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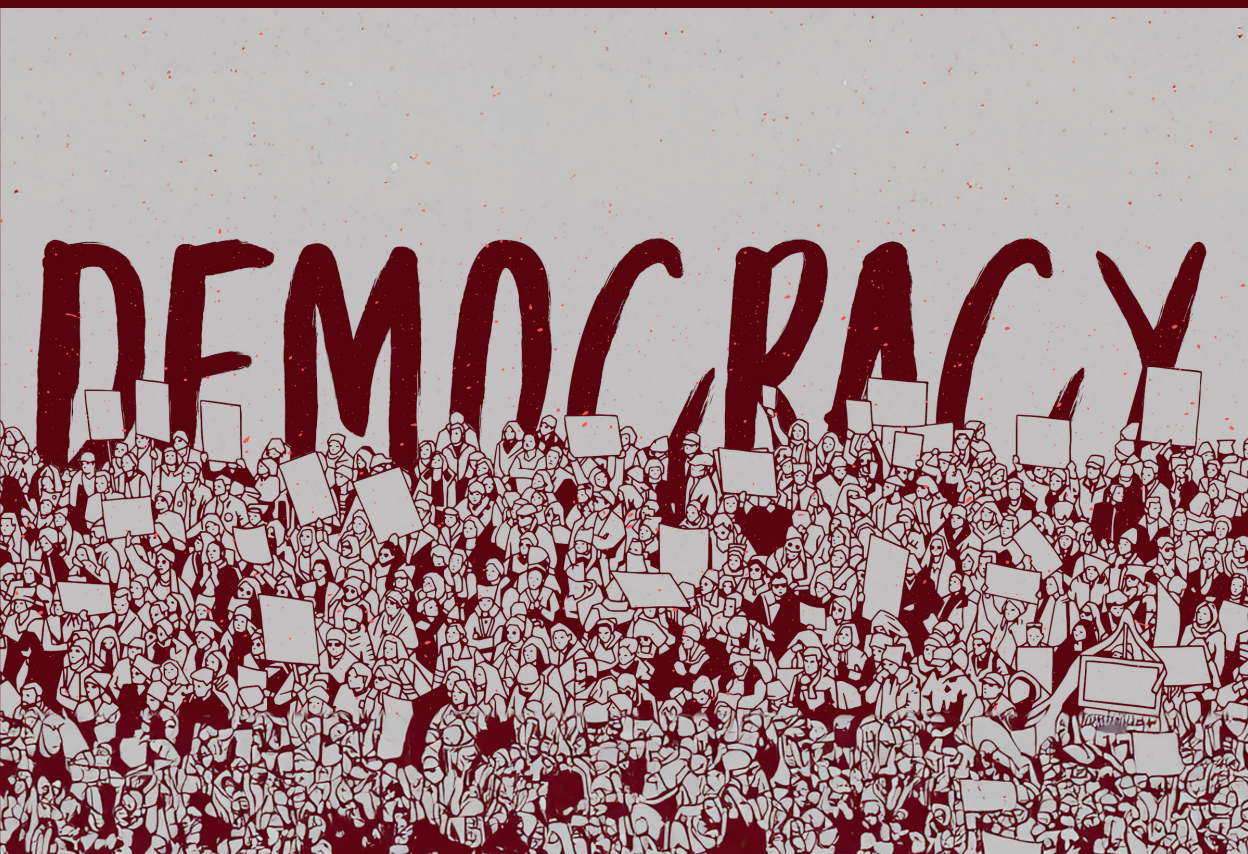
BALKAN POLITICS

POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE BALKANS, 1991-2024



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Editor : Sevba Abdula, Ali Erken

Publication No. : IDEFE | 25
Research | 11

Prepared for publication by : Hanife Etem

ISBN : 978-608-4944-23-2

DOI : http//doi.org/10.51331/EB09

Designer : Seyfullah Bayram

Publisher : IDEFE

Print : Ajgraf Skopje
Cair-Skopje, North Macedonia
1st edition, Skopje 2025

Print run : 100

IDEFE Publications
Goce Delchev 11, No 1-1, Chair-Skopje, North Macedonia

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IDEFE

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

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication is a volume of a *Balkan Politics Series – Political Parties* that is a result of collaborative and interdisciplinary effort to better understand the evolving political landscape of the Balkans. We express our profound appreciation to the contributing authors—emerging scholars whose meticulous research and innovative perspectives have substantially advanced this volume's critical examination of the complex dynamics among democratization, political parties, and state-building throughout the region.

We also wish to extend our gratitude to the editorial and publishing teams for their professionalism and dedication, and to those who facilitated access to vital data, archives, and field resources across various countries in the region.

Finally, this book would not have been possible without the enduring curiosity and commitment of those seeking to better understand the political dynamics of the Balkans. It is our hope that this work will contribute meaningfully to both scholarly literature and public understanding of the region's ongoing democratic journey.

We look forward to continuing this intellectual journey through future volumes of the Balkan Politics series, expanding our exploration of the region's political evolution in areas such as electoral behavior, democratization, party systems, governance, identity politics, and foreign policy. It is our hope that this work serves as both a foundation and an invitation—for scholars, students, and policymakers alike to deepen the comparative understanding of the Balkans and to critically engage with the ongoing political transformations that shape not only national realities but also broader European and global dynamics. As we move forward, we remain committed to fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, empirical inquiry, and regional collaboration through future studies on Balkan societies, economies, institutions, and international relations.

CHAPTER VIII

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

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DOI: http//doi.org/10.51331/EB09IL

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Post-2020 developments: an inclusive but very fragile democracy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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