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Against the Odds: Explaining Mainstream Montenegrin Parties Domination of Bosniak and Albanian Minority Representation in Postcommunist Montenegro

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Abstract

The Bosniak and Albanian minorities in postcommunist Montenegro have supported and been represented by mainstream Montenegrin parties more than by their ethnic parties. This stands in striking contrast to the situation in neighboring Serbia and North Macedonia where the Bosniak and Albanian minorities vote almost exclusively for their ethnic parties. The Montenegrin case stands out as deviant also when one considers a number of extant explanations, all of which would predict a different outcome. Montenegrin Bosniaks and Albanians constitute two native, sizeable and geographically concentrated minority groups inhabiting a country with an institutional framework and several special electoral arrangements favoring minority parties. Drawing on original data on Bosniak and Albanian legislators elected across 12 parliamentary elections in Montenegro (1990–2023), municipality and country-level parliamentary election results and 12 semi-structured elite interviews, I argue that what explains the deviance in the Montenegrin case is the peculiar nature of Montenegrin identity, specifically the fact that it does not pit the majority against minority, but rather it pits the Montenegrin and Serbian components of the Orthodox majority against each other and in such a context the non-Orthodox minorities become critical political allies of the Montenegrin bloc against the Serbian one.

Keywords: ethnic minority; ethnic party; representation; postcommunism; Montenegro

Research Puzzle

It is commonly held that ethnic parties provide the natural and most effective way to mobilize minority populations and represent their interests in the legislatures of democratic polities. This is even more the case in countries and regions like the Balkans and Eastern Europe where decades of communist rule left the countries largely devoid of non-ethnic cleavages (those based on class and religion) and raised ethnicity as the most salient and powerful social cleavage around which postcommunist partisan politics developed (Barany and Moser 2005; Bulutgil 2016). Empirical evidence from now more than three decades of postcommunism has shown that the Balkans and Eastern Europe in general is indeed a region where strong and influential ethnic parties operate. Parties like the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) in North Macedonia, the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) in Bulgaria and Hungarian minority parties in Romania and Slovakia have succeeded not only to gain the overwhelming support of their minority constituencies but also to become influential players in national politics by serving as kingmakers in several instances (Lika 2023).

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Developments in postcommunist Montenegro do not conform to this pattern. The tiny Adriatic republic, with a population of only 620,029, is home to a large minority population. Bosniaks¹ and Albanians constitute the two main non-Orthodox minority communities in the country and together they make up 16.85 percent of Montenegro's population (MONSTAT 2011).² Yet, despite their native / autochthonous status, large size, geographical concentration and Montenegro's minority-friendly electoral arrangements, the Bosniak and Albanian minorities have supported and been represented by mainstream Montenegrin parties more than by their ethnic parties. Crucially, all this stands in striking contrast to the pattern observed among Bosniaks in the other half of the Sandžak region in neighboring Serbia, "an area where Bosniak-Muslim support for ethnic parties has been almost absolute for years." (Šístek and Dimitrovová 2003, 166). Likewise, ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia and south Serbia (Preševo Valley) consistently have voted almost entirely for their ethnic parties and inter-ethnic voting virtually does not exist in those countries (Hislope 2013, 616–617). What accounts for the deviance observed in the Montenegro case?

My Argument

I argue that what makes Montenegro deviant is the peculiar nature of Montenegrin identity and its political repercussions. What is peculiar about Montenegrin identity is that it does not pit the Orthodox majority against the non-Orthodox minority (as is the case in other Orthodox-majority Balkan states), but rather pits the Montenegrin and Serbian components of the Orthodox majority against each other and in such a context the non-Orthodox minorities (Bosniaks and Albanians) become critical political allies of the Montenegrin bloc against the Serbian one.

More specifically, Montenegrin identity has historically been characterized by an inherent dualism. On the one side, Montenegrins constitute a distinct south Slavic nation with a long proud history of independent statehood. On the other side, Montenegrins as a south Slavic nation are culturally the closest to Serbs, with Montenegrin and Serb being seen as rather mutually inclusive ethnic categories. However, whenever facing a regional rise of greater Serbian ideology that suppresses the dualism inherent in Montenegrin identity and denies it altogether, Montenegrin identity temporarily takes on an anti-Serbian stance. This stance and the quest for Montenegrin autonomy / independence is the single most important factor that has impacted every political process in the country since Serbia's annexation of Montenegro in 1918 until the 2006 independence.

Since the collapse of communism and the advent of pluralism, minorities in Montenegro became a key player in the historically rooted contest between Montenegrin and Serbian parties. This was the case due to both the large minority size in Montenegro (16.85 percent) and the fact that Bosniaks and Albanians themselves perceived Serbian forces as the most important threat to Montenegro's stability, its Euro-Atlantic integration and their security. In this context, minorities have seen the Montenegrin parties, primarily the dominant communist successor party DPS and its leader Milo Đukanović, as the guarantor of stability and protector of minority nations against the Serbian forces. This explains why Bosniaks and Albanians have supported and been represented by Montenegrin parties more than by their ethnic parties. Minority preference for mainstream versus ethnic parties is even more intriguing when one considers the fact that ethnic parties in Montenegro have been almost invariably strong allies of DPS and hence, the minorities could theoretically have supported DPS by voting for their ethnic parties as well. However, this has generally not been the case as the minorities have seen the DPS as *the* political actor most capable of delivering stability and protection and thus, they have tried to strengthen DPS as much as possible by voting for it directly.

At the same time, my argument also suggests that with the decrease of the threat posed by Serbian parties in Montenegro, minority support for Montenegrin parties will also likely decrease and minorities are likely to shift more toward their ethnic parties. Indeed, such a shift began slowly after the 2006 independence and became more pronounced after Montenegro's NATO membership in 2016.

Research Design: Dependent Variables, Data, Measurement and Method

Political scientist Robert Moser argued in 2005 that the scholarship on the legislative representation of ethnic minorities, unlike that on other types such as women and racial minorities, faces fundamental data problems because “data on the ethnic identity of candidates and legislators are hard to find” (Moser 2005, 115). With the notable exception of a few studies (Moser 2008; Aktürk and Katliarou 2021), not much has changed since then in this regard.

In this article I use original data on Montenegrin legislators elected across 12 postcommunist parliamentary elections (1990–2023) and identify the Bosniak and Albanian deputies elected throughout. The data were provided by the Parliament of Montenegro’s Library and Documentation Centre and Archive.³ Since a large minority of Montenegrin Albanians (26.13 percent) adhere to the Roman Catholic faith (MONSTAT 2011), I further subdivide elected Albanian deputies into Muslim and Catholic. Then I calculate for each legislative cycle the Bosniak and Albanian deputies elected from mainstream Montenegrin and ethnic parties.⁴ Hence, the proportion of minority-origin legislators elected from mainstream and ethnic parties is one of the dependent variables used in this study. In order not to conflate minority MPs elected from mainstream parties with minority voting for mainstream parties, I also look at the parliamentary election results of Montenegrin and minority parties in polling stations in a municipality level. Here I focus only on those municipalities where the Bosniaks and Albanians constitute a majority – Rožaje (88.5 percent) and Plav (57.5 percent) for Bosniaks; Ulcinj (70.65 percent) and Tuzi (65 percent) for Albanians (MONSTAT 2011). Unfortunately, municipality-level parliamentary election results are available only for the post-2006 period (i.e. post-independence elections). To compensate somehow for this, I also look at the country-level results of Bosniak and Albanian parties across 12 parliamentary elections.

Since the majority of Montenegrin Albanians and Bosniaks are Muslim (a minority of Albanians being Catholic), I rely on names to identify the ethnic identity of minority-origin deputies.⁵ Identifying Catholic Albanians is relatively easy given their specific name forms in the Albanian language. What proved to be more challenging in a few instances was distinguishing between Muslim Albanians and Bosniaks given that several Muslim Albanian last names in Montenegro have the Slavic suffixes *vić* and *ić* which are typical of Bosniak last names. For that, I relied on the help of research assistants from Montenegro who had local knowledge of family names.⁶ To further decrease the possibility of measurement error, I also did a final background check on the Internet for all identified names and had the final list double checked by the local research assistants.⁷ The full list of Bosniak and Albanian deputies elected across 12 parliamentary elections (1990–2023) is presented in Table 1 below.

Focusing on minority representation in mainstream parties is also important because in the Montenegrin case minority legislators do not perceive themselves as just hailing from the minority, but rather see themselves as representing minority interests. Indeed, LSCG’s former Albanian deputy Xhemal Perović (2019) and DPS’s Luigj Škrelja (2019) told the author in separate interviews that they believed that in the Montenegrin political context minority interests could be better served by joining mainstream rather than ethnic parties since the former are the most capable of delivering stability and protection for the minorities. This once more attests to my argument that what drives minority support for and representation via mainstream parties in Montenegro is the level of Serbian threat.

Method

This article examines postcommunist Montenegro as a deviant case of mainstream majority parties domination of minority legislative representation. The Montenegrin case is deviant because high levels of minority support for and representation via mainstream parties coincides with a high value on a number of variables that would predict otherwise according to the extant scholarship: minority’s native/ autochthonous status, large demographic size, geographic concentration, favorable institutional environment and a regional setting where ethnicity serves as the most salient

Table 1. Bosniak and Albanian MPs elected from Montenegrin and ethnic parties across 12 parliamentary elections (1990–2023)

Legislative term	Minority-origin MPs elected from Montenegrin parties			Minority-origin MPs elected from ethnic parties		
	Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs		Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs	
		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian
1990 – 1992 <i>(out of 125 seats)</i>	Asim Dizdarević (DPS)	Skender Elezagić (SRS)	Fran Dedvukaj (DPS)	Rasim Šahman (SDA)	Mustafa Čapuni (LDMZ)	Gjergj Gjokaj (LDMZ)
	Mevludin Meco Nuhodžić (DPS)		Gjergj Berishaj (SRS)	Rifat Vesković (SDA)	Tahir Perezić (LDMZ)	
	Asim Telačević (DPS)			Ahmed Karahmetović (SDA)	Xheladin Zeneli (LDMZ)	
	Gano Lekić (DPS)			Zaim Čindrak (SDA)		
	Ruždija Redžepagić (SRS)			Rasim Gorčević (SDA)		
	Ferid Šarkinović (SRS)			Sefer Međedović (SDA)		
	Ibrahim Reković (SRS)			Harun Hadžić (SDA)		
	Ramo Bralić (SRS)			Čazim Lukač (SDA)		
	Rešad Rastoder (SRS)			Avdo Fetahović (SDA)		
1992 – 1996 <i>(out of 85 seats)</i>	Asim Dizdarević (DPS)	Xhemal Perović (LSCG)	Fran Dedvukaj (DPS)			
	Hasan Kurtagić (DPS)					
	Asim Telačević (DPS)					
	Muharem Muratović (DPS)					
	Ramo Bralić (SDP)					
1996 – 1998 <i>(out of 71 seats)</i>	Asim Dizdarević (DPS)	Omer Adžović (DPS)	Fran Dedvukaj (DPS)	Rifat Vesković (SDA)	Ferhat Dinoshia (UDSH)	
	Džemal Ljušković (DPS)			Harun Hadžić (SDA)	Mehmet Gjoni (UDSH)	
	Misin Adrović (DPS)			Orhan Šahmanović (SDA)	Mehmet Bardhi (LDMZ)	
	Hasan Kurtagić (DPS)				Muhamet Nika (LDMZ)	

Continued

Table 1 *Continued*

Legislative term	Minority-origin MPs elected from Montenegrin parties			Minority-origin MPs elected from ethnic parties		
	Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs		Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs	
		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian
1998 – 2001 <i>(out of 78 seats)</i>	Asim Dizdarević (DPS)	Xhemal Vuković (DPS)	Martin Ivezaj (DPS)	Ferhat Dinosha (UDSH)		
	Elvis Omeragić (DPS)			Mehmet Bardhi (LDMZ)		
	Salko Luboder (DPS)					
	Rifat Rastoder (SDP)					
	Ervin Spahić (SDP)					
2001 – 2002 <i>(out of 77 seats)</i>	Asim Dizdarević (DPS)		Nikola Gegaj (DPS)	Ferhat Dinosha (UDSH)		
	Husnija Šabović (DPS)		Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Mehmet Bardhi (LDMZ)		
	Hajran Kalač (DPS)					
	Ervin Spahić (SDP)					
	Rifat Rastoder (SDP)					
2002 – 2006 <i>(out of 75 seats)</i>	Mevludin Nuhodžić (DPS)	Redžep Taganović (DPS)	Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Ferhat Dinosha (UDSH)		
	Husnija Šabović (DPS)	Halil Duković (DPS)		Mehmet Bardhi (LDMZ)		
	Fahrudin Hadrović (DPS)	Xhemal Perović (LSCG)				
	Hajran Kalač (DPS)					
	Rifat Rastoder (SDP)					
	Ervin Spahić (SDP)					
	Džavid Šabović (SDP)					

Continued

Table 1 *Continued*

Legislative term	Minority-origin MPs elected from Montenegrin parties			Minority-origin MPs elected from ethnic parties		
	Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs		Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs	
		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian
2006 – 2009 <i>(out of 81 seats)</i>	Husnija Šabović (DPS)	Omer Adžović (DPS)	Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Amer Halilović (BS)	Ferhat Dinosh (UDSH)	Vasel Sinishtaj (AA)
	Mevludin Nuhodžić (DPS)			Kemal Purišić (BS)	Mehmet Bardhi (LDMZ)	
	Hajran Kalač (DPS)					
	Suad Numanović (DPS)					
	Fahrudin Hadrović (DPS)					
	Hidajeta Bajrampahić (SDP)					
	Džavid Šabović (SDP)					
	Rifat Rastoder (SDP)					
	Emin Duraković (PZP)					
2009 – 2012 <i>(out of 81 seats)</i>	Mirsad Mulić (DPS)	Halil Duković (DPS)	Nikola Gegaj (DPS)	Amer Halilović (BS)	Mehmet Zenka (UDSH)	
	Mevludin Nuhodžić (DPS)		Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Kemal Purišić (BS)	Mehmet Bardhi (LDMZ)	
	Husnija Šabović (DPS)			Suljo Mustafić (BS)	Genci Nimanbegu (FORCA)	
	Samir Agović (DPS)				Amir Hollaj (AK)	
	Jasmin Sutović (DPS)					
	Šefkija Murić (DPS)					
	Maida Bešlić (DPS)					
	Suad Numanović (DPS)					
	Fahrudin Hadrović (DPS)					
	Refik Bojadžić (DPS)					

Continued

Table 1 *Continued*

Legislative term	Minority-origin MPs elected from Montenegrin parties			Minority-origin MPs elected from ethnic parties		
	Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs		Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs	
		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian
	Rifat Rastoder (SDP)					
	Hidajeta Bajrampahić (SDP)					
	Džavid Šabović (SDP)					
	Ervin Spahić (SDP)					
	Damir Šehović (SDP)					
2012 – 2016 <i>(out of 81 seats)</i>	Mevludin Nuhodžić (DPS)	Halil Duković (DPS)	Nikola Gegaj (DPS)	Suljo Mustafić (BS)	Genci Nimanbegu (FORCA)	Nik Gjelošhaj (AA)
	Šefkija Murić (DPS)	Dritan Abazović (PCG)	Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Almer Kalač (BS)		
	Husnija Šabović (DPS)			Rešad Sijarić (BS)		
	Rešid Adrović (DPS)					
	Jasmin Sutović (DPS)					
	Maida Bešlić (DPS)					
	Izet Bralić (SDP)					
	Rifat Rastoder (SDP)					
	Džavid Šabović (SDP)					
	Damir Šehović (SDP)					
	Azra Jasavić (PCG)					

Continued

Table 1 Continued

Legislative term	Minority-origin MPs elected from Montenegrin parties			Minority-origin MPs elected from ethnic parties			
	Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs		Bosniak MPs	Albanian MPs		
		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian		Muslim Albanian	Catholic Albanian	
2016 – 2020 <i>(out of 81 seats)</i>	Mirsad Murić (DPS)	Halil Duković (DPS)	Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Ervin Ibrahimović (BS)	Genci Nimanbegu (FORCA)		
	Suad Numanović (DPS)	Dritan Abazović (URA)		Nedžad Drešević (BS)			
	Džavid Šabović (SDP)						
	Dženan Kolić (DCG)						
2020 – 2023 <i>(out of 81 seats)</i>	Mevludin Nuhodžić (DPS)	Halil Duković (DPS)	Luigj Škrelja (DPS)	Kenana Strujić–Harbić (BS)	Genci Nimanbegu (FORCA)		
	Abaz Dizdarević (DPS)			Amer Smailović (BS)	Mehmet Zenka (UDSH)		
	Adnan Striković (SDP)			Suljo Mustafić (BS)			
	Albin Ćeman (DCG)						
	Suada Zoronjić (URA)						
	Damir Šehović (SDCG)						
2023 – present <i>(out of 81 seats)</i>	Seid Hadžić (PES)	Drita Llolla (DPS)		Kenana Strujić–Harbić (BS)	Artan Ćobi (AF)	Nikolla Camaj (AF)	
	Armen Šehović (PES)	Mehmet Zenka (DPS)			Amer Smailović (BS)	Ilir Ćapuni (ASH)	
	Albin Ćeman (DCG)	Dritan Abazović (URA)			Ervin Ibrahimović (BS)		
	Abaz Dizdarević (DPS)			Damir Gutić (BS)			
				Admir Adrović (BS)			
			Mirsad Nurković (BS)				

social cleavage. Deviant cases have long been recognized in the literature as very important for yielding theoretical gains as they challenge prevalent explanations and identify new and/or omitted variables to explain the outcome of interest (Rueschemeyer 2003; Gerring 2007). As a more recent study on the topic demonstrates, deviant cases are also useful “to discover new information about causal pathways connecting the main independent with the main dependent variable” (Seawright 2016, 504).

Apart from this, I also examine the within-case temporal variation by focusing on four different periods of causal significance: from the collapse of communism to the DPS split in 1997; from the DPS split to the 2006 independence; from independence to DPS’s loss of power in 2020, and finally the post-2020 period. In doing so, I empirically demonstrate how the level of minority support for and representation by Montenegrin parties varied in accordance with the level of threat posed by the Serbian bloc in the country, reaching the highest level in the 1997–2006 period, decreasing after independence, increasing once more during the process leading to the NATO membership and then declining after Montenegro’s NATO membership in 2016. DPS loss of power in 2020 seems to have produced mixed results for now, opening up further space for the growth of minority parties in the case of Bosniaks while generating insecurity for the Albanian minority.

To research the case, I conducted fieldwork in Montenegro in March–April 2019. I conducted a total of 12 semi-structured elite interviews with mainstream and minority party leaders, deputy leaders, members of parliament, former ministers, party spokesmen and prominent Montenegrin academics. The interviews were crucial as they provided me with first-hand information about the causal mechanisms connecting my main independent variable, the peculiar nature of Montenegrin identity, with the dependent variables, high level of minority support for and representation via mainstream Montenegrin parties.

Alternative Explanations

Several extant explanations in the literature can not properly account for the deviance observed in the Montenegrin case. One area of scholarship singles out demographic variables, primarily minority size and geographic concentration, as one of the main determinants of ethnic party success. For instance, Moser (2005, 116) argues that “one would expect countries with larger minority populations to have ... greater viability of ethnic parties”. Likewise, in a recent cross-national quantitative analysis of ethnic parties in European legislatures, Dan Koev (2022, 85) concludes that “the strongest predictor for electoral success is the minority group’s share of the state’s population.” Demographic variables, however, cannot explain the Montenegrin case. The Bosniak minority is more than double the size of the Albanian one (11.95 versus 4.9 percent), yet Albanian parties have often performed electorally *better* than their Bosniak counterparts⁸ and Albanians in general have supported their ethnic parties more than Bosniaks.

A second area of scholarship focuses on institutional variables, particularly the electoral system and ethnically specific affirmative action policies for minorities. It is widely recognized that proportional representation (PR) systems are more minority-friendly and more conducive to ethnic party success than single-member plurality (SMP) or various forms of mixed systems (Lijphart 2004; Norris 2004). This is especially the case with PR systems that have higher district magnitudes and lower thresholds (Moser 2008, 274–275). Netherlands, in this respect, stands out as a quasi-ideal PR system for minorities since the whole country serves as a single district and the threshold is only 0.67 percent, a situation from which the Muslim minority there has benefited significantly (Aktürk and Katliarou 2021, 399–400). Important also are electoral systems that provide “positive discrimination” to ethnic parties, whether in the form of reserved seats or special thresholds for minorities (Moser 2005; Van Cott 2005). Still, institutional variables also cannot account for the deviance observed in the Montenegrin case.

Postcommunist Montenegro has had throughout a very minority-friendly electoral system. Ever since 1998, it has operated a closed list PR system with the whole country serving as a single district

(like Netherlands mentioned above) and a three percent threshold⁹ (Dedović and Vujović 2015, 93), a threshold four times lower than the Bosniaks' population share and below the Albanians' five percent size. Furthermore, unlike Bosniaks, Albanians have also benefited from special electoral arrangements. An electoral system amendment in 1998 created a special Albanian district (encompassing the Albanian-majority areas in Montenegro) out of which five seats were to be elected¹⁰ (Dedović and Vujović 2015, 111–112; Šístek and Dimitrovová 2003, 170). This special arrangement was deemed unconstitutional and eventually removed in 2011. It was then replaced by a new one that lowered the national three percent threshold to just 0.7 percent for all minority electoral lists (Dedović and Vujović 2015, 93). Yet, even such special arrangements often did not benefit Albanian parties much. Indeed, during three consecutive legislative cycles (1998; 2001 and 2002), the Albanian parties won *together* only two of the five seats from the special Albanian district, with the remaining seats going to the DPS–SDP coalition (see relevant data from Table 1; see also Šístek and Dimitrovová 2003, 170–171).

A third area of scholarship emphasizes historical and cultural legacies and concludes from statistical analyses that ethnic minority groups that are native / autochthonous to the lands they inhabit and that have previously experienced a meaningful degree of autonomy are much more likely to field and sustain successful ethnic parties of their own rather than be represented by mainstream parties (Bilinski 2015; Koev 2019; 2022). Montenegrin Albanians and Bosniaks are both autochthonous to the lands they inhabit (Ulcinj / Malesia for Albanians and the historical Sandžak region for Bosniaks) and as Muslims they held a dominant position in the past when the Ottoman Empire ruled those lands.¹¹ Yet, they have generally not been able to sustain successful ethnic parties, unlike their co-ethnics in Serbia and North Macedonia.

Finally, the Montenegrin case challenges also a well-established empirical pattern concerning postcommunist transitions, that which associates the anti-communist / pro-independence opposition in former communist countries with nationalism and anti-minority stances (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006). More recently, Jan Rovny (2014) likewise finds that the anti-communist opposition in countries that were formerly federal peripheries and hosted politically significant minorities from the federal center are more likely to embrace ethnic nationalism. This has clearly not been the case in Montenegro where even the most staunchly anti-communist and pro-independence party in the 1990s, Slavko Perović's Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG), has been very supportive of minorities (Bieber 2003, 20) and has had significant support among Bosniaks and Albanians. Xhemal Perović, a Muslim ethnic Albanian from Ulcinj, even became LSCG leader for a period (Lika 2023, 356).

Bosniak and Albanian minority representation in postcommunist Montenegro

To measure and show the level of minority support for and representation by mainstream Montenegrin parties, I tabulate below data on all Bosniak and Albanian MPs elected from Montenegrin and minority parties across 12 parliamentary elections (Table 1), municipality-level parliamentary election results for the post-2006 period of the Montenegrin and minority parties in the four municipalities where Bosniaks and Albanians constitute the majority (Table 2) and country-level election results of minority parties across 12 elections (Table 3)

Bosniak minority representation

At the representation level, based on the data presented in Table 1, I find that on average across 12 parliamentary elections 77 percent of all Bosniak MPs have been elected from mainstream Montenegrin parties and only 23 percent have been elected from Bosniak parties. Among Montenegrin parties, two of them have dominated Bosniak representation, with 57 percent of Bosniak deputies elected from Đukanović's DPS and 28 percent from the Social Democratic Party (SDP). DPS and SDP have been governing coalition partners uninterruptedly for 18 years, from 1998 up

Table 2. Vote shares (%) of the Montenegrin and minority parties in municipalities where Bosniaks and Albanians constitute the majority (2006 – 2023)

Plav (57.5 percent Bosniak)		
Parliamentary election	Montenegrin parties' combined vote share	Bosniak parties' combined vote share
2006	58	14
2009	66*	3
2012	48	28
2016	68	15
2020	61	16
2023	50	28
Average	59	17
Rožaje (88.5 percent Bosniak)		
Parliamentary election	Montenegrin parties' combined vote share	Bosniak parties' combined vote share
2006	65	28
2009	85*	5
2012	45	51
2016	51	47
2020	51	46
2023	32	65
Average	55	40
Ulcinj (70.65 percent Albanian)		
Parliamentary election	Montenegrin parties' combined vote share	Albanian parties' combined vote share
2006	33	56
2009	24	67
2012	28	61
2016	45	49
2020	48	44
2023	51	42
Average	38	53
Tuzi (65 percent Albanian)**		
Parliamentary election	Montenegrin parties' combined vote share	Albanian parties' combined vote share
2020	41	45
2023	30	50
Average	36	48

Source: Tables are compiled by the author based on official parliamentary election results in polling stations on a municipality level provided by Montenegro's State Election Commission (*Državna Izborna Komisija*) <https://dik.co.me>.

Notes: *The Bosniak Party (BS) entered the 2009 election as part of DPS-SDP coalition *Evropska Crna Gora*.

**Municipality-level data for Tuzi are available only for the last two elections because until 2018 Tuzi was administratively part of the capital city of Podgorica and only recently gained full municipality status.

Table 3. National vote shares (%) of Bosniak and Albanian parties across 12 parliamentary elections (1990 – 2023)

Election	Bosniak parties' combined vote share	Albanian parties' combined vote share
1990	*	*
1992	boycotted	3.85
1996	3.38	3.03
1998	0.7	2.57
2001	1.1	2.56
2002	1.3	2.4
Average (pre-independence period)	2.5	2.9
2006	3.68	3.73
2009	1.05**	4.24
2012	4.17	3.43
2016	3.4	2.52
2020	3.93	2.69
2023	7.01	3.36
Average (post-independence period)	4.4	3.3

Source: Table compiled by the author based on official election results data sent via email by the Parliamentary Institute of the Parliament of Montenegro. I am indebted to Nataša Komnenić from the Institute for sending me the data.

*The Bosniak and Albanian minority parties (SDA and LDMZ) contested together the first 1990 pluralist election as the *Democratic Coalition* and gathered 10.08 percent of the national vote.

**The Bosniak Party (BS) entered the 2009 election as part of DPS-SDP's coalition *Evropska Crna Gora*, hence its vote share is not reflected in the table above.

until Montenegro's NATO membership in 2016 when SDP decided to pull out of the government.¹² The remaining Bosniak deputies were elected from across a number of other parties, including Positive Montenegro (PCG), Democrats (DCG), United Reform Action (URA), Movement for Changes (PZP) and the current ruling party of prime minister Milojko Spajić, Europe Now Movement (PES). On the other hand, only two Bosniak parties have made it to parliament in 33 years of pluralism. From 1990 until 2006, the main Bosniak party was the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) led by Harun Hadžić, that was founded as the Montenegrin branch of Alija Izetbegović's SDA in Bosnia. From 2006 up to present the main minority party has been the Bosniak Party (*Bošnjačka Stranka*, BS), that was founded three months before the May 2006 independence referendum by the late Rafet Husović.

Municipality and country-level election results overall corroborate the dominance observed at the representation level. As clearly shown in [Table 2](#), Montenegrin parties' average vote share in the post-2006 period in Plav has been more than double the share of the Bosniak parties. Even in the stronghold of Rožaje, that is almost entirely ethnic Bosniak, Montenegrin parties have captured on average a majority of the votes. Additionally, country-level election results in [Table 3](#) indicate that municipality-level support for Bosniak parties was lower in the pre-2006 period (especially from 1998 to 2006) because the average national vote share of these parties in the pre-2006 period is almost half that of the post-2006 period. Crucially, [Table 3](#) also shows that, overall, with the exception of the first and last election (1990 and 2023), Bosniak parties' vote share has been much lower than even half of the Bosniaks' 12 percent population size.

Across 12 elections, the worst performance of Bosniak parties (and DPS-SDP coalition's best performance) has been the period from 1998 until the 2006 independence, when SDA and other smaller Bosniak parties did not even enter parliament for three consecutive legislative cycles. Indeed, their average national vote share in the 1998, 2001 and 2002 elections was a negligible one percent (Table 3). As such, in those elections Bosniaks largely voted for and were represented only by the DPS-SDP coalition. The situation started to gradually improve only after 2006 with the formation of BS.

Unlike SDA, BS has managed to enter parliament in each of the six legislative cycles after independence and the average national vote share of Bosniak parties almost doubled. At the representation level, BS still lagged behind the DPS-SDP coalition, as evidenced also by the majorities DPS-SDP captured in Plav and Rožaje throughout most of the post-independence period. It was only in the most recent 2023 election that for the *first* time in 33 years of pluralism more Bosniak MPs were elected from their minority party than from Montenegrin parties. The 2023 election marked also the first time that a Bosniak party managed to capture more than half (seven percent) of its constituency's population size, as substantiated also by BS capturing a large majority of votes in Rožaje in 2023. In Plav, on the other hand, although one can also observe a slight increase in minority support for BS, overall its local vote share there still lags significantly behind that of the Montenegrin parties (Table 2). To sum up, this is how BS's spokesperson Adel Omeragić (2024) described the process of the evolution of Bosniak support for BS in a personal correspondence with the author:

In anticipation of the referendum for the independence of Montenegro, several small Bosniak parties created one, common Bosniak party. That was in February 2006, and in a way it was the first serious movement that started to politically represent and gather Bosniaks, after the SDA. And if you compare that period, the first elections in which the Bosniak Party took part and the last results from June 2023, you see that constant growth, often minimal. But, in 18 years, the Bosniak party worked diligently and patiently, and today we finally have a situation where more Bosniaks vote for their mother party than for other parties.

Albanian minority representation

The dynamics of the Albanian minority representation differ from the Bosniak ones in two ways. First, at the representation level, the domination of Montenegrin parties is less pronounced than in the Bosniak case, whereas at the municipality and country-level, post-2006 election results show that on average Albanians have supported their minority parties more than the Montenegrin ones. Second, unlike Bosniaks, Albanians in Montenegro have experienced positive discrimination with special electoral arrangements since 1998 and this has led to a proliferation of small Albanian parties / coalitions competing to enter parliament (especially after independence). Indeed, unlike Bosniak representation that has been confined to only two minority parties (SDA and BS), seven different Albanian parties / coalitions have made it to parliament since 1990.

At the representation level, I find that on average across 12 parliamentary elections 56 percent of all Albanian MPs (both Muslim and Catholic) have been elected from Montenegrin parties and 44 percent have been elected from Albanian parties. Among Montenegrin parties, a single one has dominated Albanian representation, with 81 percent of Albanian deputies elected only from Đukanović's DPS.¹³ The remaining were elected from Alliance of Reform Forces (SRS), LSCG, PCG and URA. As far as Albanian parties are concerned, seven of them have entered parliament in 33 years of pluralism. From 1990 until 2006, there were only two main Albanian parties, the Democratic Alliance of Albanians in Montenegro (LDMZ) and the Democratic Union of Albanians (UDSH). After 2006, the Albanian minority scene in Montenegro witnessed a proliferation of small parties and coalitions, with five more Albanian minority subjects entering parliament, including the

New Democratic Force (FORCA), Albanian Alternative (AA), Albanian Forum (AF), Albanian Coalition (AK) and Albanian Alliance (ASH). Due to the relatively small size of Albanians, these are all very small parties / coalitions competing amongst themselves to win at most three seats. Country-level election results, however, do not substantiate so much the slight dominance of Montenegrin parties observed at the representation level, since results indicate that both in the pre-2006 and post-2006 period Albanian parties' average combined vote share is slightly more than half of Albanians' population size.

At the representation level, the worst performance of the Albanian parties across 12 elections has been the period from 1998 until 2006 (same with the Bosniak case). During the period in question, for three consecutive legislative cycles Albanian parties managed to win only two of the five seats reserved for the special Albanian district, while the remaining three seats went to the DPS–SDP coalition. Country-level election results corroborate this finding as they show that Albanian parties' lowest national vote shares have been precisely during the 1998, 2001 and 2002 elections.

In the post-independence period, the electoral performance of Albanian parties improved not only at the municipality and country-levels but also at the representation level. Indeed, they won together three of the five reserved seats in the 2006 election, while in 2009 they achieved their best result by winning four of the five seats, as evidenced also by the large majorities they captured in Ulcinj during the same period (Table 2). Montenegrin parties returned to dominate Albanian representation after 2012, a situation that can be attributed to the increasing Serbian threat during the process leading to the NATO membership and partly also to the fact that the special Albanian district (in place since 1998) was removed in 2011. This post-2012 increase of Montenegrin parties at the representation level is evidenced by their increasing vote share in the Albanian stronghold of Ulcinj. It bears emphasis that, unlike in the two Bosniak-majority municipalities, minority support for Montenegrin parties in Ulcinj (though not in Tuzi) continued to *increase* even in the last two elections, surpassing the support for Albanian parties. This can be in part attributed to the Albanians' feeling less secure in the aftermath of DPS loss of power in 2020 and the coming to power of parties associated with more pro-Serbian positions.

Explaining Minority Support for and Representation by Montenegrin parties and the temporal variation in it

What accounts for Montenegrin parties overall domination of Bosniak and Albanian minority representation in the postcommunist period? I argue that the peculiar nature of Montenegrin identity and its political repercussions largely account for this rather counterintuitive outcome. I have already laid out above that what is peculiar about Montenegrin identity is that it does not pit the Orthodox majority against the non-Orthodox minority (as is the case in other Orthodox-majority Balkan states), but rather pits the Montenegrin and Serbian components of the Orthodox majority against each other and in such a context the non-Orthodox minorities (Bosniaks and Albanians) become critical political allies of the Montenegrin bloc against the Serbian one.

Montenegrin identity has historically been fluid and characterized by an inherent dualism that temporarily evaporates only when pressurized from the rise of greater Serbian ideology in the region. Hence, two leading scholars in the field correctly describe Montenegrin nationalism as “situational nationalism... national identities that shift in response to overarching, compelling geopolitical battles that appeal to the loyalties of individuals in fluid identity settings.” (Jenne and Bieber 2014, 439). Prominent Montenegrin academic and intellectual Milan Popović (2019) nicely summarizes these dynamics in an interview with the author:

Here in Montenegro we have never had stabilized, clear identities. As I told you, according to most sources, most of the Montenegrins in the 19th century considered themselves, it was official ideology, being Serbs. By the way, the best Serbs. There is little bit of racism in that kind of proudness of Montenegrins. And even King Nikola who was the greatest victim of the

greater Serbian politics of the First World War, even he, until the last day of his rule, he pretended to be the king of all Serbs. Then, great trauma after the First World War, lost of kingship, independence, identity, and humiliation in greater Serbian Yugoslavia, first Yugoslavia between the wars. So, the first trauma was also the beginning of re-making Montenegrin identity as anti-greater Serbian.

In this historically rooted contest between the Montenegrin and Serbian components of the Orthodox majority Bosniaks and Albanians emerge as natural allies of the Montenegrin bloc against the Serbian one. There is even a historical narrative of Montenegrin tolerance toward minorities that is still advanced nowadays by representatives of both minority and Montenegrin parties to justify their alliance against Serbian parties. Xhemal Perović (2019) told the author that the policies of the last and longest-serving ruler of independent Montenegro, King Nikola I (1860–1918), were relatively liberal for “a time when there was neither United Nations nor any European convention on human rights”. Likewise, former SDP leader and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ranko Krivokapić (2019) averred that:

We were Orthodox theocracy until 1852, and still protected Muslims. It was historical maturity and smart behavior of our rulers. That’s the base for Montenegrin success. On the other side was Serbia where they destroyed all the mosques. Belgrade had about 365 mosques, only one survived. Same with Bulgaria ... that behavior [King Nikola’s multi-ethnic policies] in the second part of the 19th century protected Montenegro in the 20th and 21st century.

Still, it has to be recognized that this narrative of Montenegrin tolerance toward Muslims in the 19th century does not entirely reflect historical facts and it often involves a very partial view of history and a rather hagiographic view of the Petrović dynasty. Suffice here to mention that Montenegrins were regularly involved in anti-Muslim ‘actions’ along the borders with Herzegovina for the entire period between 1852 and 1882 and that the Montenegrin Prince and Bishop Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851) is considered to be the key figure in the reconstruction of the Lazar story and the mythology of ‘Christoslavism’, which more than a century later provided the ideological underpinning for the genocide against Bosnian Muslims (Sells 1996). As such, the narrative of the historical Montenegrin tolerance toward Muslims is to some extent a recent myth that has been used by Montenegrin politicians to court minority support against the Serbian bloc.

In a nutshell, the alliance of the minorities with the Montenegrin bloc against the Serbian one rests on both a political and to some extent embellished historical logic. In the postcommunist period, Bosniaks and Albanians have overall supported Montenegrin parties more than their ethnic parties because they have viewed the former (largely DPS) as protector of minorities and guarantor of stability against the Serbian bloc. That having been said, what accounts for the temporal variation in the degree of minority support for and representation by Montenegrin parties? Why was minority support and representation at its highest level during the 1997–2006 period and why did it start to gradually decline after the 2006 independence, increase once more during the period leading to the NATO membership and then decline after the 2016 membership? I am going to answer this question by focusing on four different periods of causal significance: from the collapse of communism to the DPS split in 1997; from the DPS split to the 2006 independence; from independence to DPS loss of power in 2020 and finally, the post-2020 period.

From the Collapse of Communism to the DPS Split (1990–1997)

The period coinciding with the collapse of communism and the Yugoslav dissolution wars of the 1990s was arguably the most difficult for the minorities in Montenegro. During this period, the communist successor party DPS, ruled at the time by a triumvirate composed of Milo Đukanović, Momir Bulatović and Svetozar Marović, had complete control over all levers of power in the

country and had no difficulty in winning an absolute majority in each of the first three pluralist elections (1990, 1992 and 1996). What was perhaps more consequential for the minorities was DPS's uneasy alliance during those dark years with Slobodan Milošević. DPS was the “copycat” of Milošević's Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), avers SDP spokesperson Mirko Stanić (2019). At the same time, however, representatives of different Montenegrin and minority parties all agree on the point that DPS's alliance with Milošević was largely forced upon as the Montenegrin leadership had absolutely no power to oppose Milošević during those years. Belgrade had a substantial army and paramilitary presence in tiny Montenegro and the Serbian strongman was implicitly supported by the West during those years in the name of stability (Stanković 2019; Popović 2019; Stanić 2019; Zenka 2019; Škrelja 2019). Simply put, Đukanović and Bulatović's overriding concern was to stay in power and for this they understood that they had little choice but to ally with Belgrade.

This background is necessary to understand why Bosniak and Albanian parties performed quite well in the first pluralist elections in December 1990, capturing 10.08 percent of the national vote together as the *Democratic Coalition*. At the same time, however, minorities were significantly represented by Montenegrin parties even during this period, primarily the pro-independence Montenegrin parties opposed to DPS (LSCG and SDP), but even the DPS itself *always* had Bosniak and Albanian legislators elected among its ranks. Indeed, an almost equal number of Bosniak and Albanian legislators were elected from the Montenegrin and minority parties in the 1990 election. Seven of the 17 deputies (41 per cent) won by the opposition Alliance of Reform Forces (SRS)¹⁴ in the 1990 election and five of the 83 DPS deputies were of minority-origin. In the subsequent 1992 election, Bosniaks and Albanians were represented only by Montenegrin parties (DPS, LSCG and SDP), since the Albanian LDMZ narrowly failed to cross the four percent threshold while SDA boycotted those elections due to the Bosnian war. In the last 1996 election prior to the DPS split, DPS outperformed Bosniak parties at a representation level and the latter's combined national vote share was only 3.38 percent. On the other hand, the two Albanian parties achieved almost the same vote share as the Bosniak ones in this election (despite Bosniaks being more than double the size of Albanians) and outperformed DPS at a representation level as well (see relevant data in Tables 1 & 3).

As already mentioned, even the Belgrade-allied DPS targeted minority votes during this period. BS spokesperson Omeragić (2024) acknowledges that “since the introduction of the multi-party system in Montenegro, Bosniaks as a people have always been a target for votes, predominantly from civic parties.” And the DPS during those years rhetorically defined itself as a civic party. Despite the fact that it opposed independence, it consistently promoted titular Montenegrin identification throughout the republic and sought to preserve some degree of Montenegrin autonomy within the Yugoslav federation (Bieber 2003, 20; Jenne and Bieber 2014, 450). Indeed, as Krivokapić (2019) recalls, even during those years “Đukanović and Bulatović never said we are Serbs. They said we are Montenegrins.”

To be sure, problems did exist and a general climate of fear did prevail among minorities during that time, especially among Bosniaks. Brutal episodes like the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim village of Bukovica in northern Montenegro in July 1992 and the massacre against Muslims at the Štrpci train station in February 1993 (Morrison 2009, 121–122) showed that DPS authorities were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to rein in the activities of the murderous Serbian paramilitaries in Montenegro. The imprisonment of SDA leaders, including Harun Hadžić, on a show trial in 1994 (Morrison 2009, 123) only served to sow more fear and distrust in the relations between Montenegrin authorities and the Bosniak minority. But, overall, these brutal episodes constituted the exception as there was no systematically organized and targeted violence against minorities during this period and Montenegro overall remained peaceful.¹⁵ The source of radicalization in Montenegro during the early 1990s was the Serbian paramilitaries and Serbian parties – firstly Novak Kilibarda's People's Party and then the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) – whereas DPS overall acted as a factor for the de-escalation of interethnic tensions and preservation of domestic peace. Evidence for this can be found in DPS's decision to form a grand coalition government with LSCG and SDP after

the December 1992 election¹⁶, its role in the “release of around 1,000 Albanian youth who had been forcibly conscripted by the Yugoslav Army (YNA) at the mount valley of Sutorman, waiting to be deployed in Bosnia and Croatia”, and the overall uneasy and strained relations DPS had with Milošević (Lika 2023, 358).

In sum, from the collapse of communism until 1997, minority parties performed well at a national level and, at a representation level, an almost equal number of minority legislators were elected from Montenegrin and minority parties. Pro-independence Montenegrin parties performed especially well in representing the minorities, but even the Belgrade-allied DPS did not lag behind in this respect. It can be argued that DPS was aware that minority constituencies could be crucial for its long-term political objectives. Mirko Stanić indeed rightly points out that the DPS even in those years did not consider the minorities as an ethnic problem, but rather “a political party problem”, how to get more votes from them (Stanić 2019). As such, DPS could simply not tolerate losing leverage and public standing toward the minorities by inciting violence against them. Rather it was in its interest to preserve the image of a citizen party and protect the minorities. Post-1997 developments would validate such a policy.

From the DPS Split to Montenegro's Independence (1997–2006)

A combination of intra-party elite struggle over economic resources, political interests and strong Western pressure generated a split in the ruling DPS, with one faction led by then prime minister Đukanović advocating for more political autonomy (later independence) from Belgrade and closer ties with the West, while the other faction led by then president Bulatović supported a continuation of the status-quo and further loyalty to Belgrade (Morrison 2018, 69–81). “We got new class of tycoons, they needed to be independent from Belgrade”, notes Krivokapić (2019), further contending that “the key is international pressure. The alternative [for Đukanović] was to stay with Milošević and go with him to Hague.” Hence, after openly going against Milošević in early 1997, Đukanović reinvented himself as a reformer and Western-oriented leader and his DPS fully adopted LSCG and SDP's political platform. As the leaders of these parties frequently complain about, in the post-1997 period DPS “hijacked” LSCG and SDP's program (Krivokapić 2019; Perović 2019; Stanić 2019).

I already noted above that the worst performance of the minority parties in the postcommunist period has been the period from the DPS split until 2006. During three consecutive legislative cycles (1998, 2001 and 2002), Bosniak parties' average combined vote share was a negligible one percent, they failed to enter parliament altogether and, as such, Bosniaks were represented only by the DPS–SDP coalition.¹⁷ During the same period, likewise, Albanian parties recorded their lowest national vote shares throughout the postcommunist period and managed to win only two of the five seats reserved for the special Albanian district, with the remaining three seats going to the DPS–SDP coalition. I argue that the reason why minority support for and representation by Montenegrin parties was at its highest level during the 1997–2006 period is because the Serbian threat was at its highest level. Consequently, it was during this period that Đukanović's DPS most needed minority votes to defeat Serbian parties.

It was indeed only with minority support that Đukanović first scored a razor-thin victory against Momir Bulatović in the critical October 1997 presidential election, then the DPS–SDP coalition captured a majority of votes in each of the 1998, 2001 and 2002 parliamentary elections. Most critically, Montenegro's May 2006 independence referendum, the crowning achievement, barely crossed the legally mandated 55 percent threshold only with overwhelming Bosniak and Albanian support (Lika 2023, 359). Symbolically, the top two cities delivering a “Yes” vote in the 2006 referendum were Bosniak-majority Rožaje (91.3 percent in favor) and Albanian-majority Ulcinj (88.5 percent in favor), both of which delivered higher support than even the former royal capital city of Cetinje (86.4 percent in favor).¹⁸

The Serbian threat was at its highest level during the Kosovo war and NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia (March–June 1999) until the fall of Milošević's regime in October 2000, when there was a real possibility that Milošević could have instigated a diversionary war in Montenegro that would have pitted the Montenegrin and Serbian members of the Orthodox majority against each other in a bloody fratricidal conflict (Roberts 2007, 455–457). Furthermore, such a conflict would have also included the minorities since a large number of Bosniaks and Albanians were part of Đukanović's 20,000–strong heavily militarized police force (Morrison 2009, 171). According to Perović (2019), Albanians were free to join the police force during those years. Šístek and Dimitrovová (2003, 166) also report that:

The massive presence of Montenegrin police loyal to President Đukanović protected the Bosniak-Muslim population from the excesses of the Yugoslav Army and Serb paramilitaries. In the most peripheral municipality of Rožaje, the Montenegrin police distributed weapons to the local civilian population so that it would not be defenceless in case it was attacked by armed formations loyal to Milošević.

Montenegro escaped civil war during those critical years (1998–2000) and different factors have been put forward to account for this. Popović (2019) and Petersen (2011, 270; 287–289) both contend that it was the fluidity of Montenegrin identity that prevented mobilization for violence on both sides of the Orthodox majority, whereas Krivokapić (2019) told the author that “if Milošević ordered war, we would have had war. He didn't order. He didn't want to see war in Montenegro. We know that.”

All in all, Bosniaks and Albanians delivered the highest level of support to the DPS–SDP coalition during the 1997–2006 period because Serbian threat to Montenegro's statehood, stability, and to the security of minorities was at its highest level. My interviewees from different political orientations agree unanimously on this point. For instance, both LDMZ's Mehmet Bardhi (2019) and UDSH's Mehmet Zenka (2019) emphasize the “wise policy” of Montenegrin parties that have always seen and treated the minorities as “a political partner and ally” against the Serbian parties. Perović (2019) claims that by consistently invoking an anti-Serbian nationhood vision, DPS has been able to create a winning electoral coalition by attracting minority support. Even Slaven Radunović (2019), deputy leader of the main Serbian nationalist party in Montenegro (New Serb Democracy, NOVA), who considers Đukanović not just a political opponent, but an “enemy”, told the author in an interview that:

You know, Albanian leaders here are very, they become crazy when you say to them that the Albanian leader in Montenegro is Đukanović. Because more Albanians vote for him than for Albanian parties. In all other Balkan countries where Albanians have big populations, like Macedonia or Kosovo, they have their local leaders. In Montenegro no. Because a lot of Albanians, Đukanović bought them, not by money, but ideologically bought them because he [Đukanović] became enemy of Serbia.

Finally, it is worth quoting at length the words of BS's spokesperson Omeragić (2024) who nicely captures the logic behind Bosniaks' strong support for Montenegrin parties:

After the SDA leaders were arrested in the 1994, the political activity of Bosniaks was threatened, and then a space opened up for civic parties to dominate the votes of Bosniaks. That entire period coincides with political turbulence in Montenegro, until the split in DPS, between Milo Đukanović and Momir Bulatović, in 1997, when Đukanović decided to lead a policy that guarantees security to minority people, while Bulatović, on the other hand, advocated closer cooperation with Slobodan Milošević. After that, the war in Kosovo followed and the Bosniaks were again scared. Đukanović then positioned himself as a protector of minority nations and was someone who advocated the idea of an independent Montenegro.

Thus, the Bosniaks were in a deadlock, their choice was narrowed, on the one hand Đukanović and the DPS, as well as the SDP and the Liberal Alliance, and on the other the pro-Serb party.

From Independence to DPS Loss of Power (2006–2020)

The 2006 independence would usher in a fundamental recalibration of Montenegrin politics. Since the statehood issue was resolved, identity-based politics gradually started to lose its salience and more civic issues took center stage, especially democratization, rule of law and the fight against corruption (Morrison 2018, 133–167). This is best evidenced by the significant decline in the support for Serbian parties, whose vote share almost halved in the post-independence parliamentary elections, and by the different electoral coalitions formed between Serbian and Montenegrin opposition parties against the ruling DPS. Equally important, 2011 census data showed that the percentage of the Orthodox majority self-identifying as Serb *declined* compared to the 2003 census, from 32 to 28.72 percent (MONSTAT 2011). As Milan Popović (2019) also notes, in the absence of any other upsurge of greater Serbian ideology, “Montenegrin identity will again stabilize, Serbian identity will probably return to 10 to 15 percent and it will be consolidated.”

Crucially, all this meant a significant decline in the level of threat posed by the Serbian bloc in Montenegro, and this accounts for the increase in the level of minority support for ethnic parties in the early post-independence period (2006 and 2009 elections), as evidenced at the representation level and by municipality and country-level parliamentary election results. The pattern is clear by this point. The greater the level of Serbian threat, the greater the level of minority support for and representation by Montenegrin parties (mostly DPS) and the lower the level of minority support for ethnic parties. Hence, Đukanović’s ability to attract Bosniak and Albanian support largely depends on the level of Serbian threat.

Faced with declining minority support in the early post-independence period, DPS tried to raise the spectre of Serbian threat first by recognizing Kosovo’s independence in October 2008 and then, more importantly, by instrumentalizing the question of Montenegro’s NATO membership in 2015–2016. Both issues led to massive mobilization by Serbian parties in Montenegro who fiercely opposed both decisions.¹⁹ As a result, data from Tables 1–3 show that, compared with the 2006 and 2009 elections, minority support for Montenegrin parties did indeed increase in the 2012 and 2016 elections. Specifically, the DPS-SDP coalition increased its vote share during this period in Plav (from 48 to 68), Rožaje (from 45 to 51) and Ulcinj (from 28 to 45) and this was reflected also in the decreasing national vote shares of the minority parties.

Once completed, NATO membership provided the ultimate guarantee for Montenegrin security and territorial integrity and, as such, the level of Serbian threat would once more decline and Montenegrin politics would experience another recalibration with civic issues taking once more center stage. NATO membership also meant that the DPS was now running out of options to raise the salience of identity issues and would find it more difficult to sustain its rule in the post-membership period. As URA leader and former prime minister Dritan Abazović told the author in an interview in 2019, “Now that we are a full NATO member, I expect many more factors to help us in breaking this political monopoly.” Just one year after this interview, in the August 2020 parliamentary elections, it was exactly URA and Dritan Abazović who supported a coalition of Serbian parties (led by the non-party figure Zdravko Krivokapić) and ended what was by then the only uninterrupted incumbency of a communist successor party in Southeastern Europe (Lika 2023, 359–360).²⁰

The Post–2020 Period

DPS loss of power in 2020 is a very important turning point as the party system once more reconfigured itself and because the coming to power of (pro-)Serbian parties raised again the

salience of identity issues and hence impacted the minorities as well. Data from [Tables 1–3](#) suggest that these developments, at least for now, have impacted the Bosniak and Albanian minorities in rather different ways. On the one hand, in the case of Bosniaks, DPS loss of power seems to have given impetus to the process of realignment of minority support from Montenegrin toward minority parties. BS's increasing vote share in Plav and Rožaje in 2020–2023, its unprecedented seven percent national vote share in 2023 and its outperforming of Montenegrin parties at the representation level for the first time substantiate this point. As also confirmed by BS's spokesperson Omeragić (2024):

The political changes that took place in 2020, when the DPS lost power, further opened up space for the growth of the Bosniak Party, because for years the largest number of Bosniaks voted for DPS. In the 2023 elections, the Bosniak Party won 6 parliamentary mandates. I think that the Bosniak people, after Montenegro closed important state issues such as independence and membership in NATO, estimated that the interests of Bosniaks would be best represented by the Bosniak Party, which is natural. The Bosniak Party is a member of the European People's Party (EPP) and this is a confirmation of the European commitment of our party. Our task is to preserve this result first, and with good work, I'm sure we can improve even more.

On the other hand, in the case of Albanians, DPS loss of power and the coming to power of parties associated with more pro-Serbian positions seems to have increased somehow the support for Montenegrin parties as Albanians have felt less secure in the aftermath of these developments. This can be observed at a representation level where an equal number of Albanian MPs have been elected from Montenegrin and Albanian parties in the 2020 and 2023 elections and more clearly perhaps, in the increasing vote share of Montenegrin parties in Ulcinj (from 48 to 51). In the other Albanian-majority municipality of Tuzi (where Catholic Albanians mostly reside), though, the opposite is observed as the vote share of Montenegrin parties decreased there in 2023. Needless to say, the reconfiguration of the Montenegrin party system in the aftermath of DPS loss of power is still an ongoing process and more electoral cycles are needed in order to have a clearer understanding of the new patterns.

Conclusion

Montenegro is a very small country but it provides comparative political scientists with several theoretical and empirical puzzles. In this article I tried to account for one of these, namely mainstream Montenegrin parties' overall domination of the Bosniak and Albanian minority representation in postcommunist Montenegro. Drawing on original data on Bosniak and Albanian legislators elected from Montenegrin and minority parties across 12 parliamentary elections (1990–2023), municipality and country-level parliamentary election results and 12 semi-structured elite interviews, I argue that what explains the deviance in the Montenegrin case is the peculiar nature of Montenegrin identity and its political repercussions. I empirically demonstrate how the level of minority support for and representation by Montenegrin parties varied in accordance with the level of threat posed by the Serbian bloc in the country, reaching the highest level in the 1997–2006 period, decreasing after independence, increasing once more during the process leading to the NATO membership and then declining after Montenegro's NATO membership in 2016. DPS loss of power in 2020 seems to have produced mixed results for now, opening up further space for the growth of minority parties in the case of Bosniaks while generating insecurity for the Albanian minority.

What are the broader implications and applicability of the argument I develop in this article? On a general level, I find that ethnic minorities may often mobilize through mainstream rather than ethnic parties when the majority community is divided and one component of the majority is

perceived as a threat to the country's stability, inter-ethnic relations and to the very security of the minorities. In such a context, minorities are likely to ally with one component of the majority community to oppose the threatening one. This is what Bosniak and Albanian minorities have consistently done in postcommunist Montenegro by supporting the Montenegrin bloc against the Serbian one.

Such a scenario has been observed elsewhere in the Balkans as well, even though for a very brief period, and North Macedonia is a case in point. In this article I actually contrasted North Macedonia to Montenegro and argued that the former is a case in which ethnic Albanian support for Macedonian majority parties virtually does not exist. This has indeed been the rule for most of the postcommunist period, except for the December 2016 parliamentary elections. This exception is theoretically very valuable for the argument presented here because the 2016 elections were the *first* time that a significant part of the Albanian electorate voted for the communist successor party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) (Lika 2023, 365). What was different in 2016, as former SDSM Defense Minister Radmila Šekerinska (2023) told the author in an interview, is that Albanians were strongly opposed to the antiquization policies of Nikola Gruevski's VMRO government and saw that nationhood vision as a threat to the country's stability, inter-ethnic harmony and Euro-Atlantic integration. Hence, they decided in 2016 to support SDSM, in addition to their ethnic parties, and eventually succeeded in ending VMRO's ten-year uninterrupted rule. This is largely the same dynamic observed consistently in the Montenegrin case and shows the potential for generalizability of the argument presented here. Needless to say, more empirical work is needed to see how far the argument can go in explaining comparable dynamics in other Balkan countries and beyond.

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Notes

- 1 Although not as pronounced as before, there is an ongoing intellectual debate among the Bosnian Muslims in Montenegro and the Balkans in general over the appellation of their ethno-national group. Although the larger part seems to have adopted Bosniak (*Bošnjak*) for self-identification, a portion still retains the Yugoslav-era term Muslim. Without taking sides in any way in this intellectual debate, because of space limitations, in this article I will use only the term Bosniak to refer to the Slavic-speaking Muslims living in Montenegro. Hence, figures used throughout the article on the demographic size of Bosniaks includes both Montenegrin citizens identifying as Bosniaks and those identifying as Muslims. For more on the intellectual debate within the Bosnian Muslim community in the Balkans see Kriještorac (2022).
- 2 According to the 2011 census, Bosniaks constitute 11.95 percent of Montenegro's population (the combined figure of 8.64 percent self-identifying as Bosniak and 3.31 percent still using the term Muslim), while ethnic Albanians make up 4.9 percent of the population. Apart from Bosniaks and Albanians, a Roma and a Croat minority also lives in Montenegro but their numbers are much smaller, each constituting around one percent of the population (MONSTAT 2011).
- 3 Information on the party affiliation of elected deputies (but not their ethnic identity) is also given in the dataset. I thank Daria Musić from the Documentation Centre and Archive who provided me with the full list.

- 4 Following Van Cott (2005) and Madrid (2012), I define an ethnic party as a political organization the majority of whose leaders and members self-identify as belonging to a non-dominant ethnic group (Van Cott 2005, 3), that “prioritizes” the interests of that particular group, and that appeals to them as members of that group (Madrid 2012, 6).
- 5 I recognize that identification of identity by name tends often to be problematic as people might hold different identities than those that are attributed by name. In this article I still use this method, however, for lack of a better alternative and because it is the most common method used in such studies in the literature. As Aktürk and Katliarou (2021) also note in a recent study, “Identifying Muslim-origin MPs by their names is the most common method in the extant scholarship on Muslim minority representation in Western legislatures, even in single country studies, and almost without an alternative in comparative studies” (392).
- 6 Fortunately in my case, Montenegro is a very small country and family names are generally known and/or recognizable by local people.
- 7 In a few cases, I did not count those legislators who, despite having a Bosnian Muslim name, declared publicly to belong either to the Montenegrin or Serbian nation. Such was the case with former DPS deputy Smajo Sabotić who self-identifies as a Muslim belonging to the Serbian nation, and current DPS deputy Nermin Abdić who self-identifies as a Muslim belonging to the Montenegrin nation. I thank my research assistant from Montenegro Medina Kajosević who looked into these cases.
- 8 Bosniak parties even failed to enter parliament altogether for three consecutive legislative cycles (1998–2006).
- 9 The electoral system was also amended two times before 1998 (1992 and 1996), largely reflecting the electoral needs of the dominant DPS at the time. The first pluralist elections in 1990 were held under a closed PR system with 20 electoral districts and a four percent threshold. With the 1992 amendment, the country was turned into a single district. With another amendment in 1996, Montenegro reverted to multi-member districts, this time 14 (Dedović and Vujović 2015, 93).
- 10 The number of seats in the special Albanian district was reduced to four for the 2002 election, then became again five for the 2006 and 2009 elections (Dedović and Vujović 2015, 111). It has to be noted that these were *not* reserved seats for the Albanian parties, rather all national parties could compete for these five seats in the special Albanian district.
- 11 Indeed, Koev (2019, 279–282) in his statistical analysis codes both Montenegrin Albanian and Bosniaks as native and with a previous degree of autonomy / domination, however the theory he develops cannot account for the poor performance of their respective minority parties. Moreover, Koev (2019; 2022) focuses only on the post-independence parliamentary elections in Montenegro and thus leaves out completely the six elections in the 1990–2006 period.
- 12 The decision to pull out of the governing coalition with DPS led to a split in SDP where a faction led by Ivan Brajović left the party and founded a new one, Social Democrats of Montenegro (SDCG), that continued the alliance with DPS.
- 13 DPS’s domination is almost absolute if we consider only Catholic Albanian deputies. Indeed, with the exception of a single deputy (Gjergj Berishaj) elected from the opposition SRS in the 1990 election, *all* Catholic Albanian MPs elected from Montenegrin parties across 12 elections have been from the ranks of DPS. Concerning Muslim Albanian deputies, DPS’s domination is relatively less pronounced but still very significant.
- 14 SRS was the main opposition alliance following the program of Yugoslav Premier Ante Marković. It was led by the distinguished Montenegrin academic and intellectual Ljubiša Stanković who also ran as presidential candidate against Momir Bulatović in 1990. LSCG and SDP emerged from SRS after its disintegration.
- 15 Quite significantly in this respect, the convicted SDA leaders were later amnestied by president Momir Bulatović in 1996 (Morrison 2009, 123), that is a year *before* the DPS split.

- 16 The ethnic Albanian Xhemal Perović from LSCG was even appointed as deputy speaker of the Montenegrin parliament as part of the grand coalition government (Lika 2023, 369). Janusz Bugajski (1994, 178) correctly notes that the formation of the grand coalition “appeared to stabilize the republic by lessening political tensions while isolating the Radicals as the prime instigators of conflict” (on this point, see also Roberts 2007, 445).
- 17 Former SDA leader Harun Hadžić was further discredited after 2002 when he openly opposed Montenegro’s independence and joined the unionist bloc, arguing that an independent Montenegro would mean the division of the historical Sandžak region (Morrison 2018, 123).
- 18 Figures are from Montenegro’s State Election Commission (*Državna Izborna Komisija*) <https://dik.co.me/rezultati-referenduma-o-drzavno-pravnom-statusu-republike-crne-gore-po-opsti-nama/>; I thank URA leader and former prime minister Dritan Abazović (2019) who brought to my attention the issue of Rožaje and Ulcinj being the top two cities voting in favor of independence.
- 19 Still, NOVA deputy leader Slaven Radunović (2019) told the author that they were not opposed to NATO membership per se, but rather opposed to “membership without referendum”, somehow convinced that the Orthodox majority would reject government’s decision to join NATO.
- 20 DPS subsequently lost also the June 2023 parliamentary election, achieving its worst result in the postcommunist period (capturing only 23 percent of the vote), and Milo Đukanović was also defeated in the March 2023 presidential election to Jakov Milatović from PES.

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