

# NON-MAJORITY PARTIES AND THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



Troublemakers or King Makers?

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# **Non-Majority Parties and their Influence in the Western Balkans: Troublemakers or King Makers?**

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**Summary:** General state weakness, lack of democratic tradition, and perseverance of ethnic nationalism in the Western Balkans have a disproportionate impact on non-majority or minority communities in the Western Balkans. The countries of the region struggle to build harmonious civic identities in which non-majority communities feel at ease with the state are welcomed as part of it or, in worst-case scenarios, are excluded from services. The primary responsibility for the state of minority rights rests on political elites and majority communities, as well as meddling from “mother states”. However, increasingly, the instrumentalization of non-majority community grievances is also part of the toolkit of malign authoritarian actors. On the other hand, non-majority communities have also been a factor of resilience in some cases. This policy brief will attempt to map the role that non-majority communities play in enabling or countering authoritarian currents in the Western Balkans.

## Introduction

Non-majority communities, and the parties that represent them, have diverse reputations in the Western Balkans, often they are troublemakers, sometimes they are kingmakers, and seldom they may be game-changers. Their position within their states and the power or influence they can wield relies heavily on the formal and informal context within which they operate. To use a trivial analogy: think of politics in these countries as a fishbowl, with majority parties deciding just how big or filled with water the fishbowl would be. Non-majority parties are the fish that get to swim in it. This is not as depressing for them as it sounds because it wouldn't be a fishbowl without the fish, but the fish would die without the water.

The dynamics between majority and non-majority parties are marked by strong dependencies, while the source of dependency varies. While all non-majority parties depend on their coalition partners or on majority parties, the latter also depends on non-majority parties, particularly when they do not have the majority to form a government. The variety of dependency is connected to several factors: political, systemic, legal and historical.

This paper investigates the role of ethnic non-majority political parties in multi-ethnic societies in order to analyze how they influence and are influenced by the context where they operate. For the purposes of this paper, the concept of a non-majority political party is used interchangeably with political parties of non-majority communities, and it means the political parties which represent the interests of a single or multiple non-majority communities in a country. We posit that non-majority parties are influenced by the context they inhabit and influence it in turn within the opportunities that they have within the system, which defines their *modus operandi*. For this reason, this paper firstly lays out the electoral and legal framework of the three countries which form part of the research: Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Consequently we also analyze in detail how three non-majority political parties operate within their respective political systems. Lastly, taking into consideration both the context and the ideological and structural background of these political parties, we seek to find the trends that define their influence in state politics. We end the paper with lessons aimed at clarifying and improving the way researchers and policy-makers understand non-majority parties in the Western Balkans.

## Methodology

This report focuses on three case studies where non-majority communities influence the government and political developments. Based on this criteria, the countries that are the most relevant to research are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Due to the differences in the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it will not be included in this analysis, to facilitate the comparison between the three other countries. It must be highlighted that all these countries have been classified by the Freedom House as transitional or hybrid regimes<sup>1</sup>, which further affects the playground for all political parties, including the non-majority ethnic parties.

In our analysis we have chosen three different size communities, Albanians in North Macedonia (25.3% according to the 2002 census<sup>2</sup>), Serbs in Kosovo (roughly 3-7%<sup>3</sup>), and Albanians (4.9%<sup>4</sup>) in Montenegro, to see if there is any difference in the way they operate. Within the three chosen countries, we have selected one political player among non-majority communities which has had the most influence in the state political scene. Thus, this research focuses on the Serb List (Srpska lista) in Kosovo, the United Reform Action (URA) in Montenegro, and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) in North Macedonia.

Srpska lista is a political party that is heavily influenced by the kin-state of the community, Serbia. URA is a civic party therefore not a typical non-majority party, however it holds the image of the unfulfilled ideal type of the future of ethnic parties. Lastly, DUI is a political party which has structures which are embedded within the framework of the state. While all these political parties are different, they share one similarity: the influence of non-majority communities they represent, but they are different in how these communities exert and use their power.

The data of this report is based on a desk analysis of the political parties, as well as on the outcomes of an expert panel discussion. The expert panel discussion was organized with experts on political parties in the three countries under research under Chatham house rule<sup>5</sup> in January 2022. This means that while we may quote the statements of the experts, we will make no attribution to their names or title/position. The expert panel outcomes were crucial to ascertain the facts on the ground and to get a better perspective from practitioners and civil society activists on the role of non-majority parties on politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House. (2021). *Countries and Territories* <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>

<sup>2</sup> The data of the 2021 census are still not processed, thus we are using the data from the last census in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> It is not possible to find an accurate estimate of how many Serbs live in Kosovo. Available data only offer estimations, and the last census on the territory of Kosovo in which Serbs have participated has been conducted in 1991.

<sup>4</sup> *Montenegro* - The World Factbook. (2022). <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/montenegro/#people-and-society>

<sup>5</sup> *Chatham House Rule*. (2022, February 9). Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>

## Defining the context and the political anatomies of the parties

The countries that emerged after the breakup of Yugoslavia began their transition to democracy following an authoritarian regime(s)<sup>6</sup> and, in several cases, overcoming the scars of conflict and violence. After a period of turmoil, it was expected that after democratic parties took power in the 2000s in the countries of the region, there would be progress towards democratic functioning of the government, however, there has been largely stagnation<sup>7</sup>. The countries of the Western Balkans are still considered to be in a transitory phase, with a series of backslides into semi-authoritarianism in recent years, particularly in the cases of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro.<sup>8</sup>

The three countries that form a part of this study, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, have all been challenged, in various degrees, in consolidating their democracy within a multiethnic society, still not fully reconciled in the post-conflict and post-independence context. If we look at politics in these countries and within these contexts in a holistic way, then that calls for the review of numerous actors and their interaction to understand the rough road to democratization. Particularly important is that within a divided society, divided politics has also been the norm, which has seriously affected institution-building and hindered the development of democratic culture. In North Macedonia and Kosovo, the dynamics of a post-conflict society have established important cleavages which have largely supported a divisive and ethnicized political space, whereas in Montenegro, recent events have shown that nationalism and populism still have a strong influence in the country.

The political parties of these countries have established strong networks of clientelism and resource dependence, and they have done so through different means. As Soren Keil highlights, the “processes of building new states, establishing functional government and administrative services, and establishing the monopoly of power throughout the territory were controlled by a group of elites, who were either nationalists [...] or they were former Communists, who had turned towards nationalism as their new framework ideology”<sup>9</sup>. This monopoly of power was not spread through a single elite as the increasing accommodation of ethnic minorities in each country expanded, thus opening the space for ethnically divided elites. Within this division, political elites particularly became a way of distributing resources and of establishing new clientelistic networks, changing the relationship that citizens have to political parties and institutions. However, the logic behind the modus operandi of non-majority parties is often under-researched because it is either assumed that they operate under a nationalist frame or that they lack sufficient agency to affect political processes. While both of these assumptions are not without merit, we want to investigate further the framework and the decision-making processes of non-majority parties and their influence on the political space of the countries where they participate in the election processes.

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<sup>6</sup> Dolenec, Danijela. 2013. *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*. Colchester: ECPR Press., pg 20

<sup>7</sup> Dolenec, Danijela. 2013. *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

<sup>8</sup> Bieber, Florian. 2020. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>9</sup> Keil, Soeren. 2018. “The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.” *Southeastern Europe* 42 (1): 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201004>, pg.64

## Electoral systems and competition

All three countries examined by this paper have a parliamentary system, however, when it comes to the inclusion of non-majority parties in the electoral system, they have different approaches and methods. Ethnic-based political parties, or parties that cater to an ethnically selective electorate, run for elections in all three countries and enjoy relative success, particularly Albanian parties in North Macedonia, Serb and other non-majority community parties in Kosovo, and Serb and Albanian parties in Montenegro.

In North Macedonia, there are no reserved seats in the parliament for members of non-majority communities in the country, however a closed list proportional representation voting system ensures representation and it is preferred for consociational or power-sharing democracies as suggested by Arendt Lijphart<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the country is divided into six electoral zones, thus there are at most six lists of each party per zone (some parties may choose not to submit lists in some zones), and a voter chooses to vote for a party, and not individual candidates, a method which favors parties of non-majority communities as the votes do not spread out, however, hinders a more competitive process among candidates and indirectly controls and conditions democratic representation.

The Kosovo system is quite different as there is a single electoral district with a multi-party proportional representation system with preferential voting for up to five candidates (open lists). Kosovo Assembly, has 120 seats, with 100 seats distributed among candidates who have passed the 5 percent threshold, while the remaining 20 seats are guaranteed for non-majority communities, with ten seats for the Serb community, and the other ten seats for other non-majority representatives<sup>11</sup>. Non-majority communities compete among each other for the seats that are guaranteed for that ethnic community. There is no threshold for these parties to enter the parliament within the guaranteed seats, but should a political party representing a non-majority community receive over 5% of the total votes, they would receive new seats in addition to the guaranteed number of seats, though it must be highlighted this has not yet been the case.

In Montenegro, the electoral system is also a proportional representation system with the electoral threshold of 3%, which facilitates the entry for new parties as well as for non-majority parties.<sup>12</sup> The elections are also through a closed list but, unlike North Macedonia, they have one single country-wide list<sup>13</sup>, thus it is easier for a party to reach the threshold, even in the case where many ethnic non-majority parties of a single community compete for elections.

When it comes to party competition, there are several similarities and differences that emerge. In Montenegro and North Macedonia, the non-majority parties' main goal is to enter the government, after securing parliament seats, as junior partners after elections or to join a pre-electoral coalition. On the other hand, this is not the case in Kosovo because the non-majority parties compete for the seats in the parliament guaranteed for that ethnic community. Therefore, there is no practice of the

<sup>10</sup> Lijphart, Arend. 1977. *Democracy in Plural Societies A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven : Yale University Press.

<sup>11</sup> EU EOM Kosovo 2021 Municipal Elections - Final report. (2022). EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission. [https://eeas.europa.eu/election-observation-missions/eom-kosovo-2021/110464/eu-eom-kosovo-2021-municipal-elections-final-report\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/election-observation-missions/eom-kosovo-2021/110464/eu-eom-kosovo-2021-municipal-elections-final-report_en)

<sup>12</sup> Stankov, N. 2019. Springing up like mushrooms after the rain: „New“ parties in Montenegro's institutionalised party system, *Politics in Central Europe*, 15 (1), pp163-185

<sup>13</sup> IFES. (2020). *Elections in Montenegro 2020 Parliamentary Elections*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems. [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes\\_faqs\\_elections\\_in\\_montenegro\\_2020\\_parliamentary\\_elections\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_faqs_elections_in_montenegro_2020_parliamentary_elections_august_2020.pdf)

pre-election coalitions across ethnic lines, but it may occur that some non-majority community ethnic parties receive endorsements and support from the Albanian parties in the pre-election period. In order to enter the parliament and consequently receive positions in the government, these parties do not have to be a part of the ruling coalition.

## The power of forming coalitions

The benefits of forming coalitions or becoming part of governing coalitions are important to non-majority parties as they have the most to gain, wield the most power and ensure their longevity in the way of resources. While this sounds trivially logical, it is worth highlighting that being in the government is the main gateway to resources, particularly in Montenegro and North Macedonia. In addition, being part of the government is also about controlling who those resources go to, and within the clientelistic party structures that all these countries display, this subject becomes widely contentious. These resources include state funds, key positions such as ministries or directorates, employment to constituents in political parties' clientelistic networks, and access to information.

Therefore, whichever non-majority party is in power, it immediately has an upper hand on competitors, marking not only a disparity of votes but of resources. As one of the experts noted in the panel, "everyone wants to be a gatekeeper to their communities"<sup>14</sup> and becoming part of the government guarantees this. This control of resources and votes has meant that economic and political power are closely linked<sup>15</sup>. It also means that for non-majority parties, the way they consider their positionality within the political frame and coalition forming is different from that of majority parties in several ways, and in the following sections we will explore their logic and their political anatomy.

An important way to ensure that one party becomes part of the government is to ensure that they are the winning party within their ethnic community, as a result, there is strong intra-ethnic party competition more than inter-ethnic party competition in these countries. In North Macedonia, there are four large ethnic Albanian parties, DUI, Alliance for Albanians, Besa, and Alternativa. The Democratic Party for Albanians (DPA), the only remaining party from the 90s, has decreased in power and only secured one position in parliament and effectively lost the power it used to hold until the early 2010s. In North Macedonia, until recently, the principle was that the winning party/coalition of the majority would create a government with a non-majority party (read Albanian) that secured the most votes within their community. Thus when in 2006, VMRO DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) chose DPA as a junior governing party instead of DUI, which had secured the majority of Albanian votes, DUI organized protests and boycotted government sessions, leading to early elections in 2010, after which DUI has continued being a junior governing partner in all governments until the time of writing. After the 2016 elections, this rule was put to the test when DUI chose to enter a governing coalition with SDSM, which we will explore further in the next section. Smaller community parties, on the other hand, mostly rely on pre-electoral coalitions with the larger Macedonian parties, such as SDSM or VMRO DPMNE in order to secure their position.

In Montenegro, a recent trend has seen a growing support across all communities for civic parties that seek to represent all communities rather than one particular community. However, this has not ended intra-ethnic competition for seats in the country's parliament, particularly among the ethnic Albanian population. The Albanian community in Montenegro seems divided in terms of political

<sup>14</sup> Expert panel discussion, online: January 19, 2022

<sup>15</sup> Dolenc, Danijela. 2013. *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Europe*. Colchester: ECPR Press. p. 22



allegiances, and considering they represent 5% of the population, this undermines seriously their capacity to enter parliament on their own. In the 2020 general elections, there was an attempt to bring the ethnic Albanian parties together under the Albanian List, including parties such as the Democratic Union of Albanians or the Democratic Parties, to form a pre-electoral coalition, with pressure from the diaspora. However, the attempt failed<sup>16</sup> as the latter parties formed another Albanian Coalition, together with the Democratic League in Montenegro. Both lists only managed to get one seat each. Within this context, civic parties have become an attractive option, not only ideologically speaking, but also in broadening the voter base. For instance, the Black on White (Crno na bijelo) coalition led by URA, managed to win 4 seats in the 2020 elections. Indeed, URA has been very capable of utilizing the benefits of coalitions, considering that the threshold for entering the parliament remains at 3% both for parties or coalitions, thus it has been able to win in each election since its formation in 2015.<sup>17</sup>

In Kosovo, on the other hand, due to a more comprehensive legal framework in regards to the inclusion of non-majority communities, there are certain differences. Non-majority parties compete within their ethnic community, and should they form pre-election coalitions, they will do that within their ethnic community. In the case of the Serb community in Kosovo, especially in the post 2013 context, Srpska lista has not been forming coalitions with other Kosovo Serb political subjects, while other political subjects within the same community did, but without success in winning MP seats. For them, it is important to win all that one ethnic non-majority community can win in the elections since the Kosovo Constitution has foreseen a wide array of guarantees for the non-majority communities, starting from the guaranteed seats in the Kosovo Parliament, to the guaranteed posts in the executive branch. But that does not stop there. The non-majority communities play a crucial role in major legislative processes - in order to change the constitution or any of the laws of vital interest<sup>18</sup>, it requires to have a double 2/3 majority<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>. So, it is not that they are only securing the representation of their ethnic communities, but they also serve as gatekeepers of the non-majority community rights.

Non-majority parties have an interest in forming pre-electoral coalitions, but only within their ethnic community since that would increase their chances to win more/all seats guaranteed for that ethnic group. For these parties, the interest is to get into parliament and to draw from the constitutionally prescribed representation of non-majority communities. These parties have, on multiple occasions, served to secure the required majority to form the government with majority party(ies), but they do not need to be in the ruling coalition in order to get minister(s) or deputy ministers positions. For example, the last early legislative elections in February 2021 resulted in Srpska lista winning 10 out of 10 MP seats guaranteed for the Serb community, but remained in the “opposition”; still, this party has received one ministry (Ministry for Communities and Return) and several positions of deputy ministers<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> BIRN. (2020, July 29). Montenegro Albanians Fail to Unite Despite Diaspora's Plea. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/29/montenegro-albanians-fail-to-unite-despite-diasporas-plea/>

<sup>17</sup> Stankov, N. 2019. Springing up like mushrooms after the rain: „New“ parties in Montenegro's institutionalized party system, *Politics in Central Europe*, 15 (1), pp163-185. p. 76

<sup>18</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 81. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=3702>

<sup>19</sup> 2/3 majority within the 100 MP seats and 2/3 majority within the 20 guaranteed seats for the non-majority communities.

<sup>20</sup> Considering that the Serb community holds 10 MP seats, they can easily block these motions.

<sup>21</sup> This is foreseen in Kosovo Constitution Article 96, which stipulates that the Kosovo Serb community should have at least one minister and at least 2 deputy ministers in the Kosovo government.

# Political anatomies and the way they influence political systems

All three political parties have different ways in which they operate within the states where they run for election. Their anatomies and the influence they have on political systems in their countries are a consequence of the complex socio-political and demographic factors which will be presented in this section.

## Srpska lista

Since 1999 and the arrival off the international forces, Kosovo Serbs have been caught between the hammer and the anvil<sup>22</sup> political-economic dependence, and the requested loyalty from Belgrade, as well as pressures to take part in Kosovo political life, but, have mainly been restricted in the articulation of their politics. Faced with a demographic deficit, shortage of human potential and the loss of intellectual and academic elite, they have (except in rare moments) been a political instrument, and not an important political player.

Given the circumstances, the development of political parties and party system of Kosovo Serbs was chaotic, ad hoc and conditioned by broader political and social trends, including the issue of the status of Kosovo and political changes in Belgrade. The current absence of political pluralism has therefore a heightened degree of partocracy and there are clientelist relations between parties and citizens, as due to not having sufficiently built-up institutions, a party has become a place from which an ascend in the social hierarchy is possible.

Until 2014, political parties of Kosovo Serbs (especially in the north of Kosovo, and to a somewhat lesser extent in the south) were predominantly subsidiaries of bigger political parties from Serbia. The political power of Kosovo Serb leaders depended on the power of their political patrons in Belgrade and with the changes of power in Serbia the political hierarchy among Kosovo Serb parties changed. Simultaneously with the negotiations on the status of Kosovo and normalization of relations, Belgrade insisted on the political loyalty of Kosovo Serbs whose collaboration and acceptance of integration conditioned the international position of Belgrade as a credible partner. This political loyalty has been materialized into Srpska lista.

Srpska Lista became a dominant Kosovo Serb political party after the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013<sup>23</sup>. Founded as a civic initiative with the support from Belgrade, and a political party since 2017, it contributed to marginalization of former leaders in the north of Kosovo who opposed integration into Kosovo political and legal system and at the same time it put an end to the dominance of the Independent Liberal Party (SLS) in the south of Kosovo. In subsequent circles of local elections, in 2013, 2017 and 2021 and in the early parliamentary elections in 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2021, Srpska lista fully consolidated its power and is currently holding all 10 Serb-majority municipalities and controls all 10 guaranteed seats in the Kosovo Assembly, and the Ministry for Communities and Return within the Government of Kosovo.

The answer to why Kosovo Serbs vote for Srpska lista lies in the complex and dependable relationship that this community has with Serbia. Due to the historical role, demographic factors, economic, political and security dependence, Kosovo Serbs seek existential security in their relationship with Belgrade, seeing it as their guardian. Kosovo Serbs are economically dependent on Belgrade since

<sup>22</sup> Political parties of Kosovo Serbs in the political system of Kosovo: from pluralism to monism (2021)

<sup>23</sup> S.G.R. (2013). *Brussels Agreement*. The Government of the Republic of Serbia. <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en/120394>

Serbia is by far the biggest investor and job and service provider in Serb-populated areas in Kosovo, and that dependence reflects on the political behavior. Additionally, due to the lack of trust in Kosovo institutions, Kosovo Serbs will vote for the political option that has support from Belgrade, in this case - Srpska lista.

## DUI

The history of DUI and its formation connects it to the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict in North Macedonia which continues to set the way that it operates and its agenda. Namely, DUI is a political party which was formed after the 2001, incorporating some of the former Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare (National Liberation Army- UÇK) guerilla fighters, including Ali Ahmeti which as the leader of UÇK in North Macedonia became the leader of DUI, as well as politicians from other Albanian political parties active at the time, namely the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) and the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP). Because it came out of UÇK and the 2001 conflict, DUI has been able to claim a strong symbolic legitimacy over the representation of ethnic Albanians in the country. Namely, they shape their narrative as the protectors of the ethnic Albanians, frequently using terms such as “picking up our weapons” when pressuring majority parties, and this position has also made it harder for new ethnic Albanian parties to claim a similar legitimacy.

This savior shield places DUI in a similar narrative league, albeit two narratives which seek to exclude each other, with VMRO DPMNE who also posits themselves as the saviors of the Macedonian nation<sup>24</sup>. These two narratives exclude themselves, because they are each protectors against the other, although in the political reality of the country, they have worked well together. Indeed, DUI has been a part of all but one government formation since 2002, making it the non-majority party, or even single party, that has been in government the longest in the country’s history. This longevity in government has meant that DUI has been able to navigate through different government changes, survived electoral cycles and determined the fate of government formation as part king-maker. It has been king maker partially because of the competition it has had from other ethnic Albanian parties which have risen over the years, including the Alliance for Albanians, Besa, and Alternativa. However, the strength that DUI has had over these parties is determined by both its 2001 legitimacy claim and its longevity in power which has made it a powerful gatekeeper to jobs and resources.

As a result, while DUI has not been the only king maker, it has been a game maker, namely, it has established the framework of the political game to be played by non-majority parties, and so far, no party has been able to beat DUI at its own game. This political game has rested on two principles: maintain a clear narrative of need for protection of ethnic Albanians with the ultimate safety haven being the country joining NATO and EU; and by maintaining a strong patronage system of resource distribution.

## URA

In Montenegro, the 30 year-long and mostly uncontested<sup>25</sup> rule of DPS ended in 2020 when it was replaced by a coalition led by the Democratic Front (DF), Democratic Montenegro (DM) and URA. The new coalition, which was built only to keep DPS out of the government, is a strange amalgamation of actors, including the right-wing populist (DF), centrist (DM), and a civic movement/party (URA).

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<sup>24</sup> Crowther, William. 2017. “Ethnic Condominium and Illiberalism in Macedonia.” *East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures* 31 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325417716515>.

<sup>25</sup> Stankov, N. 2019. Springing up like mushrooms after the rain: „New“ parties in Montenegro’s institutionalised party system, *Politics in Central Europe*, 15 (1), pp163-185

URA, led by ethnic Albanian Dritan Abazović, became a party after splitting from Positive Montenegro in 2015 over the former's refusal to support a DPS government<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the anti-DPS stance has been a crucial pillar for the party, which has recently come under scrutiny considering that DPS has supported the mandate given to Abazović in forming a government.

URA maintains itself as a civic (or the only “authentic civic movement.”<sup>27</sup>), progressive and green party. Indeed, they have a clear green agenda<sup>28</sup>, which is not frequent in a region which is plagued by environmental issues.<sup>29</sup> Other than being the only civic party that is led by a member of a non-majority leader in the country, and in the region, URA also constitutes a new type of party in the Montenegrin context because of its spread-out structure with local offices which makes it a bit more bottom-up and truly a new party in the Montenegrin context.<sup>30</sup>

The existence of a party like URA challenges two principles of the DPS government. First, by challenging DPS it also challenges its *modus operandi*, which “ensured that major segments of the public administration and the civil service have been filled with party associates.”<sup>31</sup> Overcoming the clientelism of public service will be a great challenge for URA, or any challenger of DPS, considering that a politicized public service can hinder any reform agendas. The second challenge URA poses is to ethnically divided issues and parties. As one expert claimed in the panel, the disintegration of narratives of pro-Montenegrin or pro-Serb issues have covered other issues in the country.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Albanian parties in Montenegro have felt particularly challenged by URA's civic model, and it has come under fire by other Albanian politicians claiming that only Albanian parties can secure proper representation of their community.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176

<sup>27</sup> Brezar, A. (2022, February 2). *Montenegro lurches back into political crisis as former allies try to oust PM*. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/01/27/montenegro-lurches-back-into-political-crisis-as-former-allies-try-to-oust-pm>

<sup>28</sup> *Civic Movement URA | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Belgrade - Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo*. (2021, February 25). Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. <https://rs.boell.org/en/2021/02/25/gradanski-pokret-ura>

<sup>29</sup> In North Macedonia, DUI, too, declared a green agenda for its electoral campaign, but it has not created any programme based on its promises.

<sup>30</sup> Stankov, N. 2019. Springing up like mushrooms after the rain: „New“ parties in Montenegro's institutionalised party system, *Politics in Central Europe*, 15 (1), pp163-185

<sup>31</sup> Keil, Soeren. 2018. “The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.” *Southeastern Europe* 42 (1): 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201004>

<sup>32</sup> Expert panel discussion, Online: January 19, 2022

<sup>33</sup> BIRN. (2020b, July 29). *Montenegro Albanians Fail to Unite Despite Diaspora's Plea*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/29/montenegro-albanians-fail-to-unite-despite-diasporas-plea/>

# Environment and behaviors enabling and constricting political parties

When in doubt, stick to the center

Ideologically, the non-majority parties in the three countries, similar to the majority parties, do not have clear delineations. The majority of political parties of Kosovo Serbs is not sufficiently ideologically profiled. They are rather a mix of ideological orientations. Based on their pretty general programs and publicly stated views, it cannot be clearly concluded how those political parties are positioned along a "left-right" ideological continuum. It is also questionable if there is a division into "nationalists" and "cosmopolitans", as the political and party system based on consociationalism and provision of rights of minorities to participate in institutions directs parties of non-majority communities toward a declarative "nationalism" rather than "cosmopolitanism".

In North Macedonia, DUI is also ideologically ambiguous, although it is anti-communist<sup>34</sup> in the sense that they are against the communist regime of Yugoslavia, however this has not prohibited them from joining a coalition with the Social Democratic Party of Macedonia. In terms of policies their profile has largely varied, except for the maintenance of strong support for the country's Euro-Atlantic integrations. Their political programme is largely based on the advancement of the rights of ethnic Albanians, however this programme has remained largely unchanged since the party's inception.

URA on the other hand, is the only outlier in our case studies, it is a civic party, containing members of different ethnicities. Ideologically, it is a social liberal and progressive party, with green aspirations. While it is not the only civic party in the country, notably there is also the Social Democratic Party, it is a civic party which has presented a serious competition to ethnic Albanian parties, as well as to other communities. It also managed to enter the (now failed) government of Montenegro after the 2020 elections, which has posited the opportunity for the leader of URA as the new Prime Minister of the country. It would challenge the concept of ethnic parties if civic parties were to appear as politically more viable and able to garner wider support, though it would not erase the phenomenon altogether.

## Intra-party democracy and values

What is noticeable as an ideological and political difference within the Serb community is a division into those political parties favoring a certain form of cooperation and integration into Kosovo legal framework, based either on ideological or pragmatic views, and those opposing the integration. An obvious representative of the former would be the Independent Liberal Party or the Progressive Democratic Party who advocated integration and participation in institutions, whereas of the latter that would be the former Serb National Council of the North of Kosovo (SNC) or the present Fatherland (Otadžbina) Movement resisting any integration<sup>35</sup>. Srpska lista would be in the middle, by enabling the further integration of the Kosovo Serbs in the north of Kosovo, while, by being a proxy of SNS (Serbian Progressive Party, Srpska napredna stranka), transmitting the official narrative on Kosovo of the Serbian government.

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<sup>34</sup> Panov, Trajche, and Dane Taleski. 2020. "The Shades of Communism: The Basis of Political Divisions in the Republic of Macedonia." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 53 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2020.53.3.22>.

<sup>35</sup> None of these political actors play an active role in Kosovo's political life.

Srpska lista is the only parliamentary party of the Kosovo Serbs, and the only Kosovo Serb party in power at the local level<sup>36</sup>, therefore it controls the political and socio-economic life of the Kosovo Serbs. This party was not established on values and ideology but rather as a practical response to the political developments. In 2013, the First Brussels Agreement was signed, which, among other things, included the integration of the four northernmost municipalities in Kosovo legal system<sup>37</sup>. In order to ensure that the integration process occurs but also to secure its control over the Kosovo Serb community, Belgrade has created Srpska lista. This party is a catch-all party, bringing together people of different ideological backgrounds but loyal to the government in Belgrade. In terms of political communication, the SL insists on the unity of Kosovo Serbs, emphasizing it is the only party having the support of Belgrade.

What is obvious is that the ruling political parties of the Serbs supported by Belgrade are historically led by the ideology of official national patriotism. For the purpose of a proclaimed national unity for the sake of the "defense of Kosovo" there is a need for political party monism and labeling other political actors as traitors or collaborators of the Albanians. This leads to stigmatization of channels of cooperation and exchange between communities that are conducted outside the established political parties. In more extreme cases, such a stigmatization leads to the use of labels such as "traitor" in order to prevent any interaction at the political level between communities outside the formal channels.

The figure of traitors also complicates issues in North Macedonia and oftentimes hinders inter-ethnic cooperation. When SDSM was seeking to extend its voter base to include ethnic Albanians by having ethnic Albanian members, it faced a challenge in finding persons who would join the party. Even though SDSM won ethnic Albanian votes in the 2016 elections, this is largely considered to have been a one-off occurrence in order to ensure the end of the Gruevski regime. In the 2020 elections, the ethnic votes largely moved back into place.

In Montenegro, the anti DPS stance has had a similar effect to the anti VMRO push in 2016, as many political parties are divided in terms of a willingness to cooperate with DPS and a strong opposition to the idea. Thus the 2020 government was formed among a coalition of very different political parties with the sole purpose of keeping DPS out of the government.<sup>38</sup> In addition, in Montenegro, the figure of the traitor also emerges often in the political scene. In the recent protests, with chants of "Abazović's treason and insults aimed at his ethnic Albanian background".<sup>39</sup>

In these three cases we can see that there is a lot of intra community pressure for these parties, which is defined by both the overall context and the separate beliefs as to how these communities can be best accommodated within their states. The latter constitutes a large debate, either out in the open or reflected through tension, over whether non majority parties can represent their constituents and win election through an ethnic or a civic conception of the state and their own role within it.

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<sup>36</sup> Out of 38 municipalities in Kosovo, 10 are Ser-majority municipalities. Srpska lista is in power in all ten municipalities.

<sup>37</sup> North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan and Zubin Potok are four Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo that have been integrated into Kosovo's legal framework as a result of the First Brussels Agreement signed by Belgrade and Pristina in April 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Seizing the democratic opportunity in Montenegro. (2020, September 8). LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog. [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/106843/1/europpblog\\_2020\\_09\\_08\\_seizing\\_the\\_democratic\\_opportunity\\_in.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/106843/1/europpblog_2020_09_08_seizing_the_democratic_opportunity_in.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Brezar, A. (2022b, February 2). *Montenegro lurches back into political crisis as former allies try to oust PM*. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/01/27/montenegro-lurches-back-into-political-crisis-as-former-allies-try-to-oust-pm>

## **Civic or Ethnic? The main conceptual dilemma of non-majority political parties**

Kosovo is designed as a multiethnic state, with broad guarantees that secure non-majority communities' representation and participation, which leads to non-existence of multiethnic parties or parties that transcend ethnicity. Despite the fact that the ethnic minorities in Kosovo do not make more than 10% of the entire population, they still, thanks to the Kosovo' legal framework, have extensive powers which can either be constructive or destructive, especially if they are the holders of the key to the government's stability. The legal framework as such imposes the creation and existence of ethnic parties as the only way for the representation of interests of different ethnic communities.

DUI is an ethnic party, though it has had electoral lists in Macedonian areas and famously decided to keep the word Albanian out of its name. However, their policies and programmes are targeted specifically at advancing the position of ethnic Albanians. It does not have an all-encompassing view of non-majority communities, as there seems to be an understanding among politicians that they cover their own communities. While it is largely conservative, they did support LGBTQ rights, though this can be an effect of external pressure rather than party programming. One strong held policy is the support for EU which is one of the main divergences it had from VMRO DPMNE, in addition to the mutually exclusive and beneficial nationalism.

Namely, the nationalist rhetoric and politics that were advanced during the regime of the VMRO DPMNE greatly helped the narrative of DUI as "protectors" of Albanians in North Macedonia. This narrative has been able to continue even with the new SDSM-led government due to debates around the law on the use of languages in the country. The general reception of the law and the debate surrounding it was marked by nationalist and often-times racist language, which further legitimized the defensive narratives of ethnic Albanian parties, making it almost unnecessary for them to have to offer new alternatives to their voters.

The civic parties, while not a new concept in Montenegro, considering that DPS has also purported to define itself as a civic party, are gaining traction particularly with the new success of URA. However, that does not mean that they are fully supported by ethnic minorities. Ethnic identities and preservation are still important in Montenegro, and the divisions are not only political, but also connected to identity and religion. The clashes over the Law on Religion<sup>40</sup> which mobilized the ethnic Serb community in the country, showed that ethnicity is still a powerful element of disruption.

## **Influence on Politics**

Non majority parties in these three countries have varied degrees of influence on politics, and their influence depends on many factors, including their votes and constituency, the votes and constituency of the majority communities. However, there have been key events, which we explore here, which have either set the course for the non majority parties, or have shown their influence on the overall political scene in their respective countries.

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<sup>40</sup> BIRN. (2020c, December 18). *Montenegro Alters Contentious Religion Law, Satisfies Serbian Church*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/18/montenegro-alters-contentious-religion-law-satisfies-serbian-church/>

## Kingmakers and never kings?

DUI was part of the VMRO DPMNE government since 2008 and stayed in the government throughout tumultuous times which included the Kumanovo weekend shootout between ethnic Albanian fighters and the army of North Macedonia, as well through the popular discontent expressed in the movements from 2014-2016. However, a significant shift in DUI's politics was when it decided to enter a coalition with SDSM in 2017. The elections at the end of 2016 were closely observed due to the popular movements against the Gruevski regime (which had included DUI as a coalition partner). Despite this discontent, VMRO DPMNE managed to garner a majority of the votes even with 10 votes less than the previous elections, however not enough to be able to create a government on its own, which it had done in the last elections. This opened up the opportunity for new coalitions to be formed. DUI suffered heavy losses, going from 19 to 10 seats, but it was still the Albanian party with the most votes. While it lost some votes to other Albanian parties, such as Alliance for Albanians and Besa, it also, for the first time, lost votes to SDSM. This was an important signal for DUI to reconsider its politics and coalitions. After an intense period of negotiation, DUI, along with Alliance for Albanians and Besa both decided to form a coalition with SDSM. Thus, a coalition was formed with the Macedonian party that had not gained the majority of votes, and this was only possible due to the fact that no Macedonian party had gained enough votes to have a parliamentary majority, which made a shift possible, as either party needed to form a coalition with more than one ethnic Albanian party to get the required numbers to form a functioning government.<sup>41</sup> This position gave Albanian parties more leverage power than ever, considering that in the 2014 elections VMRO DPMNE only included DUI out of principle, since they already had enough votes on their own. Indeed, the coalition forming took a long time considering that Albanian parties placed more concessions, particularly demanding a new Law on the Use of Languages. Much was said at the time of the "Tirana Platform" which was a list of principles which the ethnic Albanian leaders discussed in a meeting with the Prime Minister of Albania after elections.<sup>42</sup> However, we would argue that this did not constitute significant kin-state influence, considering that the premises of the discussion of the platform were not new, such as the focus on the issue of language rights, and because ethnic Albanian parties were at this stage acutely aware of the dislike to Nikola Gruevski among Albanian voters, so support for VMRO DPMNE would've been very costly for any party that would side with them. Therefore, the platform itself offered nothing new, and the political parties, despite the call of the platform to unite, were quite divided in their positions, even if deciding to support SDSM. Fundamentally, DUI was susceptible to voter accommodation and international pressure to form a new government with SDSM instead of VMRO DPMNE, with the accommodation of their most important requests including a new Law on the use of languages.

Another significant shift in terms of the influence of non-majority parties in North Macedonia was DUI's electoral campaign for an ethnic Albanian prime minister, which initiated a petition for all Albanian parties to support the move with the motto "Why not?"<sup>43</sup>. With the creation of the 2020 coalition between SDSM and DUI, it was agreed that the last 100 days, the country would be led by an ethnic Albanian PM. However, considering that recently there has been a change in the SDSM leadership, and a change of the cabinet, including a new PM, it is unclear whether there will be an Albanian PM in the country, or who that would be, other than that they would be chosen by DUI. If

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<sup>41</sup> Pollozhani, L. (2016, December 19). *Albanian Parties may potentially become kingmakers in forming the next Macedonian government*. Kosovo 2.0. <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/albanian-parties-may-potentially-become-kingmakers-forming-next-macedonian-government/>

<sup>42</sup> BIRN. (2018, May 22). *Macedonian Albanian Leaders Plot Joint Strategy in Tirana*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/30/tirana-gathers-leaders-of-albanian-macedonian-parties-12-30-2016/>

<sup>43</sup> Telegrami. (2020, June 23). *"Pse jo", nis peticioni për mbështetjen e Kryeministrit shqiptar*. Telegrami. <https://telegrami.mk/pse-jo-nis-peticioni-per-mbeshtetjen-e-kryeministrit-shqiptar/>



this were to occur, it would be the first time in the country's history that there is an ethnic Albanian prime minister. This could have a significant influence on politics and also on counter-movements, as there are still strong nationalist groups in the country, therefore such a leadership would likely be affected by strong tensions.

It is possible that North Macedonia may gain from the recent experience of Montenegro, namely, at the time of writing, Abazovic has received the mandate to form a government as the new prime minister of the country<sup>44</sup>, with only 4 seats in parliament, therefore potentially becoming the first prime minister (excl. Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the region from a non-majority community, as well as from a minority party in terms of votes. While grand coalitions have been practiced before, notably in North Macedonia after the 2001 conflict, the Montenegrin scenario would be an entirely new practice in the Western Balkans. While it is too soon to determine whether such configurations would be positive or not, whether they would bring new democratic practices or cause non-democratic backlashes, however one aspect which is important both for DUI and for URA is the steadfastness to the Euro-Atlantic alliances. While this is not a pattern of minority parties, considering that Serbian parties in both Kosovo and in Montenegro, and Levica (the Left) in North Macedonia (which they claim to be a multicultural party due to its membership) have shown pro-Russian tendencies and have employed divisive and undemocratic lexicons, often times perpetuating the divisions that they are supposed to overcome, or becoming stuck in the same viscous cycle.

## **Double trouble: the conundrum of compromise for non-majority political parties**

The constitutional guarantees, i.e., ten guaranteed seats in the Kosovo Parliament, Serb-majority municipalities, ministries, double  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority, secure the position of this political party which pulls the strings to all issues concerning the community they represent, including posing as safeguards of the Constitution and the laws of vital interest. Having in mind that Kosovo Serbs have 10 guaranteed seats in Kosovo Parliament, political parties of Kosovo Serbs have a great impact on forming and functioning of institutions. That is why it is important for the representatives of Belgrade and Srpska lista to control all 10 guaranteed MP seats. For that reason the pressure exerted on the Belgrade-favored party to win as many votes as possible and prevent any other party of Kosovo Serbs to enter the Kosovo Assembly is even greater. The lack of political pluralism within the Kosovo Serb community consequently leads to democratic deficit within this community and absence of accountability of this party to its voters, while this accountability is reserved for those who appointed them.

Political participation of non-majority communities in Kosovo institutional life has been a non-issue, except in the case of the Serb community, which can be characterized as controversial, especially in the aftermath of the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013. That year marked an important milestone in the political behavior of the Kosovo Serb community. Due to multiple factors such as the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia, political scene in Serbia and the political scene in Kosovo, unwillingness for integration by the northern municipalities, this party coming to power was enabled by pressures on voters and other political subjects, who were in the meantime merged with Srpska lista or marginalized from the political life. Consequently, after the rounds of both local and parliamentary elections, Srpska lista has consolidated its power within the Kosovo Serb community and in Kosovo political life, all at the detriment of the political pluralism.

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<sup>44</sup> EWB. (2022, March 8). *Abazović will form the new government, protests are still taking place*. European Western Balkans. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/03/08/abazovic-will-form-the-new-government-protests-are-still-taking-place/>

Back in 2013, and up to 2015, this party has been seen as an enabling factor for integration and the implementation of the Brussels Agreement. From 2015, specifically from the moment the Kosovo Government has started refusing to establish the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities (A/CSM), Srpska lista receives a label of a destructive factor in Kosovo political life.

A crucial part of the First Brussels Agreement was the establishment of the A/CSM<sup>45</sup>. The idea of the Brussels Agreement, in particular of the A/CSM, is to facilitate the full integration of Kosovo Serbs (from the four northern municipalities) into Kosovo's system, as well as that of the institutions functioning within the Serbian system, including educational and health care institutions. Support for this Agreement was lacking in Kosovo; it was criticized by the opposition and the public, despite that this agreement has been ratified in the Kosovo parliament and that the Constitutional Court has deemed the establishment of the A/CSM constitutional. Despite this, the A/CSM has not been established to this date, thus causing a stalemate in the further integration and normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia. Nevertheless, Srpska lista has had a pragmatic approach especially in relation to the extent of cooperation with the majority parties in power.

Within the diverse constellation of the parties of non-majority communities, it is not easy to find patterns or trends due to the different contexts they inhabit, the heterogeneity of political parties, and the communities they represent, which gives them certain proclivities. For instance, ethnic Albanian communities generally are pro-EU due to the fact that they see this as a potential way in which there would be no borders between the countries where Albanians live. Due to the NATO bombing, Serb communities are generally not responsive or supportive of the alliance. Because these parties represent non-majority communities of different sizes and thus of different ways in which they exert influence, at the end their main challenge is to assert their position and that of their communities in states which may not always be susceptible or supportive of such influences.

Despite the differences, non-majority parties which hold ethnic platforms do have one thing in common, which is ultimately to the detriment of citizens. These parties fail to build a vision for politics that answers the challenges of the future, as they are strongly anchored in politics as is and as was, and not how it could be. Namely, these parties are built in a type of survival mode, whereby they purport to protect their communities from physical or institutional harm, and as such, they maintain a limited scope where they have to reproduce the premises of a dangerous environment for their messaging to work. It is important to note that this mode of functioning hinges on the response of majority parties, and due to the context out of which these countries came to be, so far this 'cooperation' has not been lacking. Therefore, while these parties, by their existence, do not note a regression of politics, by their modes of operation they do mark a stagnation.

## **In lieu of conclusion: How to understand these parties?**

This policy brief was built on the analysis of three different countries with three very different ways of accommodating non-majority communities, and three very different political parties. In the case of North Macedonia, the larger size of the Albanian non-majority community affords certain benefits in securing independence of action non-reliant on quotas or influence from the "kin states". In the case of Kosovo, the post-conflict setting and the smaller size of the Serb non-majority community has necessitated stronger protections to secure their position due to the constitutional guarantees and their support from the kin state, which have changed the typology of the non-majority political

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<sup>45</sup> The Agreement envisaged the establishment of the Community/Association of Municipalities with Majority Serb Population in Kosovo – Northern Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, Zvečan, Leposavić, Gračanica, Štrpce, Novo Brdo, Klokot, Ranilug and Parteš.

parties. Lastly, in the case of Montenegro, civic parties have appeared as a legitimate alternative to ethnic parties.

It is not easy to make recommendations on political parties, since influencing them would not only mean influencing the political party, but their constituencies and the systems that define and enable the way that they operate. Instead we have chosen to share several points on the commonalities of the non-majority parties and the drivers for their decision-making, for better understanding of these parties' functioning. Furthermore, instead of recommendations, we have developed lessons which stem from the findings of this document.

### *What affects the decision making of non-majority community parties?*

– *Zero-sum game*: The idea that interests of different ethnic groups are opposite and/or detrimental to one or the other group's welfare, a civic party shuns the idea that community rights and interests present a zero-sum game but is faced with the issue due to criticism of their legitimacy.

– *Control*: Non-majority political parties that win the majority of votes within their constituency seek to be gate-keepers to their respective communities and thus control the access to political representation as well as narrative, this way ensuring their own stability and longevity in politics.

– *Resources*: Due to a limitation of resources available, political parties generally, and non-majority parties particularly, seek to gain resources for themselves and their constituents. Resources secure the control, and control secures the resources.

– *Community-based*: Despite their power lust, non-majority parties are community-based in the sense that they have to maintain a direct connection to their constituents, which holds true for civic parties as well, as URA succeeded due to its local strategy. This is a benefit which majority parties may not utilize as well, having a larger voter base, and having the principle role in governing.

### *Lessons*

- *Cannot change the focus on ethnicity if the context stays the same*: in an ethnic context where divisions are persistent, hate speech largely tolerated and unpunished, non-majority parties have no incentive, interest or courage to change their electoral course and their modus operandi.

- *Cannot compete with parties that control resources unless resources are detached from political parties*: stricter regulations on financing of parties and their campaigns, more funds for parties which pass threshold; state-based institutes which support smaller political parties.

- *Cannot change the political without diversifying the economical*: need to support entrepreneurship and de-center economic ventures from politics. Opportunities for youth and marginalized youth belonging to non-majority communities is particularly important.

- *Cannot rely on political parties as only legitimate representatives of non-majority communities*: due to the electoral systems in these three countries, and the low election turnout as well, it must be highlighted that non-majority parties are not the only legitimate representatives of non-majority communities. Other actors such as civil society and academic or community leaders need to be included in high level discussions.

- *Needed mechanisms to ensure the representation of the non-majority community* - in societies as these three it is necessary to have affirmative mechanisms for the political participation of non-majority communities as that is, due to their size or due to the context itself, this is the way for these communities are able to represent their interests. (for example, gender quotas as a parallel)

- *Responsibility of the majority* - Even though in ethnocentric societies enabling the existence of the ethnic parties sounds like a paradox, as long as the majority parties don't transcend approaching politics through the ethnic lenses, non-majority parties will not make a first move.

