime legitimacy in contexts where security considerations override democratic benchmarks.

**Keywords:** EU enlargement, Democratic resilience, Geopolitical conditionality, Europeanization, Montenegro

## Political Conditionality or Geostrategic Choice? Explaining Divergent EU Accession Outcomes in Post-Communist Europe

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More than three decades after the collapse of communism, post-communist states in Europe display strikingly divergent trajectories of democratization, institutional consolidation, and international integration. While several Central and Eastern European countries successfully joined the European Union during the 2004–2007 enlargement rounds, many Western Balkan states remain outside the Union despite prolonged reform efforts and sustained engagement with the accession process. This paper examines the political foundations of EU enlargement by comparing four post-communist cases: Slovakia and Bulgaria, which acceded to the EU in 2004 and 2007 respectively, and Montenegro and North Macedonia, which continue to hold candidate status.

The paper addresses a central research question: are EU accession outcomes primarily determined by compliance with formal democratic and legal criteria, or by the political and geostrategic readiness of the European Union to enlarge at specific historical junctures? Employing a most similar systems design (MSSD), the analysis focuses on structurally comparable states sharing post-communist legacies, transitional institutional weaknesses, and challenges in democratic consolidation, yet exhibiting divergent accession outcomes.

The theoretical framework integrates Europeanization theory, new institutionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and geopolitical approaches to EU

integration. While dominant Europeanization accounts emphasize rule-based conditionality and meritocratic accession, this paper argues that enlargement outcomes are more convincingly explained by shifts in intra-EU political consensus, changing geopolitical priorities, and evolving institutional constraints within the Union itself. Enlargement methodology is conceptualized as an intervening mechanism through which political willingness—or its absence—is translated into technical procedures, benchmarks, and forms of conditionality.

Empirically, the paper relies on qualitative document analysis and process tracing, drawing on European Commission progress reports, Council conclusions, and key political decisions shaping accession trajectories. The findings indicate that periods of strong political consensus within the EU enabled accession despite evident deficiencies in democratic and institutional performance, whereas periods marked by enlargement fatigue, internal crises, and geopolitical ambivalence resulted in heightened conditionality, procedural innovation, and prolonged negotiations.

By situating EU enlargement within broader debates on democratization and state-building, the paper contributes to a more politically grounded understanding of external conditionality and highlights the structural limits of rule-based integration in post-communist Europe.

**Keywords:** EU enlargement; democratization; political conditionality; post-communist transitions; Western Balkans

## New black knight in the region: China's interference in Montenegro

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This paper examines the scope, mechanisms, and implications of China's growing influence in Montenegro, with particular attention to how economic, technological, and diplomatic engagement translates into political leverage. The central research question guiding this study is: How does China convert its material capabilities into influence in Montenegro, and what are the implications for democratic governance and policy autonomy?

The analysis integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks: the concept of authoritarian "black knight" behavior and Goh's (2014) typology of influence, which distinguishes between preference multiplying, persuasion, and the ability to prevail. Through five empirical components—the Bar–Boljare highway project, Confucius Institute activities and elite exchanges, telecommunications infrastructure involving Huawei and ZTE, coordination with Russian-linked activities, and the construction of a new Chinese embassy in Podgorica—the paper demonstrates that China's influence operates primarily through preference reinforcement and elite-level persuasion, rather than overt coercion.

The main argument advanced is that China's influence in Montenegro is indirect but structurally significant: by aligning with domestic development preferences and exploiting institutional weaknesses, China enables patterns of governance that may undermine transparency, accountability, and democratic

consolidation. While China does not actively promote authoritarianism, its engagement reduces the effectiveness of Western conditionality and expands the strategic options available to domestic elites. The findings contribute to broader debates on external authoritarian influence in small states and highlight the importance of examining non-coercive forms of geopolitical power.

**Keywords:** China; Montenegro; authoritarian influence; process tracing; Belt and Road Initiative; democratic governance

# PANEL IX

Social Structure, Inequality,  
and Historical Legacies

## **The socio-economic and ideological predictors of national and European attachment in comparative perspective**

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The paper examines the relationships between national identification and identification with Europe in a comparative perspective. The literature treats these identifications inconsistently, sometimes treating them as unrelated, sometimes as contradictory identities. For instance, nationalist right-wing parties are often described as being 'Eurosceptic' as well. The present paper will provide fresh empirical evidence on this issue, including comparisons between East and West Europe and analyses of the predictors of these attachments at the individual level.

In the first part of the paper, the relationships between European and national attachments will be examined across different European countries, with particular attention paid to comparisons between EU member and non-member countries. The second part examines the socio-economic and ideological predictors of European and national identifications, expecting that leftist ideolog-

ical identification is associated with greater identification with Europe but relatively weaker national identification. On the other side, lower socio-economic status and dissatisfaction with the political system are expected to be associated with stronger national identification. This work in progress will make use of the European Social Survey cross-national datasets. The initial results suggest that national attachment is stronger than European attachment across all examined countries, but also that the two attachments are positively associated in most countries. Also, increased national attachment does not seem to be much based on economic frustration.

**Keywords:** national identity, European identity, ideology, attitudes, European Social Survey

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## The Ethno-Economy of Roma in Montenegro: A Vicious Circle of Exclusion

**Prof. Dr. Danijela Vuković-Ćalasan**

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**Prof. Dr. Rajka Đoković**

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Members of the Roma ethnic community in Montenegro face significant challenges in the process of inclusion in the economic dimension of social life. Their participation in this sphere has largely been limited to performing jobs that members of the majority population were unwilling to undertake, primarily informal occupations that could not ensure even a minimum standard of living. The phenomenon of ethno-economy can be traced from the arrival of the

Roma in Montenegro to the present day. This presentation analyzes the key features of the economic inclusion and exclusion of Roma within the Montenegrin context, both in earlier historical periods and in contemporary society.

The concept of ethno-economy in the case of the Roma population in Montenegro is based on three central arguments: the historical association of Roma with specific occupations and professions; the extent of their participation in formal employment; and the overall economic position of this community. From the beginning of their migration to the Balkans, Roma were engaged in occupations considered disreputable by the rest of the population. At the same time, their participation in formal employment has historically been, and continues to be, low. In explaining the key characteristics of Roma ethno-economy and its historical rootedness, the concept of the underclass will also be employed. The aim of this presentation is to reconstruct the historical patterns of economic exclusion of Roma that have, over time, created a vicious cycle of ethno-economy that persists in contemporary multicultural and civic Montenegro. The presence of ethno-economy, as one of the manifestations of antigypsyism as a specific form of racism directed against Roma, has not been recognized as an obstacle to their economic and broader social equality. Moreover, due to the failure to recognize the problem of ethno-economy and its historical embeddedness, certain institutional measures and activities aimed at improving the economic position of Roma have paradoxically resulted in its reinforcement.

**Keywords:** Roma, ethno-economy, Montenegro, antigypsyism, inclusion

## Variation of Democratic Belief System (DBS) Across Europe: The Role of Network Structure in Democratic Resilience

Prof. Dr. Nemanja Batrićević

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The success of democracy depends heavily on public support and citizen's engagement in democratic process. In turn, individuals' decision to participate in political process is strongly influenced by their attitudes towards democracy. Instead of existing in isolation, democratic beliefs form embedded networks of interrelated attitudes known as a belief system (Converse, 1964). Understanding structure of democratic belief system (DBS) is vital step towards evaluating trajectory of country's democratic development. Mapping how coherent and dense DBS networks are across different subsets of population is imperative for understanding how resilient a society is to democratic backsliding practices. With this in mind, paper aims at tackling a number of previously unanswered questions: how similar the structure of DBS is across European countries? How different structure of DBS is between different portions of population within European countries? How does structure of DBS in between European regions or what are the core value nodes without which whole democratic belief system would potentially collapse?

Existing research on democratic attitudes in Europe analyzes them either separately or as a part of a latent belief structure (Lavrič & Bieber, 2021). While these approaches are valid, they fail to address the problem of the structure: relationship between beliefs and shape of the network they form. This project proposes conceptualizing beliefs as a network in which beliefs

regarding democracy represent nodes while correlation between them form edges (Boutyline & Vaisey, 2017). Treating DBS as a network of related beliefs allows us to move focus from what people to think about democracy to how people think about democracy in Europe. On the basis of network representation using available survey data, this project focuses on three structural dimensions of DBS – density, inconsistency and value centrality – potentially relevant for democratic resilience.

In empirical terms, paper utilizes comparative analysis of DBS, composed of eight dimensions (features of democracy) using European Social Survey (ESS) Rounds 6 and 10, which have batteries of question dedicated to evaluation of democracy in 40 European countries.

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## **Demographic Changes in Montenegro Relevant for Social Policy Planning – According to the Three Most Recent Population Censuses**

**Prof. Dr. Mehmed Đečević**

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Since the beginning of the dissolution of the SFRY, Montenegrin society has undergone several social shocks that have substantially altered its already multi-layered configuration. The most intense of these disruptions occurred during the 1990s, a period marked by armed conflicts in the region, while domestically the country experienced political fragmentation, social stratification, and the accumulation of social problems, largely caused by the collapse of the planned economy. Following the end of hostilities in the region and the disappearance of threats of major conflict within Montenegro itself, the coun-

try entered a more stable phase of transition, bringing greater predictability to the trends shaping the incidence and prevalence of social problems. Within this framework, a comparative analysis of demographic indicators relevant to social policy, recorded in the three most recent population censuses (2003, 2011, and 2023), points to trends characteristic of post-socialist transitional societies in the region: overall population ageing and pronounced internal migration flows from the country's interior towards larger urban centres. A specific feature of Montenegro in this context is reflected in its marked inter-regional disparities: the northern region is demographically significantly older than the other two regions, and is also far more affected by internal migration—particularly movements of its population towards the capital city and the southern/coastal region. A third analysed indicator relevant to the field of social protection, recorded for the first time in Montenegro's 2011 population census—the presence of intrinsic functional limitations affecting the individual's ability to perform daily activities—demonstrates temporal stability alongside pronounced regional disparities. Such limitations are considerably more prevalent in smaller municipalities in the north than in the rest of the country, a phenomenon whose underlying causes warrant further research.

**Keywords:** demography, population ageing, social protection, migration

## Why Some Post-Communist Countries in Europe Punished While Others Forgave: Explaining Divergent Approaches to the Communist Past

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The question of whether transitional societies should forgive and forget or remember and punish remains one of the central dilemmas of democratic transformations and transitional justice. This dilemma emerged prominently in post-communist Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when newly democratizing states were confronted with decisions about how to address human rights violations and the authoritarian legacies of communist rule. While some countries implemented retributive mechanisms such as criminal trials and lustration policies, others adopted more conciliatory approaches, emphasizing political continuity and institutional stability. This paper seeks to explain why post-communist countries in Europe diverged in their adoption of retributive transitional justice mechanisms. Drawing on transitional justice theory, it examines whether the manner in which communist regimes were established, the duration of communist rule, the degree of regime brutality and the type of democratic transition had an impact on transitional justice strategies in confronting the communist past in Europe. The analysis combines qualitative comparative political analysis with quantitative methods, including correlation and multiple regression analysis, covering a sample of post-communist European countries. The findings indicate that two vari-

ables are particularly decisive. First, the degree of repression and brutality under communist rule significantly increases the likelihood of implementing criminal prosecutions and lustration measures. Second, the type of democratic transformation plays a critical role: communist regimes that collapsed through political and economic breakdown are more likely to produce strong retributive responses, whereas negotiated transitions tend to generate softer approaches to accountability. In cases where communist elites transformed themselves and managed the transition process, policies of forgiveness and institutional continuity prevail. By contrast, the duration of communist rule and the mode of regime establishment do not show statistically significant effects. Confronting the communist past, therefore, was not primarily a moral or symbolic choice, but a political outcome shaped by power relations at the moment of transition. It emerged as a product of structural conditions and elite realignment, revealing that the way regimes ended and the degree of brutality they exercised mattered more than how they were established or how long they lasted.

**Keywords:** politics, political system, democracy, transition, transitional justice, communist past, criminal trials, lustration.

# PANEL X

Postgraduate panel

## **Democratic Backsliding and the Welfare State: Friends or Enemies? Case Study: Viktor Orbán's Hungary**

**Vedran Vujisić**

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**Maša Jovanović**

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The welfare state is fundamentally a Western concept and, as such, has long been inseparably linked to and studied within the context of democratic regimes. After the collapse of communism in various countries, socio-political thought and practice also turned toward examining the specific type of social regimes (and social policy) that developed within non-democratic systems such as communism. Since then, it has become clear that the welfare state (and social policy) not only exists but can also be (mis)used in non-democratic regimes.

In this regard, the focus of our paper is the welfare state as it develops in countries experiencing democratic backsliding, assuming the existence of a complex relationship between democratic backsliding and (populist) socio-political measures.

We conduct a case study of Hungary during the rule of Fidesz under Viktor Orbán, first analyzing how Hungary transitioned from the so-called Socialist model of social policy to an incongruous type of social regime—chaotically and inconsistently shaped as a result of competition between neoliberal and neo-populist political options (Lendvai, 2009).

We analyze efforts in the field of social policy with the aim of identifying key areas that were prioritized in the context of either expanding rights or “tightening the belt” by non-democratic regimes. We then trace the course of social policy reforms, focusing on policy content, the manner of adoption and implementation, and segments of public discourse shaped by decision-makers.

The research findings indicate that democratic backsliding does not necessarily lead to a reduction in the scope of the welfare state and social rights. Rather, the social protection system is reshaped toward creating programs and measures that are more “lucrative” in terms of electoral support. Furthermore, in public discourse, decision-makers and political elites frequently frame social policy as exclusive, using it as an instrument to reinforce anti-migrant narratives by excluding certain social groups from social measures and programs. However, it appears that no single social model characterizes illiberal, competitive authoritarian regimes; instead, we observe authoritarian “specificities” that shape and modify the “original” social models.

**Keywords:** democratic backsliding, welfare state reforms, Hungary, social policy

## Economic Statecraft and Democratic Resilience: The Political Consequences of Tariff Policies

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Tariffs are back – not merely as instruments of trade policy – but as tools of economic statecraft. The past decade has witnessed a marked revival of economic nationalism across both consolidated and fragile democracies, with tariff measures increasingly deployed to project political authority, discipline external adversaries and mobilize domestic constituencies. Yet scholarship on democratization has been slow to engage with the political consequences of this shift, often treating economic statecraft as an external phenomenon rather than a force that reshapes domestic political orders from within. This paper therefore asks: how does the strategic use of tariffs as instruments of economic statecraft undermine democratic resilience?

This paper argues that when tariffs are instrumentalized primarily to concentrate executive authority, mobilize political constituencies and legitimize nationalist narratives – rather than to correct market distortions or protect strategic industries – democratic resilience is placed under strain. Three mechanisms drive this dynamic. First, tariff decision-making increasingly migrates toward the executive, bypassing legislatures and courts under the justification of national security or economic emergency. Second, the distributive effects of protectionism generate entrenched political constituencies, deepening polarization and constraining the space for cross-partisan deliberation. Third, the nationalist narratives that legitimize tariff policies tend to privilege political loyalty over institutional accountability, normalizing the erosion of checks and

balances as foundational principles of democratic governance.

The United States serves as an illustrative case precisely because it resists easy classification as either a fully consolidated or a fragile democracy. The invocation of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 as legal bases for unilateral tariff measures demonstrates how even mature democratic systems remain vulnerable to executive aggrandizement through economic statecraft. Judicial responses do not mitigate this concern; rather, they confirm it – the very need for courts to intervene reveals the pressure placed on institutional checks and the conditional, rather than guaranteed, nature of democratic resilience.

The paper draws on economic statecraft theory, research on democratic backsliding and the political economy of populism. It contributes to debates on democratization and state-building by demonstrating how tariff-based statecraft shapes the long-term sustainability of democratic governance.

**Keywords:** economic statecraft; tariffs; democratic resilience; democratic backsliding; political economy of populism

## Between Subjection and Participation: An Analysis of Youth Trust in Institutions and Civil Society in the Process of Montenegro's Democratization

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This paper explores the complex role and position of young people in the democratization process of Montenegro, as a representative case of a post-transition society in the Western Balkans. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of political sociology, the research analyzes the dynamic relationship between formal state structures and civil society, relying on Gramsci's conception of civil society as a space of cultural hegemony and a key field for generating substantive social change. The central focus of the paper is directed toward the dichotomy between proclaimed democratic values and the persistent "subject" political culture, which often positions youth in Montenegro as passive objects of the system rather than self-aware actors of social transformation.

Methodologically, the study is based on a descriptive analysis of empirical data collected through an online survey with a sample of 209 respondents. The specificity of the research is reflected in its coverage of three key age cohorts: early adolescents (16–17 years old), young adults (18–21 years old), and youth in late adulthood (22–30 years old). Such stratification of the sample allows for a deeper comparative insight into the evolution of attitudes following the acquisition of formal voting rights and the progressive degree of social integration. The research primarily focuses on examining the level of trust in key institutions of the state system, the integrity of the electoral process, and the perception of the NGO sector's role as a necessary mediator

between citizens and centers of power.

The results indicate deeply rooted mistrust toward traditional political structures, while the civil sector is recognized as relevant but insufficiently empowered to counter dominant clientelistic patterns and the “sycophantic” logic of political engagement. The analysis suggests that while youth recognize systemic flaws, their reactions often fluctuate between apathy and cynicism, further consolidating the existing subject culture. In conclusion, the paper offers guidelines for democratization “from below,” emphasizing that without restoring genuine trust among youth in institutions and civil society, democratization processes remain susceptible to stagnation and institutional regression within the post-transition framework.

**Keywords:** democratization, youth in Montenegro, institutional trust, civil society, post-transition.

## De-Montenegrinisation of Montenegro: Content and Narrative Analysis of the Serbian Orthodox Church According to the portal “Vijesti”

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The issue of Montenegrin national distinctiveness has remained the subject of ongoing debate in Montenegro to this day. Over the course of history, two diametrically opposed ideological viewpoints have developed. The first viewpoint is advocated by proponents of Montenegrin national identity, asserting that it is entirely unique when compared to all other nations. The second viewpoint, advocated by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), denies any separateness between Montenegrin and Serbian national identities, portraying Montenegrins as a regional subgroup of the Serbian nation.

This research paper analyzes the narratives through which the SOC seeks to delegitimize Montenegrin national identity. Therefore, the central research question asks: through which narratives did the Serbian Orthodox Church seek, in 2020, to reshape, relativize, and deny Montenegrin national distinctiveness? To address this, qualitative content analysis was conducted, focusing on the national-negating narratives espoused by SOC officials, produced between January 1 and December 31, 2020. This particular timeframe was selected because it exemplifies one of the most turbulent periods of ethno-religious unrest in Montenegro's post-2006 referendum history. It was primarily characterized by mass religious processions (litanies), organized by the SOC, which sought to overturn the then newly legislated “Law on Freedom of Religion”. This legislation, introduced by the ruling coalition, aimed to re-nationalize church prop-

erty that had belonged to the state prior to 1918, thereby generating a significant number of thematically relevant narratives.

The analysis of the aforementioned narratives produced three primary codes. The first code includes narratives that seek to delegitimize Montenegrin national identity by relativizing Montenegro's statehood. The second code analyzes narratives that directly deny Montenegrin national autonomy. The third code is based on the dichotomous division between "us" and "them", in which "they" represent the national-ideological rivals of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This research draws on theories of relevant sociological authors such as Emile Durkheim, Anthony Giddens, Anthony D. Smith, and Michel Foucault to deconstruct the range of national-negating narratives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which are becoming an increasingly prominent component of Montenegrin social reality.

**Keywords:** Serbian Orthodox Church, religious processions, Montenegrin Orthodox Church, Montenegrin national identity, de-Montenegrinization

Thank you for  
*participating.*