"DEMOCRATIZATION OF POLITICAL PROCESSES AND OVERCOMING POLITICAL-IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION"

Ethnic Politics in Western Balkans: The State of Play and Ways Forward

Roland Gjoni

PhD Candidate in Political Science at University College Dublin

Introduction

Ethnicity is defined as a feeling of belonging shared by members of a certain community based on assumed shared ancestry, history, language, religion, race, territory or descent. While ethnicity per se is not a generator of instability and violence, it manifestation in political life within a multi-ethnic society can be used as a ground for group polarization and enmity. Therefore; politicized ethnicity or ethno-nationalism in multi-ethnic societies is seen as a source of political polarization across ethnic and an obstacle to social cohesion and national integration.

With the exception of Albania, in the last 25 years all the six Western Balkan states have experienced violent conflicts where ethnicity has been often invoked as a primary cause. Many accounts of the break-up of Yugoslavia have explained the eruption of ethnic violence with the role of self-seeking politicians like Milosevic, Tudjman and Izetbegovic in exploiting the common insecurities following the demise of the multinational federation and politicizing ethnicity. [1] In fact, the initial root causes of the Yugoslav conflict may have not been ethnic at all but the wide spread violence along ethnic lines reinforced ethnic cleavages within all communities.

The intervention of the EU, US, NATO and UN was crucial to ending the ethnic violence in Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo and establishing peace plans and agreements which have been largely successful to preserve the ethnic peace and avoid a relapse in full scale violent conflicts. The region has not seen widespread armed conflicts after the Albanian armed insurgency in Macedonia in 2001 but peace consolidation remains a challenging task in Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo. The Kosovo's riots of March 2004, the frequent skirmishes in the Northern part of Kosovo and volatile inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia and Macedonia are strong reminders that ethno-nationalist issues still have the potential to be important triggers of conflicts with broader security implications for the region and Europe.

Twenty-five years since the break-up of Yugoslavia, most Western Balkans societies are still recovering from armed conflict and widespread violence. Most countries have had to struggle simultaneously with competing processes of state-building and nation-building similar to "building a ship while sailing". Milosevic, Tudjman and Izetbegovic have all gone but the ethnically charged political environment has created conditions for old and new political actors across the Balkans to play the nationalist card to the detriment of democratic accountability and rule of law.

---

[1] V.P. Gagnon (2004) The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s. Cornell University Press. pp.217, Bunce, V (1999) Peaceful versus Violent State Dismemberment: A Comparison of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, Politics & Society, 27, pp. 217-237, Posen, B. (1993): "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," Survival, 35, pp. 27–47.

The power sharing solutions implemented have predominantly been guided by the dynamics of ethnic conflict on the ground and consequently the constitutional frameworks established are conducive to the long term politicization of ethnicity. [2] As a result, ethnicity continues to be a salient and polarizing factor in most societies in the Western Balkans and ethnic parties claiming to represent ethnic communities have become the rule rather than the exception in the post conflict situation. Particularly in Bosnia and Macedonia, political parties using the ethno-nationalist card have entrenched a system of ethnic patronage extending in the large public administration at central and local levels as well as the business and media sectors. Elections have turned into ethnic headcounts with result simply confirming the degree ethnic polarization at societal level and strength of entrenched political eleites which are hardly replaceable with constitutional and democratic means.

So what does this mean for the future of the region? Are ethnic politics turning polarization between ethnic groups into a permanent feature of the political system? Is the "ethnification of politics" indefinitely going to hamper the necessary state-building and consolidation reforms required to join the EU? Are we going to see a shift from ethnic politics into a post-ethnic "normal politics" without external intervention?

This brief paper revisits some of the assumption on the role ethnicity and ethnic parties in multi-ethnic societies by looking at the empirical record in the Western Balkans focusing primarily on Bosnia and Macedonia. The next session looks at the impact of ethnicity in post-conflict societies and how ethnicity affects political party strategies. The third section focuses on the record of ethnic politics in Western Balkans focusing on Bosnia and Macedonia. Section 4 concludes with some ideas on de-ethnicizing politics across the region.

Ethnicity as a Political Resource in Divided Societies

The manifestation of ethnicity as a political resource in post-conflict societies and the strategies for its management have been the focus on two competing research programs in political science and different strategies of ethnic conflict management. Consocionalism as the best known approach to managing ethnic diversity in divided societies views ethnicity as a stable feature of social life and takes a realist approach towards ethnic politics. It considers ethnically-based parties as key pillars to maintain the "ethnic peace" by serving as interest aggregators for their ethnic group, participating in elections in a proportional system of representation and sharing power in a governing coalition with

---

[2] Dayton Peace Accords (1996), Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), Ahtisaari Plan for Kosovo's final status (2007).

their ethnic rivals in order to prevent a relapse into ethnic violence or armed conflict.[3] Positive leadership is crucial as ethnic leaders are expected to avoid unreasonable ethnically motivated demands and pursue their political projects by sharing power in an adversarial framework. This approach claims that elite cooperation will result in overall moderation across communities and as power imbalances are addressed, the role of ethnic parties will gradually diminish leading to a normalization of politics across non-ethnic but ideological cleavages.   In contrast to consociationalism, an alternative approach commonly labelled as "centripetalism" holds that ethnic politic closes opportunities for political compromises and threatens the democratic stability.   When ethnicity becomes a political resource and a basis for political mobilization, people tend to vote for political parties and politicians form their own ethnic group expecting them to defend their interest against other groups and channel resources, jobs and other benefits to co-ethnics.   The two-way relationship between politicians who articulate ethnic demands and voters producing ethnic votes gradually turns elections in "ethnic headcounts", political life become organized around ethnic blocs, government become arenas of inter-ethnic competition and compromise on ethnically disputes issues becomes more difficult.

An ethnic party is defined as a political party which either declaratively or practically advocates for the rights of a certain ethnic group, by explicitly or implicitly referring the ethnic group in party manifestos and electoral programs and defending and advancing its interest when in power.[4] Ethnic parties are generally expected to represent the interest of minority communities but there are exceptions to this rule depending on the number and demographic size of the politically mobilized ethnic groups and the degree to which ethnicity is salient in electoral politics. Thus in certain countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Macedonia although Bosnian and Macedonian communities constitute a relative majority in relation to other groups (Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Albanians in Macedonia) given the size, territorial patterns and organizational capacities of other non-dominant groups, Bosnian and Macedonian parties operate in a framework where political representation is ethnically framed and are generally viewed as ethnic or ethno-nationalist parties.

---

[3] Power-sharing arrangements between dominant political streams in oppositional communities include four key elements to keep the "ethnic peace" namely 1) a grand coalition governments in which all ethnic groups are represented; 2) a system of proportional representation of ethnic groups in order to turn their demographic size with parliamentary seats; 3) segmental autonomy through federalism, regionalization or decentralization of local self-government; and 4) a minority veto on issues of vital interest to minority groups (cultural, religious, linguistic affairs). The approach has undergone significant modifications which have enriched the consociational approach emphasising the importance of non-territorial autonomies, asymmetrical decentralization and recognizing the role for kin states in managing ethnic conflicts in dampening ethnic conflicts which are applied at varying degrees in Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo.

[4] Chandra, K (2007), Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India, Cambridge University Press. Chandra also adds that ethnic parties are expected to draw a disproportionate amount of members, leader and votes exclusively from a certain ethnic community and frequently in a certain geographical considered as its electoral stronghold.

Once ethnicity becomes a political resource, ethnic parties and politicians can use a number of strategies for mobilizing voters on ethnic grounds, accessing power and consolidating their electoral success. The most widely known strategy is that of "ethnic outbidding" when political parties take more extreme positions on issues involving ethnic and national identity to outcompete other forces within the same ethnic group. Ethnic outbidding efforts translate into aggressive political programs, campaign language and political strategies between and within ethnic blocs.[5] This spiralling process of intra-ethnic competition relegates other important issues that have a cross-ethnic appeal such as unemployment, corruption, social justice, environment into the background of political campaigns preventing debates on programmatic issues.

When the ethnic out-bidding pressure recedes and two or more ethnic parties largely cover the field of ethnic politics by emphasizing ethnic issues over other social issues, ethnic parties can also gradually become "ethnic tribune parties" and are largely perceived as the most effective advocates in their respective communities.[6] Due to the expectation that votes for other parties will be wasted, voters are inclined to keep voting these parties because of their reputation as tribune parties and because they indirectly expect them to channel power and resources to the community. In large part, the long term coalition of the VMRO and DUI in Macedonia illustrates this situation where parties have managed to project themselves as the "guardian" of their respective Macedonia and Albanian communities and have squeezed the middle ground for other less moderate parties. Both parties have shown a tendency to provoke or heighten ethnic tensions either prior to elections or when they want to divert the attention from non-ethnic issues and governing failures into ethnic problems and consolidating their voters against potential rivals. "Controlled incidents" with ethnic background are then used to re-assure their respective ethnic constituencies that VMRO and DUI are the most ardent defenders against the rival ethnic group.

When a framework of intra-ethnic competition is stabilized with two main parties turning into "ethnic tribune parties", rival parties or new comers involved in intra-bloc competition are often forced to pursue a more moderate political campaign in order to discredit the established nationalist parties through strategy of "ethnic underbidding".[7] An under-bidding ethnic party continues to appeal to its own ethnic community but adopts a more moderate stance toward the dominant ethnic group. This strategy is usually provisional and is abandoned once initial success to out-compete traditional parties is achieved. For example, initially SNDS led by Milorad Dodik was able to attract support from international community by projecting a more moderate stance on the future of the Serb community in

---

[5] Horowitz, D. L. (1985). Ethnic Groups in Conflict. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[6] Mitchell, P, Geoffrey E. and O'Leary B. (2009) 'Extremist Outbidding in Ethnic Party Systems is not Inevitable: Tribune Parties in Northern Ireland', Political Studies 57: 397–421.
[7] Coakley, J (2008) 'Ethnic Competition and the Logic of Party System Transformation', European Journal of Political Research 47: 766–93.

Bosnia relative to the SDS party founded by Karadzic. As this strategy helped him break ground amongst moderate voters he abandoned the ethnic underbidding strategy and started making nationalist appeals threatening with complete secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A less successful strategy is that of counterbidding employed by parties which seek to move away from ethnic issues in order to appeal to a more moderate middle ground that cares about ethnic issues but is also concerned about other cross-ethnic issues such as economic prosperity, rule of law, openness and transparency in government.[8] To a certain extent this strategy has been tried by new parties in Bosnia like Nasa Stranka but they have hardly been able to garner more than 5% of the vote. The middle ground parties can be quite successful in times of sustained ethnic peace when ethnic identity, ethnic discrimination and other issues recede in importance. However, once ethnic tensions are renewed, counter-bidding or cross-ethnic political parties are usually squeezed by traditional ethnic parties which often orchestrate ethnic tensions in order to keep the ethnic polarization high and fend off counterbidding efforts of non-ethnic parties.

The strategies of ethnic parties differ significantly based the status of the party (traditional or new), overall ethnic climate (ethnic tension versus ethnic peace) and party position (governing or opposition) and election cycles (before and after elections).[9] Traditional parties have a tendency to keep their ethnic rhetoric high but in the long run may even moderate their stances unless presented with outbidding pressures from new comers. When ethnic tensions are low, new comers do not always embark upon outbidding pressure but may well be strategic about the electoral terrain available and run on a program that combines ethnic cleavages with broader social issues resonating with large segments of populations. Also parties that have access to power are expected to moderate their position on ethnic issues and continue "business as usual" once election are over. Whereas opposition parties tend to radicalize their position on ethnic issues and portray the incumbents as "too weak" or "sold out" before elections.

Ethnic Parties in the Western Balkans: The State of Play in Bosnia and Macedonia

---

[8] Coakley, J (2008) "Ethnic Competition and the Logic of Party System Transformation", European Journal of Political Research 47: 766–93.
[9] Zuber, Ch. (2011) "Beyond outbidding? Ethnic party strategies in Serbia", Party Politics 19(5) 758–777

A large number of political organizations in all the Western Balkan states are ethnic or minority parties and a large part of them compete in elections. The post-Dayton Bosnia is viewed as a typical case of consociationalism where Bosniac, Serb and Croat ethnic group share power at all levels of government. The Ohrid Framework Agreement in Macedonia which does not mandate power sharing in the government between Macedonia and Albanian parties, provides for local autonomy, equitable representation and veto powers on issues of vital interest to the Albanian community. The Ahtisaari Plan which was incorporated into Kosovo's Constitution provides asymmetrical representation and veto powers on issues of vital interest to the Serb community at central level, a high degree of autonomy at local level and the right of Serbia to provide financial and technical support to Serb municipalities.

A cursory research on the political parties in the region shows that of more than 400 parties registered in the six Western Balkan countries, more than 120 claim to represent a certain ethnic community and a large part of them are actively participating in elections.[10] The legacies of the conflict and the constitutional frameworks have created a framework of ethnic representation where political fragmentation is very rampant across ethnic groups and within the same ethnic group. For example, in Kosovo where non-Albanian communities constitute less than 10% of the population of 2 million there are about 28 minority parties claiming to represent the Serb, Turkish, Bosniac, Gorani, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities thus competing for less than 150 thousand votes. The largest of the Serbian parties Lista Srpska received less than 40 thousand votes in the last elections of June 2014 but due to reserved parliamentary seats and ethnic quotas it currently has 9 MPs, 1 Deputy Prime Minister, 2 ministers, 5 deputy ministers at the central level and at the local level it runs 9 out of the 10 municipalities where the Serb-community is in majority.

Lista Srpska was created in 2014 and is to a large extent controlled by Belgrade but in a very short time managed to render the other well established Serb parties Kosovo politically irrelevant. As the future of the Serb community in Kosovo is still being negotiated in the EU facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, in the next section we look at the record of ethnic politics in Bosnia and Macedonia where due to the consociational nature of the Dayton and Ohrid agreements, ethnic politics has taken place for more than 20 years.[11]

The Entrenchment of "Sextet" in Bosnian Politics

---

[10] For example, in Serbia out of 75 parties about 42 claim to represent Hungarian, Bosnia, Croat, Albanian, Roma and other communities. In Albania, 8 parties claim to represent the Greek, Macedonian and Roma communities. In Kosovo more than 30 ethnic parties representing the Serb, Bosniak, Turk, Roma, Gorani and Croat communities. In Montenegro about 30.

[11] McEvoy, J. O'Leary, B (2013) "Power Sharing in Deeply Divided Places", University of Pennsylvania Press

The Dayton Accord which ended the war in Bosnia in 1996 created an ethno-federal state of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) between two loosely connected entities Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina where Muslim and Croat populations are predominant and Republika Srpska with a large Serb majoirty and jointly shared autonomous district of Brcko. The Constitution recognized the BiH as the shared state of the three constituent peoples Bosniacs (48%), Serbs (37%) and Croats (14%) and Other undesignated groups (1%). Consistent with the requirement of the consocational approach, this system has incentivized the establishment of ethnic parties which focus their political programs on ethnic issues. Since no Bosniac, Serb or Croat parties can garner the required number of seats to form the government, main parties from the three main communities share power at the federal level in proportion with their vote share and established ethnic quotas. Ethnic parties are then represented in the collective federal presidency, a two chamber parliament and a government where each minister has two deputies from other ethnic communities. The ethnic representation extends in all levels of government and civil service at municipal, cantonal and state level.

Notwithstanding the variations in their political programs, most parties claiming to represent their respective Bosniac, Serb and Croat communities focus on ethnic issues. Broadly speaking, Bosniac parties demand a strong federal state with reduced powers for the two entities, Serb parties are interested to maintain the highest level of self-rule for the Republika Srpska and, if possible, complete independence from the BiH and Croat parties are interested the re-organization of the state in order to get their own Croat entity outside of the Bosniac/Muslim dominance.

The first post-Dayton elections represented the first opportunity to move away from ethnic politics in favour of multi-ethnic parties. In order to prevent ethnic parties from the government, international community invested a lot in the Unified List, a cross-ethnic coalition of Bosniac, Croat and Serb political organization. The results of the first elections were disappointing and ethnic parties took more than 70% of the popular vote.

When European Union and international actors have tried to support multi-ethnic parties, the results have been limited and short lived. Ever since 1996 the political scene has been dominated by 6 or 7 major political parties representing the three communities.[12] The vote share for the nationalist parties has increased to 85% leaving very little ground of about 15% to other smaller parties with cross-ethnic or non-ethnic electoral programs. Despite the international intervention to create a more viable centralized state at the federal level, ethnic issues dominate the agenda of political parties which

---

[12] Bosniac parties include SDA, SBiH, SDP, Serb parties are SNSD, SDS and Croat parties HDZ and HDZ-1990.

hardly dedicate time and energy to find solutions for cross-ethnic problems of poverty, corruption, unemployment or economic growth.

The only time that traditional nationalist parties where left out of the government in both federal and state level was in 2000-2002 when the SDP led a large multi-ethnic eleven party collation called the Alliance for Change. The SDP led coalition received substantial support before and after elections from the international community which was also instrumental in forging a post-election coalition that left the traditional ethnic parties (SDA, HDZ and SDS) out of office. Multi-ethnic parties Social Democratic Party of BiH (SDP), Nasa Stranka and United Front have managed to a certain degree to have a multi-ethnic membership and political platforms but their electoral success is hampered by the entrenched nature of ethnic politics.

On the Serb political camp, in 1997 the international rallied to support Milorad Dodik as a prime minister of the Republika Srpska (RS) although the DSD had only two seats in the RS parliament. Dodik was seen as a moderate leader with little or no direct connection to the wartime establishment and represented a viable alternative to the SDS which was formerly led by Karadzic. Dodik initially committed to work on reconciliation and an untied Bosnia for all communities but once in power, he gradually shifted his stepped up his nationalist rhetoric, outbidding the SDS and turning himself into a nationalist publicly announced that the RS had the right to declare impendence from BiH. The combination of nationalism and populism have now turned into one of the most powerful politicians in the country.

Although ethno-nationalist parties are unable or unwilling to strike compromise on most policies, a group of six parties and their leaders referred euphemistically as the "Sextet" has been taking turns in government for almost 20 years.[13] These parties describe themselves as strong advocates of their ethnic community while continuously sharing the spoils of power with ethnic rivals. They have built an extensive system of patronage by channelling resources, jobs, privatization deals, concessions, government public work tenders and through informal rules and practices ensure a division of turf and benefits along ethnic lines. Twenty years after Dayton, the Sextet practically presides over a system of ethno-cracy where democracy has been transformed in a hegemony of ethnic parties from each community.[14] Ethnic discrimination entrenched in the constitutional framework has been found to violate key human rights by the European Court of Human Rights but constitutional reforms

---

[13] The parties are SDA, and SDP in the Bosniac community, HDZ and HDZ 1990 in the Croat community and SNSD and SDS, see Bosnia's Future Europe Report N°232 - International Crisis Group, 10 July 2014
[14] Bosnia's Future Europe Report N°232 - International Crisis Group, 10 July 2014

necessary to de-ethnicize politics have been met with resistance from ethnic parties particularly in the Croat and Serb community.[15]

Party democracy and debate are stifled and main decisions are made by a handful of leaders from each community. Although frustration with government inefficiency, corruption and clientelism is very high across the ethnic groups, civil society remains organized along ethnic lines or and a limited number of multi-ethnic civil society organizations are weak and disorganized. As voters widely regard politics as "dirty business" political frustration is high but political participation and election turnout very low. Occasional outburst of frustration with bad governance, nepotism, patronage and corruption similar to the multi-ethnic youth riots of 2014 in many BiH cities is stifled and isolated through sustained media campaigns, coercion or co-option of leaders and activists in the existing networks of ethnic patronage.

The EU integration and constitutional and state reforms are hampered as conflicting goals of ethnic powerbrokers have become permanent sources of decision-making deadlocks and crises. The international community and particularly EU who were once seen as necessary but transitional peace guarantors have become constant deadlock-breakers of the ethnic politics and a permanent feature of peace agreements. Ethnic politics shows no signs of abating and ethnic leaders and communities continue to amass resources and power for their own community as if they are preparing for the next ethnic confrontation.

> **Macedonia: A Bi-national Oligarchy**

Macedonia had a less violent and more promising start than other regional neighbours after it declared independence in 1991. In the post-independence period, all ethnic communities are mobilized politically in their own political parties and ethnic tensions between Macedonia and Albanian communities have been a recurring feature of Macedonia's society since 1991. Initial contention of the Albanian community focused on provisions of Constitution of Macedonia of 1991 which defined Macedonia as a state of Macedonians and other communities. Albanian community representatives viewed the constitutional status as setback compared to the 1974 constitution which recognized Albanians and Turks nominally as nationalities.

Twenty-five years later, Albanian parties claim that the Albanian community is discriminated and have continuously demanded changes in the constitutional framework to enhance Albanian

---

[15] See in particular two ECHR ruling on cases Sejdi and Finci (2009) and Ilijaz *Pilav* v. Bosnia and Herzegovina *(2016)* finding the Dayton derived constitutional provisions in the breach of ECHR

community rights whereas Macedonian parties emphasize the fact Macedonia community is the largest national group and generally consider the Albanian demands for more rights with suspicion and distrust.

The Albanian political camp has gone through several changes since 1991 as a result of a series of successful "ethnic outbidding" efforts. Following, the initial boycotts and an unrecognized referendum on territorial autonomy, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), as the largest Albanian political party in Macedonia participated in post-independent parliaments and governments in Macedonia. After some initial success in advancing the rights of the Albanian community, it PDP soon splintered and was outflanked by the Democratic Party of Albanians, a new party bringing together various political activists presumably dissatisfied with the poor record of the PDP in defending the Albanian community.

DPA initially projected itself as a more aggressive defender of Albanian interest and was advocating consociational solutions for Macedonia. It dominated the Albanian political scene until 2001 but rapidly lost support once the National Liberation Army launched a short live insurgency against Macedonian security forces. After the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), the NLA leadership established the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) which from 2002 has become the dominant Albanian party. DUI runs on a nationalist program demanding full implementation of the OFA and touts its successful war credentials anytime it is criticized. DUI has been the dominant Albanian party in Macedonia winning all central and local elections since 2002. At central level, for almost 15 years, DUI has been a junior coalition member in four governments led the largest Macedonian parties.

On the Macedonian political establishment, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and the League of Social Democrats of Macedonia (LSDM) have been taking turns a ruling parties since 2001. Widely viewed as a more nationalist and populist party, the VMRO which led the government at the outbreak of the armed conflict in 2001 lost the power to the LSDM in the first elections held in 2002 after the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). After initial progress with the implementation of the OFA and a controversial decentralization of local self-government, LSDM suffered from criticism of being unable to stand to Albanian pressures and since 2006 VMRO have continuously won all central and local elections.

Since 2008, as the prospects of NATO and EU accession becoming unattainable due to the Greek veto over Macedonia's state name, VMRO led by Gruevski increasingly embarked upon a nationalist and populist program emphasizing the ancient roots of Macedonian nation. Although VMRO shares

power with DUI, the implementation of a 600 million Euro Skopje 2014 project to promote an exclusively Macedonian identity as well as allegations of unfair treatment of Albanians have strained the inter-ethnic relations.[16]

The intra-Macedonia political polarization has reached its peak in February 2015 after the LSDM released transcripts of a government led wiretapping scandal that revealed direct involvement of VMRO and DUI senior officials in government corruption, election fraud and undue influence over judiciary, media and civil society. An EU commission expert team confirmed serious symptoms of state capture in all levels of society finding amongst other things:

> "apparent direct involvement of senior government and party officials in illegal activities including electoral fraud, corruption, abuse of power and authority, conflict of interest, blackmail, extortion (pressure on public employees to vote for a certain part with the threat to be fired), criminal damage, severe procurement procedure infringements aimed at gaining an illicit profit, nepotism and cronyism; … unacceptable political interference in the nomination/appointment of judges as well as interference with other supposedly independent institutions for either personal or party advantage."[17]

Both VMRO and DUI have significantly increased their vote shares since they first joined the coalition in 2008 whereas the second largest parties in both communities LSDM and DPA has halved. As the wiretapping scandal has shown both the VMRO and BDI are presiding a system of bi-national oligarchy where they project themselves as the guardians of their respective communities but otherwise pursue very similar non-ethnic and instrumentalist goals of expanding their resources for themselves and their families in clear disregard of the rules of democratic system.[18]   They have now created a system of government which is hard to dismantle with constitutional means.

Despite the success in the implementation of the OFA, the Albanian community's discontent with DUI has increased rapidly due to alleged inability of the DUI to defend the Albanian interest against an aggressive nationalist VMRO. Ironically, since the VMRO's position as an "ethnic tribune party" amongst Macedonian voters, is pushing the LSDM to appeal for support in the Albanian community in order to become a dominant party of the Macedonian community. However, as ethnicity is heavily politicized across communities, bridging the ethnic gap and attracting Albanian voters appears to be an uphill battle for LSDM. The opposition and civil society groups are constantly holding demonstrations but so far it has been difficult to create cross-ethnic coalition with the critical mass to reform the system.   The links between VMRO run too deep to allow any cross-ethnic coalition to

---

[16] See an estimate of cost conducted by BIRN in 2015 available at http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/true-cost-of-skopje-2014-revealed and the calculation of Prisma at http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/

[17] Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015, Brussels 8 June 2015

[18] Macedonia: Defusing the Bombs - International Crisis Group, 9 July 2015

emerge and they will together continue to use nationalist scaremongering and end of the world scenarios like the Kumanovo armed incident in order to keep their political fiefdoms intact.

As in Bosnia, the country's Euro-Atlantic integration and democracy have stagnated and the tension is very high within Macedonian and Albanian communities and between them. The overall post-independence experience of Macedonia shows that political space will continue to be organized along ethnic lines in the years to come. Although Macedonians and Albanian communities may be equally dissatisfied with the chronic crisis, ethnic distrust prevents cross-ethnic political processes. Multi-ethnic initiatives to reform the political system and the state are proving difficult to build and sustain and both VMRO and DUI are leading the polls in their respective camps despite the crisis escalation and revelations of the wiretapping.[19]

On the Albanian side, newcomers into the political scene are trying to capitalize into the Albanian discontent with DUI hoping to mount and "ethnic outbidding" effort. However, new Albanian parties appear to be more interested to dethrone DUI than to fix the many problems of Macedonia which are there to stay and will not disappear with DUI's electoral defeat. While it is yet unknown how long will it take to replace DUI, it is clear that the next wave of Albanian political demands will focus on re-configuration of the state along ethnic lines beyond the arrangements offered by OFA.

Ways forward: Is post-ethnic politics desirable or possible in the future?

The brief overview of ethnic politics in the Western Balkans shows that once ethnicity is politicized and ethnic parties are created, state-building may suffer perpetually as "ethnification of politics" and the political system becomes heavily dependent on ethnic loyalty and thus less conducive to political compromises and national cohesion. In the long run, the use of ethnicity as a political resource is leading to a situation of "political immobilism" where reforms and changes are impossible and programmatic debates between parties are almost inexistent.

So far, nationalist parties in Macedonia and Bosnia have been able to provide a certain level of predictability in politics which resonates with expectations of large numbers ethnic voters from the rival communities and serves the international interest of putting stability before democratic accountability. Also the international community by emphasizing stability has become increasingly dependent on ethnic power brokers who can maintain local peace to the

---

[19] See nationwide poll conducted by Brima Consulting on behalf of the International Republic Institute in April 2016 with results announced on 8 June 2016 at
http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_macedonia_survey_april_2016_0.pdf

detriment of democracy and rule of law.   Ironically, the prioritization of stability over democracy is leading to democratic backsliding and state weakness. Ultimately, the blockages of democracy and the disagreements about who runs the state and how should the state be organized may threaten the relative peace between ethnic groups.

To be fair, ethnicity is far from being the source of all evils in the Western Balkans and you only need to look at Albania to understand that consolidating democratic stability and rule of law can be a daunting challenge even when ethnic diversity is not a problem. Bad governance, stalled reforms, rampant corruption, entanglement of politics and organized crime do not take place only multi-ethnic societies. Autocrats who coerce the media, supress the opposition and consolidate their grip to power with seemingly legitimate, free and fair elections can flourish even in ethnically homogenous societies in the Western Balkans and beyond.

The key difference is that while in Albania, extreme polarization and state-building failures remain immense; political change may gradually come from within and as the political system matures, a new generation of politicians may be able to complete the democratization and rule of law reforms. In contrast, in Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, ethnic groups do not agree on the fundamental nature of the state and its direction so de-ethnicizing the political processes without external intervention seems impossible.

Ethnic politics has displayed lock-in tendencies which are multiply determined by distant and recent memories of the ethnic violence, the constitutional frameworks established, the political enterprises of ethnic leaders and the expectations and immediate concerns of ethnic voters. The framework of intra-ethnic competition is also reinforced by kin-states, external influences of global actors and processes such as the increasing multi-polarity in the world and the stagnation of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans due to the looming financial crises and frequent debates about Grexit and Brexit. Assuming that "constrained change" is a key property of ethnic identity and ethnic communities are not going to disappear in the near future, what can international community to help de-ethnicization of politics in the Western Balkans. How can the constitutional frameworks, electoral law and political party regulations be reformed in order to reduce the salience of ethnicity in political processes?

The first approach to reduce the salience of ethnicity in favour of multi-ethnicity is a top down approach where international community forces dramatic changes in the constitutional frameworks, electoral system and political party laws in order to outlaw ethnic parties. This approach which has been tried unsuccessfully in the post-communist Bulgaria to prevent the emergence of ethnic parties is seen as both anti-democratic and probably impossible to achieve in Bosnia and Macedonia due to the

powerful role of local leaders in resisting change that affects their grip on power. Short of this drastic and probably counterproductive intervention, it is possible to introduce rules, and procedures that encourage multi-ethnicity for the establishment, registration and participation in elections.[20] These rules make it difficult for ethnic parties to compete by requiring cross-ethnic membership, leadership and national presence for competing in elections.   The downside of setting cross regional or cross-ethnic composition as a pre-condition for competing in elections is that it may disproportionately affect parties from small ethnic communities such as Serbs in Croatia, Albanians in Serbia and Turks in Kosovo which may fail to attract support and establish their presence outside their region and turn into political outcasts. Restricting ethnic parties may have an adverse effect in the democratic process as it forces such outcast groups to venture into anti-constitutional activities potentially mobilizing supporters for armed struggle against a government.

One alternative to challenge the "business as usual" approach to ethnic politics is to employ a bottom up approach that makes the current system more transparent by increasing pressure for change from within by building aggressive multi-ethnic civil society groups that monitor the electoral performance based on the state-building and good governance indicators and not judging parties based on ethnic performance. In addition, encouraging underrepresented groups from all ethnic groups to enter politics can increase the pressure points on the entrenched ethnic parties from youth, women and emerging middles classes.   While this appears as a "more of the same" prescription, political processes in Bosnia, Macedonia and other divided societies tend to result in accumulation of power in a handful of political bosses whereas other groups are neither heard nor participated in the decision-making processes.

As the recent intra-group polarization between insiders and outsiders of the political establishment in Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia and Montenegro show that even within dominant ethnic groups generational and class differences are becoming more expressed and may lead to political projects that pose a threat to ethnic politics in the longer run.   However, it is hard for new political initiatives to break ground into the closed political landscape of traditional parties maintained through patronage networks in business and media sectors.   Therefore; to enable new voices in the political system, one of the areas to reform the current system with newcomers is to make party recruitment, financing and decision-making processes more open to public scrutiny.

---

[20] Reilly, B (2001); Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management, Cambridge University Press