

## Democratization in the Balkans The Limits of Elite-Driven Reform

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### Abstract

This essay attempts to shed light on the fact that, more than two decades after regime change, most Balkan countries remain either hybrid regimes or tentative democracies. It focuses primarily on the ways in which political party system dynamics influence democratization trajectories in these countries. The essay first explores the argument about party system competitiveness as a key driver of the process, but in doing so, reveals its limited explanatory potential. Instead, it is suggested that the crucial relation in a democracy is not the horizontal marketplace of the election, but the vertical relation of accountability between parties and voters. Given that the dominant strategy of voter-party linkage in this region is clientelism, the second part of the essay argues that the client-patron relation of accountability undermines rule of law and protection of civil liberties as fundamental pillars of democracy. The effects of the resulting power morphology are particularly pronounced in the Balkans, primarily due to factors of strong nationalist mobilization and disputed statehood processes. As a result, it is argued that further democratic advances depend on the growing social contention and mobilization as sources of pressure from below, which are currently jeopardized by rising levels of inequality and poverty in this region.

**Keywords:** Democratization, party system dynamics, clientelism, democratic accountability, the Balkans.

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**M**ore than two decades after the formal introduction of democratic institutions in countries of the Balkan region, these societies' regimes have not reached the threshold of consolidation as measured by Freedom House. Given that free and fair elections are the *sine qua non* of liberal democracy, political parties

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can be thought of as central institutions of democracy,<sup>1</sup> while the structure and interaction of political parties are “the most significant variables which contribute to the consolidation or failure of the political systems of democratic polities.”<sup>2</sup> This essay discusses ways in which competitive party systems advance democratization, and applies this argument to the countries in the Balkans. In doing so, the essay reveals the limited reach of such accounts, arguing that party system competitiveness represents neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for democratic advances. Instead, it is suggested that the crucial relation in a democracy is not the horizontal marketplace of the election, but the vertical relation of responsiveness and accountability<sup>3</sup> between parties and voters. It is in this second dimension that we need to look for explanations of why low-quality democracies persist. Political parties will develop democratic practices only if they are pressured into accepting limitations on their power. Since democracy cannot be engineered through smart design of formal institutions,<sup>4</sup> further democratic advances should be expected only with the strengthening of independent social spheres and the growing popular mobilization that demands government accountability.

### **Weak Democratization Trajectories**

A decade after regime change in the former communist bloc, it was clear that the differences among countries in this region far outnumbered supposed similarities.<sup>5</sup> Diversity of regime trajectories was the main outcome, with countries diverging to such an extent that, today, it is worthwhile wondering whether the term “post-communist” carries any analytical purchase at all. In any case, the most recent Nations in Transit<sup>6</sup> report classifies thirteen post-communist countries as democracies, six as transitional, and ten as authoritarian regimes. Successful trajectories were concentrated in Central

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Blondel, “The Role of Parties and Party Systems in the Democratization Process,” in *Democracy, Governance and Economic Performance: East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Ian Marsh, Jean Blondel, and Takashi Inoguchi (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Jon Elster, Claus Offe, and Ulrich K. Preuss, eds., *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies: Rebuilding the Ship at Sea* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 110.

<sup>3</sup> See Herbert Kitschelt, “Divergent Paths of Postcommunist Democracies,” in *Political Parties and Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), and Herbert Kitschelt, “Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities,” *Comparative Politics Studies* 33, nos. 6/7 (2000): 845-879.

<sup>4</sup> Danijela Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Kitschelt, “Divergent Paths of Postcommunist Democracies,” and Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Milada A. Vachudova, “Democracy in the Postcommunist World: An Unending Quest,” *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 1-24.

<sup>6</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2015 Report*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2015#.ViJQzH4zfDc> (accessed October 17, 2015).

and Eastern Europe (CEE). In the Balkans, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania are classified as semi-consolidated democracies; Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia are considered transitional hybrid regimes; while Kosovo is a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime. The key finding of the 2014 Nations in Transit report vis-à-vis the Balkans was that “dysfunctional governments continue to drive down democracy scores.”<sup>7</sup> Even though regime change formally occurred twenty-five years ago—sparking twin hopes of political and economic “catch ups” with Western Europe—neither came true. Countries in the Balkans remain substantially poorer than the rest of Europe, with lower standards of democracy.

At the same time, when compared to the states of the post-Soviet region, the assessment of prospects for further democratization in the Balkans looks substantially better. After the fall of the Eastern bloc and the rapid succession of regime changes that introduced democratic reforms, it was expected that at least some of the newly independent states, particularly Russia, would democratize. Though during the first half of the 1990s Russia recorded democracy scores similar to those in the Balkan states, after 1997, these scores worsened and have not recovered since.

Regarding the countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States, apart from a few exceptions, most of them never made substantial gains in the direction of democratic reforms. Today,<sup>8</sup> Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine are considered hybrid regimes, while the rest of the countries in this group are authoritarian regimes. Among the Central Asian states, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are scoring somewhat better, falling into the category of semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan belong to the “Worst of the worst” category, scoring the lowest possible ratings on both political and civil liberties. In other words, countries on the periphery of Europe remain mired in authoritarian rule, which “should be a source of deep concern for democrats everywhere.”<sup>9</sup>

## **Party System Competitiveness as a Driver of Democratization**

In the 1990s, insights from the literature on Latin American and Southern European transitions were applied in trying to account for post-communist transitions to democracy.<sup>10</sup> Today, we know that “transitology” was overly

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<sup>7</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2014 Report*, [https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2014#.VYK\\_rfnzrDc](https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2014#.VYK_rfnzrDc) (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2015 Report*.

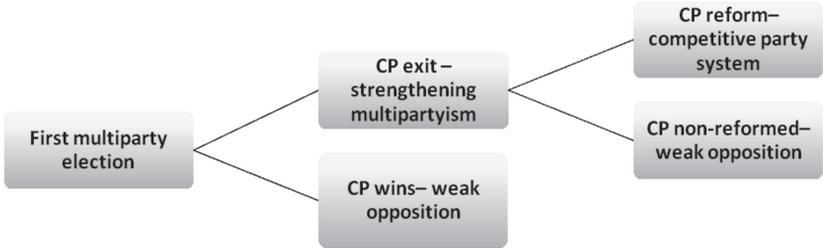
<sup>9</sup> Arch Puddington, “Promise and Reversal: The Post-Soviet Landscape Twenty Years On,” *Freedom House* (August 19, 2011), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/promise-and-reversal-post-soviet-landscape-twenty-years> (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, John T. Ishiyama, “The Sickle or the Rose? Previous Regime Types and the Evolution of the Ex-Communist Parties in Post-Communist Politics,” *Comparative Political*

optimistic in its predictions, since it put overwhelming emphasis on elite interactions, at the expense of historical legacies and structural prerequisites for democratization. At the same time, this literature greatly improved our understanding of how competition among elites furthers democratic development.<sup>11</sup> This essay revisits the argument according to which party system competition is a crucial factor for democratization in order to reassess its strength and relevance twenty-five years after regime change.

An analytical model that ingenuously summarizes a number of arguments about how political party competition influences democracy was developed by Grzymala Busse,<sup>12</sup> reproduced in figure 1. Grzymala Busse’s model summarizes several points which scholars agree are relevant for the development of political party competition in post-communist countries: the exit of the communist party from power at the first multiparty election; the existence of a strong democratic opposition to take its place; the prompt reform of the former communist party into a European-style Social Democratic party

Figure 1. Development of Competitive Party Systems in Post-Communist Countries



Source: Grzymala Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*, 16.

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*Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 299-330; Laszlo Bruszt and David Stark, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Bela Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience: East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998); Anna Grzymala Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Non-cooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (2002): 212-244; and id., “Transitions from Communism,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005): 5-19.

<sup>11</sup> Milada A. Vachudova and Timothy Snyder, “Are Transitions Transitory? Two Types of Political Change in Eastern Europe since 1989,” *East European Politics and Societies* 11, no. 1 (1996): 1-35; Milada A. Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Grzymala Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past*; and Anna Grzymala Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan: Party Competition and State Exploitation in Post-Communist Democracies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Grzymala Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*.

after losing office; and the subsequent regular alternation of political parties in power.<sup>13</sup> The logic of the model follows Hellman's<sup>14</sup> famous encapsulation of the essence of competitiveness: where politicians were most vulnerable to electoral pressures, countries adopted and sustained the highest level of reform.

### ***Communist (Non) Exit***

In the depicted model, the first point of divergence is the outcome of the initial multiparty election: whether former communist parties remain in power or are replaced by the opposition. Studies have shown that the exit of communist parties from power in the first democratic election was crucial for providing the initial impetus for political and economic democratic reform.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the fact that the former communists lost the first election indirectly speaks to the character of the previous regime in the sense to which it enabled the fostering of pluralism and the formation of alternative political society.<sup>16</sup> As Kitschelt et al.<sup>17</sup> have argued, substantial differences existed among communist regimes with respect to the extent to which communist elites were able to dominate society, as well as regarding the ways the regime handled oppositional elites. Looking at post-communist Europe, this diversity spanned from cases such as Albania, where patrimonial communist states faced no significant opposition while communism had no rivals expressing alternative visions of modernity, to the Czech Republic, which had considerable democratic experience in the interwar period and a much stronger opposition to communism, though repressed.<sup>18</sup>

That communist exit, indeed, was linked to characteristics of the previous regime and to the overall level of socioeconomic development is supported by the fact that, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, former communists lost elections to democratic anti-communist opposition parties across the board. In the Balkans, the situation was markedly different, as table 1 shows.

Among the six Balkan cases, only in Croatia did the former communist party lose the first multiparty election to a strong anti-communist opposition.

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Fish, "The Determinants of Economic Reform in the Post-Communist World," *East European Politics and Societies* 12, no. 1 (1998): 31-78; Valerie Bunce, "The Political Economy of Post-Socialism," *Slavic Review* 58, no. 4 (1999): 756-793; Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*; Grzymala Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past*; and id., *Rebuilding Leviathan*.

<sup>14</sup> Joel S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (1998): 203-234.

<sup>15</sup> Fish, "The Determinants of Economic Reform in the Post-Communist World," and Venelin I. Ganey, *Preying on the State: The Transformation of Bulgaria after 1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> See Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski, and Gabor Toka, *Post-Communist Party Systems* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Table 1. Communist Non/Exit

Exit	Remain in power	“It’s complicated”
Croatia	Bulgaria	Macedonia
	Serbia	
	Romania	
	Albania	

According to the model in figure 1, this set Croatia on a path toward a competitive party system, similar to that developed in Hungary or Poland, cases studied by Grzymala Busse.<sup>19</sup> In four Balkan cases, former communists stayed in power after the first multiparty election: Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania. According to the model in figure 1, this created multiple problems. First of all, there was a lack of impetus for substantial political and economic reform. Secondly, it spoke to the weakness of the opposition and the resulting great sway of ruling parties to abuse power.

Finally, Macedonia is a difficult case, since the first election, held in 1991, was subject to massive irregularities.<sup>20</sup> Even after the election was repeated, no party was able to form a majority, so the anti-communist VMRO-DPMNE led a technical government, which collapsed in less than a year. After the 1992 election, the former communist SDSM-led coalition came to power and remained in office until 1998.<sup>21</sup> The difficulty of implementing a free and fair election, followed by a long period of rule by former communists, places Macedonia much closer to the “no communist exit” group than to Croatia.

### ***Strength of Opposition***

Moving on to the second juncture in the model, Grzymala Busse understands political party competition as referring to a party system in which the incumbents are faced with a political opposition that “offers a clear, plausible and critical governing alternative that threatens the governing coalition with replacement.”<sup>22</sup> A strong opposition can monitor and influence the incumbent’s behavior, and it poses a threat of replacement, which should have the effect of inducing more accountable behavior by shifting the preference of incumbents toward strengthening formal institutions.<sup>23</sup> In other words, if a party in power can plausibly imagine being voted out of office in the forthcoming election, it will have the incentive to strengthen formal institutions so that it does not

<sup>19</sup> Grzymala Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*.

<sup>20</sup> Bogdan Szajkowski, “Elections and Electoral Politics in Macedonia,” *Transitions*, nos.1-2 (1999): 55-82.

<sup>21</sup> Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

<sup>22</sup> Grzymala Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

get a raw deal once out of power. Similarly, Vachudova<sup>24</sup> applies this logic of political competition to argue that political competition at the moment of regime change determined whether European post-communist countries embarked on a democratic trajectory. The quality of political competition is determined, she argues, by the presence or absence of an opposition to communism strong enough to take power at the moment of regime change, and secondly the presence or absence of a reformed communist party. This is basically the same argument that Grzymala Busse makes, but Vachudova explicates the essential link between political party competition and democratization.

Therefore, democratization prospects, to a large extent, depend on whether at least two strong political alternatives compete for power, beginning with the first multiparty election. Their alternation in government as a source of mutual restraint is considered to have a strong positive effect on the development of democracy. Conversely, in the absence of competition at that critical juncture of the first few rounds of elections, new regimes spiral into vicious circles of abuse of power and state capture. A critical juncture means that regime change in the 1990s is seen as a historic moment that proves crucial in directing subsequent outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Examples from post-Soviet space can well illustrate outcomes of entrenched despotism that occur in the absence of competitive elections; in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko won his fifth term in office in October 2015, ruling since 1991; similarly, Nursultan Nazarbayev won the election in April 2015, with nearly 98 percent of the vote,<sup>26</sup> ruling Kazakhstan for over a quarter of a century.

One way of empirically encapsulating the competitiveness argument is by applying Huntington's<sup>27</sup> two-turnover test, which claims that, after the opposition wins and then loses office to the pro-regime party, a democratic regime is considered consolidated. Applying this two-turnover test allows us not only to establish when a country entered a period of consolidated democracy, but also helps create a comparative, easily readable visual of the length of rule of political parties in post-communist European countries. Figure 2 shows moments of first and second turnover, with countries sorted according to the year of the first turnover. Apart from the Balkan cases, the figure also includes CEE countries in order to cover a wider diversity of outcomes.

Setting aside Albania for the moment, countries that have subsequently established a more positive democratization trajectory are, as expected, those

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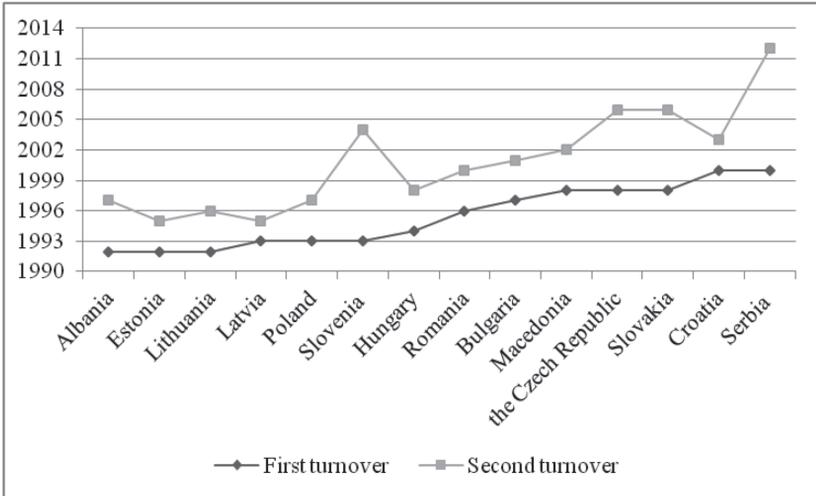
<sup>24</sup> Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*.

<sup>25</sup> Henry E. Brad and David Collier, *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> "Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev Declared Election Winner," *Al Jazeera* (April 27, 2015), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/kazakhstan-nazarbayev-declared-election-winner-150427044024003.html> (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

Figure 2. Two Turnovers in Post-Communist Europe



Source: Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

where the first turnover happened early: Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia. In contrast stands a group of countries where the party that won the initial elections stayed in power for six to ten years: Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia. The last two countries of this group passed the first turnover test only in 2000. Until this first turnover, in all these cases, nationalist parties dominated the first decade after regime change, which proved to be highly consequential for their democratization trajectories. It was only after these entrenched nationalist parties lost power that cycles of alternation in power started. In Bulgaria and Macedonia, the respective 1997 and 1998 reform governments were also the first governments to survive entire terms in office. With respect to the second turnover in power, all fourteen countries have experienced it by now, with Serbia standing out as the case where this occurred most recently, in 2012.

However, figure 2 also reveals some surprising findings. First of all, in this measurement, Albania stands out as a competitive party system, while this has not propelled the country on a democratization trajectory similar to that of CEE countries. Competition was present, but it took place in a context that lacked the minimal guarantees for a democratic process.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, even though Slovenia's party system does not look highly competitive (the LDS had a long period in office), Slovenia is one of the success stories of post-communist democratic transformation. Opposite to the Albanian case, it would seem that

<sup>28</sup> Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

the explanation lies in the fact that the LDS ruled within a framework that was able to guarantee mechanisms of monitoring and accountability that provided checks on abuse of power. To summarize, although the competitiveness argument of alternation in power between two strong blocs illuminates important democratization dynamics, as an explanation, it satisfies neither the condition of necessity (the case of Slovenia disproves this) nor sufficiency (the case of Albania). Instead, these findings seem to suggest that it is the character of the accountability and responsiveness in the party–voter linkage, rather than the mechanism of competition, that makes the difference.

In order to develop this argument, this essay again starts from Grzymala Busse’s model,<sup>29</sup> which stands on three assumptions, two explicit and one tacit. The first explicit one is that alternation in power is a good thing, since “changing places” in government encourages all parties to strengthen independent institutions and curbs abuse of power. The second explicit assumption moves us in the direction of exploring *who competes*. Though she develops primarily a structural argument that emphasizes the mechanism of competition, Grzymala Busse also assumes that, after regime change, the main contenders for power will morph into two recognizable European party families—the conservatives and the social democrats. Building on the experience of Central European states, primarily the Czech case that she knows best, she assumes that the anti-communist opposition is democratic liberals, so puts most focus on whether former communists were able to relatively swiftly reform into European-style social democrats. And herein lies the tacit assumption—that political parties in post-communist Europe will base their electoral strategies on programmatic competition. However, this is only part of the story since, as Kitschelt<sup>30</sup> and others have argued, voter–party linkages also can be based on charisma or selective rewards (clientelism). Though no party relies exclusively on one type of linkage, we are usually able to determine the dominant type of linkage in a given party system.

Linking Kitschelt’s<sup>31</sup> multifaceted argument about the determinants of dominant strategies of voter–party linkages with the propositions that Grzymala Busse makes, shifts the focus onto *who competes*, or in other words, onto party ideology. In principle, the expectation is that parties espousing universalist ideologies, such as socialism and liberalism, dominantly rely on programmatic appeals, since they aim to eradicate unfair advantages and are explicitly opposed to rent-seeking special interests. This is where Kitschelt’s argument ties in with Grzymala Busse’s assertion that the transformation of former communist parties into social democrats is a crucial step in the post-communist democratization process. Having said that, Kitschelt considers

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<sup>29</sup> Grzymala Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*.

<sup>30</sup> Kitschelt, “Divergent Paths of Postcommunist Democracies.”

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

two reasons why this outcome is not such a frequent occurrence in the post-communist space. First, because socialism was so fundamentally discredited, former communist parties were hesitant to hedge their survival on programmatic promises; second, where they remained in power after the first election and kept their hands on state resources, the parties had a strong incentive for building clientelist network linkages. As shown earlier, the communist non-exit trajectory is highly pertinent in the Balkans, as was the clientelist strategy of voter—party linkages.

Even more important in the context of the Balkans is the fact that parties which ruled over regime change did not espouse a universalist ideology, but rather various hues of particular ideologies which appealed to sectional constituencies and explicitly sought to draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders. According to Kitschelt, parties that base their appeal on ethnic nationalism (and similar forms of exclusionary ideology) are inclined to build clientelist linkages because they have a clearly identifiable constituency, and because they shy away from formulating an economic program for fear of dividing their constituency. As a result, ethno—nationalist parties always tone down programmatic, policy-oriented linkages. This is of fundamental relevance to the context of the Balkans, where, in most cases, nationalist parties, which emerged on both sides of the party spectrum, ruled over the initial decade of regime change.

Finally, establishing that the dominant strategy expected of political parties in the Balkans was clientelist rather than programmatic, moves us away from the horizontal mechanism of party competition as a source of democratization toward the vertical relationship of accountability and responsiveness between parties and voters. Kitschelt argues that clientelist voter—party linkages establish very tight bonds of accountability and responsiveness, but along client—patron lines rather than through the development of policies that benefit citizens as a whole. As a result, democracies in which clientelist strategies prevail yield high income inequality, as well as high levels of corruption and abuse of power. If the parties' primary strategy is to satisfy rent-seeking special interests, formal institutional legality often may be sacrificed to this end, which subsequently shows up as low scores for rule of law and protection of civil liberties—key dimensions which drive down democratization scores in countries of the Balkan region.

## **Clientelism and Its Morphology of Power**

In one of the earlier attempts to capture the morphology of power that emerged from the development of multiparty systems in the Balkans, Zakošek<sup>32</sup> argued

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<sup>32</sup> Nenad Zakošek, "Pravna država i demokracija u post-socijalizmu" [Rule of law and democracy in post-socialism], *Politička misao* 4 (1997): 78-85.

that it was characterized by three processes: power concentration, power transformation, and, paradoxically, power dispersion. Power concentration refers to the domination of the executive over the parliamentary and judicial branches of government, which made regimes in the Balkans somewhat akin to the delegative democracies that O'Donnell<sup>33</sup> captured in Latin America. This feature of power manifests itself as impotent legislatures; the lack of judicial independence; the overgrowth of advisory and various para-institutional formations; exclusion of the opposition from oversight bodies; the misuse of intelligence services; and similar tactics.<sup>34</sup>

Second, power was transformed as political clout was used for economic gain, transforming political into economic elites. Privatization processes across the Balkans transformed political party affiliates into economic moguls and tycoons, as “privileged information, privileged access, privileged loan terms, and appropriations by dubious means helped to build up private fortunes.”<sup>35</sup> In a second step, economic power was used to wield political influence, leading to inside capture of the privatization process.<sup>36</sup> This political influence, in turn, allowed companies to corrupt their way to public tenders, avoid taxes, and systematically break laws to gain competitive advantage.<sup>37</sup> As has been documented, for instance, in Bulgaria and Romania, even after their accession to the EU, serious problems regarding tackling corruption and establishing judicial independence remained.<sup>38</sup>

Due to this process of power transformation, an independent economic sphere as the precondition of control over the political system failed to emerge.<sup>39</sup> This diagnosis identifies a key problem because, however well one designs the formal legal framework, the government cannot be expected to be the sole source of its own control. Monitoring and control should stem from independent sources of power that can counterbalance the power of political elites through pressure from below from citizens and groups demanding fair treatment by government institutions. As a result of power transformation in the 1990s, economic and political power became fully intertwined, so the only

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<sup>33</sup> Guillermo A. O'Donnell, “Delegative Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (1994): 55-69.

<sup>34</sup> See Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

<sup>35</sup> Sabrina P. Ramet and Peter Wagner, “Post-Socialist Models of Rule in Central and Southeast Europe,” in *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, ed. Sabrina Ramet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22.

<sup>36</sup> John A. Gould, “Out of the Blue? Democracy and Privatization in Post-Communist Europe,” *Comparative European Politics* 1, no. 3 (2003): 277-312.

<sup>37</sup> Centre for the Study of Democracy, *Organised Crime and Corruption: National Characteristics and Policies of the EU Member States* (Sofia, Bulgaria: CSD, 2010), 6.

<sup>38</sup> Aneta Spendzharova and Milada A. Vachudova, “Catching Up or Sliding Back? Consolidating Liberal Democracy in Bulgaria and Romania after EU Accession,” paper presented at the European Union Studies Association Conference, Boston, March 3-6, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

real potential for change exists in the various forms of citizen mobilization. The extent to which this mechanism of pressure from below was present in the different post-communist countries probably accounts, in large measure, for the divergent democratization trajectories across post-communist Europe, a topic to which the final section of this essay returns.

Third and counterintuitively, in the initial period of regime change in the 1990s, there was a process of power dispersion. Since formal institutions and legal instruments were side-lined and disregarded, a refeudalization process was set in motion whereby already relatively weak bureaucracies were further weakened through a wide web of informal power coalitions based in party affiliations.<sup>40</sup> In a nutshell, parties presiding over regime change in post-communist Europe were defining rules and institutions to govern their societies, and, at the same time, redistributing the bulk of existing assets. This created favorable conditions for abuse of power, insider deals, and rampant corruption across the post-communist world.<sup>41</sup> The three described processes of power concentration in the executive, the fusing of economic and political power, and power dispersion in a web of informal corruptive networks capture the power morphology that coalesced after regime change in post-communist Europe. However, given that democratization trajectories in the Balkans have been markedly weaker than those of Central European states, what remains is to define key factors that made their sway so much stronger in the former as opposed to the later region.

### **Why Weak Democracies Persist in the Balkans**

Embarking on democratic reforms in the beginning of the 1990s brought unusually high legitimacy to regimes across Eastern Europe. In an era of high consensus about the desirability of coupling liberal democracy and capitalism, encapsulated in Fukuyama's end of history,<sup>42</sup> post-communist governments in the 1990s had very strong societal support. In other words, newly formed democratic regimes in the 1990s enjoyed unprecedented levels of legitimacy from their citizens, giving governments strong mandates to implement wide-reaching reforms. Even after it became obvious that the "good life" was not materializing for the majority in these countries, these governments did not face popular revolt. Greskovits<sup>43</sup> showed that citizens of post-communist Europe exhibited patience in the face of growing social inequalities and deterioration

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<sup>40</sup> Zakošek, "Pravna država i demokracija u post-socijalizmu" [Rule of law and democracy in post-socialism].

<sup>41</sup> Milada A. Vachudova, "Corruption and Compliance in the EU's Post-Communist Members and Candidates," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 47 (2009): 43-62.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Bela Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience: East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998).

of living standards that accompanied the restoration of capitalism, using only the electoral ballot to voice their discontent. Therefore, although strong support for democratization was an important ingredient for implementing change, it turned out to be a double-edged sword, since the citizens' unquestioning support simultaneously created great leeway for parties in how they exercised power.

While popular patience was characteristic of all newly democratizing regimes in post-communist Europe, since the process of democratization in former Yugoslavia broke out into several violent conflicts, this created greater leeway for governments to rule without fear of social contention. Nationalist ideologies do not promise much apart from building the nation, and inherently do not engender accountability mechanisms that strengthen rule of law mechanisms and the protection of civil liberties. In addition, the context of disputed state-building and violent conflicts, which characterized democratization processes in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo, further suppressed a pluralization of the public sphere, and discouraged social contention that would demand government accountability. A politics of nationalist consensus that emerged in contexts where statehood was disputed, either externally or internally, produced therefore a critical vacuum, with political parties enjoying broad scope in their exercise of power. Furthermore, wars that went on during the 1990s further aggravated the problem of corruption by allowing political leaders to exploit extreme circumstances<sup>44</sup> in which the economies of these societies were being transformed far away from the public eye.

Who were the main protagonists of the power morphology in the Balkans? In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) officially governed during 1990-1991 and 1994-1997, but it was also the major supporter of the government in the interim period, 1991-1994. Its support and influence eroded only gradually, and it never experienced any major rifts during the early 1990s.<sup>45</sup> In other words, in Bulgaria, the Socialists exerted a hegemonic position both on the national and local levels until 1997.<sup>46</sup> Party loyalists were strategically placed within state institutions in order to increase informal power networks and extract resources from the state, coupled with instrumental reforms that severely crippled state capacity for control and monitoring. Hence, once the BSP finally left office, severe defects in state mechanisms of control and monitoring remained, creating a lasting negative legacy for the process of democratization.

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<sup>44</sup> Ramet and Wagner, "Post-Socialist Models of Rule in Central and Southeast Europe."

<sup>45</sup> Georgi Karasimeonov, "Bulgaria's New Party System," in *Stabilizing Fragile Democracies: Comparing Party Systems in Southern and Eastern Europe*, ed. Geoffrey Pridham and Paul Lewis (London: Routledge, 1996), 258.

<sup>46</sup> Ganev, *Preying on the State*.

In Romania, after the first multiparty election, the former communist party declaratively changed into a socialist party, won elections, and postponed any substantial reforms.<sup>47</sup> In both Romania and Bulgaria, these parties had free rein to exploit the high contingency surrounding simultaneous political and economic reform.<sup>48</sup> The evolution of a multiparty system against the background of patrimonial communist regimes<sup>49</sup> and low modernization levels created new “feuds” based on family and local ties, breeding favorable circumstances for political elite to act outside control.<sup>50</sup> At the onset of the 1990s, Romania was abandoning the extremely oppressive form of communism that evolved under the dictatorship of Nicolai Ceaușescu.<sup>51</sup> Regime change was made possible by the consent of Ceaușescu’s army and secret police,<sup>52</sup> a circumstance repeated in Serbia with the ousting of Milošević in 2000. On the one hand, there were orthodox communists and some Gorbachev-style reformers, while the other side has been characterized as “doctrinaire personal communism associated with Ceaușescu.”<sup>53</sup> Iliescu and his supporters developed a mode of rule that manipulated institutions to restrict political competition.<sup>54</sup>

After former communists lost power and access to state resources, Bulgaria and Romania experienced advancement in democratization.<sup>55</sup> In Bulgaria, after the 1997 election, the former communist party started to develop a programmatic strategy, adopting a “pro-European stance.”<sup>56</sup> In Romania, the Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), led by hard-line nationalist Iliescu, also started to develop a program along the lines of European social democracy.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, both parties had trouble shedding the specter of the old regime, as well as initiating substantial economic and political reform, which

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<sup>47</sup> Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*, and Frank Schimmelfennig, “Strategic Calculation and International Socialization: Membership Incentives, Party Constellations, and Sustained Compliance in Central and Eastern Europe,” *International Organization* 5 (2005): 827-860.

<sup>48</sup> Vachudova, “Corruption and Compliance in the EU’s Post-Communist Members and Candidates.”

<sup>49</sup> Kitschelt et al., *Post-Communist Party Systems*.

<sup>50</sup> Karasimeonov, “Bulgaria’s New Party System.”

<sup>51</sup> Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*, and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Romania: Fatalistic Political Cultures Revisited,” in *Democracy and Political Culture in Eastern Europe*, ed. Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Dieter Fuchs, and Jan Zielonka (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> Mungiu-Pippidi, “Romania.”

<sup>53</sup> Tom Gallagher, “The Emergence of New Party Systems and Transitions to Democracy: Romania and Portugal Compared,” in *Stabilising Fragile Democracies: Comparing New Party Systems in Southern and Eastern Europe*, ed. Geoffrey Pridham and Paul G. Lewis (London: Routledge 1996), 213.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*.

<sup>56</sup> Taras Kuzio, “Comparative Perspectives on Communist Successor Parties in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41 (2008): 397-419.

<sup>57</sup> William M. Downs and Raluca Miller, “The 2004 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Romania,” *Electoral Studies* 25 (2006): 393-415.

led to a postponement of the two countries' accession process to the EU.<sup>58</sup>

The development of representative democracy epitomized by voter-party linkages and government accountability was particularly difficult in Albania. Sali Berisha's rule in the 1990s was "dictatorial and authoritarian."<sup>59</sup> When in the late 1990s the rest of the Balkans was experiencing a democratic turn, Albania was going through a meltdown of state institutions,<sup>60</sup> followed by "several months of near anarchy."<sup>61</sup> As a result, while some other regimes in the region substantially improved after 2000, Albania remained stuck in fundamental problems of electoral fraud, widespread corruption, and violations of democratic standards.<sup>62</sup>

Similar to Albania, democracy in Macedonia was instituted mainly as a result of changes in the external environment following the dissolution of Yugoslavia.<sup>63</sup> Two major parties emerged in the first multiparty elections: the former communist SDSM and the VMRO-DPMNE. As in Bulgaria and Romania, the former communists won the first election and then ruled Macedonia for most of the 1990s. On the other side was the nationalist right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, which won the 1998 election in Macedonia. Given that the Albanian minority in Macedonia represented 23 percent of the population,<sup>64</sup> and the fact that Macedonia was in the neighborhood of several ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia, party competition in Macedonia became structured along ethnic lines. The precarious balance of peace between ethnic communities was shattered after the crisis in Kosovo spilled over to Macedonia, erupting in violence between Macedonians and Albanians in 2001. The crisis ended with the adoption of the Ohrid Agreement, which gave the Albanian minority more extensive rights. However, although the 2001 Ohrid Agreement was designed to resolve ethnic strife, it actually might have engendered a framework whereby ethnic group rights permanently dominate the political agenda at the expense of further democratization.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group Europe Report, no. 87, *Albania: State of the Nation (2000)*, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/balkans/albania/087-albania-state-of-the-nation.aspx> (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Bogdan Szajkowski, "The Parliamentary Elections in Albania, June–August 2001," *Electoral Studies* 22 (2003): 361.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 325-395; Bogdan Szajkowski, "The Parliamentary Election in Albania, July–August 2005," *Electoral Studies* 26 (2007): 196-231; and Tom Hashimoto, "Victory for European Albania: Democratic Election as a Step towards 'Strong States'," *European Perspectives – Journal on European Perspectives of the Western Balkans* 1, no. 1 (2009): 75-92.

<sup>63</sup> Jenny Engstrom, *Democratization and the Prevention of Violent Conflict* (London: Ashgate, 2009), 110.

<sup>64</sup> Zhidas Daskalovski, "Democratic Consolidation and the 'Stateness' Problem: The Case of Macedonia," *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3, no. 2 (2004): 52-66.

<sup>65</sup> Engstrom, *Democratization and the Prevention of Violent Conflict*, 132.

The international environment has further exacerbated interethnic tensions in Macedonia, the most pressing being the name dispute with Greece. Greece's decision to block Macedonia's NATO membership in 2008 de facto also has blocked the process of European integration ever since. In addition, Bulgaria disputes aspects of Macedonia's statehood, most notably its language and its claim to a separate ethnic identity. As a result, Macedonian nationalism, which is voiced primarily by the ruling VMRO-DMPNE, is nurtured by the continued challenge to the country's statehood and national identity, as is confirmed by recent turbulent events. This translates into lasting problems of poor government accountability, state capture, and corruption.

Finally, the cases of Serbia and Croatia often were compared during the 1990s with respect to Milošević's and Tuđman's mode of rule. Dominant parties in both countries were ethno-nationalist, even though the Croatian Democratic Union (CDU) was an anti-communist party, while Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia was the successor of the Communist Party of Serbia. However, while in Croatia the CDU was the only major party to espouse ethno-nationalism, in Serbia, Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) had an even more extreme wingman in the Serbian Radical Party (SRP). In the early 1990s, the SRP provided parliamentary support to Milošević's SPS by implementing a radical ethno-nationalist platform, through which Serbia resisted the dissolution of Yugoslavia and attempted to acquire territories in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Croatia. During the first decade of regime change, these two extremist parties dominated Serbia's political space.

In Croatia, the CDU emerged in 1990 as the national movement for independence and developed into a charismatic clientelist party.<sup>66</sup> All governments from 1990 to 2000 were majority CDU governments.<sup>67</sup> The year 2000 is the first time that the CDU was removed from power, and a center-left coalition assumed leadership, led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The 2000 election was a democratic turning point.<sup>68</sup> It was in 2001, after Tuđman's death and the removal of the CDU from power, that Croatia moved from a Semi-Free to a Free country, according to Freedom House ratings. Following Tuđman's death, the new party leader, Ivo Sanader, initiated the transformation

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<sup>66</sup> Mirjana Kasapović, "Demokratska konsolidacija i izborna politika u Hrvatskoj 1990-2000 [Democratic consolidation and electoral politics in Croatia 1990-2000], in *Hrvatska politika 1990-2000* [Politics in Croatia 1990-2000], ed. Mirjana Kasapović (Zagreb, Croatia: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 2001).

<sup>67</sup> Mirjana Kasapović, "Koalicijske vlade u Hrvatskoj: prva iskustva u komparativnoj perspektivi," [Coalition governments in Croatia: First experiences in comparative perspective], in *Izbori i konsolidacija demokracije u Hrvatskoj* [Elections and the consolidation of democracy in Croatia], ed. Goran Ćular (Zagreb, Croatia: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> Schimmelfennig, "Strategic Calculation and International Socialization," and Goran Ćular, "Političke stranke i potpora demokraciji" [Political parties and the support for democracy], in *Izbori i konsolidacija demokracije u Hrvatskoj* [Elections and the consolidation of democracy in Croatia], ed. Goran Ćular (Zagreb, Croatia: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 2005).

of an ethno-nationalist organization into a Christian Democratic party.<sup>69</sup> After this point, the party system became competitive, with two major parties taking turns in power.

From the moment of regime change, the party system in Serbia was dominated by extreme nationalism, countered by a bloc of parties which aimed to develop a liberal programmatic appeal, but which was, as shown elsewhere,<sup>70</sup> timid, weak, and disorganized. After the 2008 election, Serbia witnessed some important realignments in its party space, primarily as a result of the nationalist fervor withering thin. Members of the Socialist party rebranded themselves Social Democrats and left the extremist nationalist field populated by only the Radicals. Soon thereafter, the Radicals suffered an internal split, with the splinter Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) espousing more moderate nationalist politics. Since then, the Serbian Progressive Party has become the most popular party in Serbia, winning the 2014 election and currently heading the government. However, given that since 2012 the former democratic bloc has literally imploded and that SPP has a strong majority in parliament, concerns have been voiced over an Orban-style authoritarian threat in Serbia.<sup>71</sup>

## The Legacy of the 1990s, Growing Popular Discontent, and the Future

To summarize, the six Balkan cases examined were all characterized by regime change that was shaped by parties which faced weak oppositions and timid electorates, and which drew their legitimacy from nationalist ideology and clientelist ties to voter groups. Here, one might say, fine, but these are stories from the 1990s—how do they matter today? I argue that the initial decade of regime change represented a critical juncture, in which authoritarian rule within a formally democratic framework produced lasting negative legacies.<sup>72</sup>

As the brief case studies above show, in the second decade after regime change, the six Balkan countries saw a strengthening of political opposition as a source of restraint and, in more recent times, they increasingly are facing

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<sup>69</sup> Nenad Zakošek, *Politički sustav Hrvatske* [Political system in Croatia] (Zagreb, Croatia: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 2002); Steven Fish and Andrej Krickovic, “Out of the Brown and into the Blue: The Tentative Christian-Democratization of the Croatian Democratic Union,” *East European Constitutional Review* 12, no. 2 (2003): 104-112; Danijela Dolenc, “Europeanization as a Democratizing Force in Postcommunist Europe: Croatia in Comparative Perspective,” *Croatian Political Science Review*, no. 5 (2008): 23-46; and id., “Demokratizacija stranačkog sustava u Hrvatskoj: ponuda i potražnja javnih politika” [Democratization of the party system in Croatia: Supply and demand for public policies], in *Stranke i javne politike. Izbori u Hrvatskoj 2007* [Political parties and public policies: Elections in Croatia 2007], ed. Zdravko Petak (Zagreb, Croatia: Biblioteka Politička Misao, 2009).

<sup>70</sup> Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

<sup>71</sup> Danijela Dolenc, “Jačaju li autoritarne tendencije u Srbiji?” [Are authoritarian tendencies in Serbia growing?], *Političke analize* 17 (2014): 53-57.

<sup>72</sup> Dolenc, *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*.

popular contention. The patience that Greskovits was describing in the early 1990s has worn thin, with wide popular mobilization recorded on the streets of many city capitals in the Balkans. In 2012, citizens of Romania protested against the health-care law;<sup>73</sup> in 2013, widespread popular protests against the rising cost of electricity forced Bulgaria's center-right government to resign;<sup>74</sup> in 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed riots and demonstrations in twenty towns and cities;<sup>75</sup> and in 2015, Macedonia experienced a prolonged crisis due to widespread demonstrations against the government.<sup>76</sup> These are positive developments, which should hopefully translate into democratic advances.

However, these positive trends are countered by the fact that the features of the state and mode of rule are firmly entrenched, as is the temptation of political parties to keep extracting resources from the state. Until popular mobilization becomes strong enough to enforce vertical accountability to citizens' demands along programmatic rather than clientelist lines, the same mode of rule will survive. Here, a crucial obstacle to stronger pressure from below is the countries' overall level of socioeconomic development, and, in particular, the rising levels of inequality and poverty, as table 2 and figure 3 show.

In 2014, countries of the Balkans were much poorer than their CEE neighbors, and they remain below 50 percent of the EU28 average GDP per capita. Figure 3 shows data on risk-of-poverty for selected countries in the region in 2013.

Figure 3 confirms expectations regarding the extent of socioeconomic deprivation in the region. Balkan countries for which these data are available—Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Croatia—have the highest levels of risk of poverty in Europe. Ever since Lipset,<sup>77</sup> we know that overall levels of socioeconomic development are related to urbanization, literacy, and educational attainment, and conversely—that widespread poverty, deprivation, and existential risk disable individual emancipation and demands for more democratic government.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "Romania Redrafts Health-care Law after Violent Protests," *Lancet* (February 11, 2012), [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(12\)60214-1/fulltext?rss=yes&utm\\_source=feedblitz&utm\\_medium=FeedBlitzEmail&utm\\_content=196607&utm\\_campaign=0](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(12)60214-1/fulltext?rss=yes&utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzEmail&utm_content=196607&utm_campaign=0) (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> "Nations in Transit 2014—Bulgaria," *Freedom House* (June 12, 2014), [http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/277845/411140\\_de.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/277845/411140_de.html) (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>75</sup> "Bosnia-Herzegovina Hit by Wave of Violent Protests," *Guardian* (February 7, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/07/bosnia-herzegovina-wave-violent-protests> (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> "Macedonia Violence after Zaev Claims 'Cover-up'," *BBC News* (May 6, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32610951> (accessed October 17, 2015).

<sup>77</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69-105.

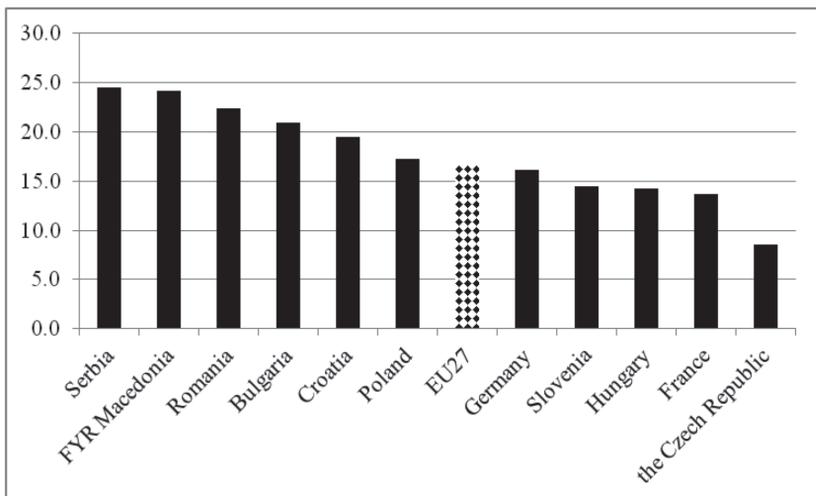
<sup>78</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Table 2. GDP Per Capita in Old and New European Democracies, 2014

Index—EU28	100
Germany	123
France	107
Czech Republic	84
Slovenia	83
Hungary	68
Poland	68
Croatia	59
Romania	54
Bulgaria	45
Montenegro	39
FYR Macedonia	36
Serbia	35
Albania	29

Source: Eurostat 2014, publicly available dataset, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tec00114&plugin=1> (October 17, 2015).

Figure 3. At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate by Poverty Threshold, in 2013



Source: Eurostat, publicly available dataset, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People\\_at\\_risk\\_of\\_poverty\\_or\\_social\\_exclusion#Income\\_poverty:\\_17.2.C2.A0.25\\_of\\_the\\_population\\_in\\_the\\_EU-28\\_facing\\_risk\\_of\\_poverty](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion#Income_poverty:_17.2.C2.A0.25_of_the_population_in_the_EU-28_facing_risk_of_poverty) (accessed October 17, 2015).

## Conclusion

To conclude, structural preconditions, such as overall levels of socioeconomic development, condition both the strategies of political parties and, more importantly, the strength of independent social spheres, which are the source of popular pressure from below. In his study of regime change in Russia and Germany in the 1920s, Kirchheimer<sup>79</sup> argued that the social and economic frame of a particular society is the “conditioning parameter”<sup>80</sup> within which choices are made and solutions are sought. While we may argue that twenty-five years of experience with democratic institutions should increase the competences of citizens in Balkan states in holding their governments to account, the growing social inequalities in these societies work in the opposite direction. Instead of engendering emancipated subjects capable of political efficacy and of pressuring governments into being more accountable, they create new breeding ground for nationalist and exclusionary appeals that maintain political parties’ broad sway in how they exercise power.

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<sup>79</sup> Otto Kirchheimer, “Confining Conditions and Revolutionary Breakthroughs,” *American Political Science Review* 59, no. 4 (1965): 964-974.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 966.