



UDC: 329:324(4-12)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.7842022.11>

Original research paper

Serbian Political Thought

No. 4/2022, Year XXIX,

Vol. 78

pp. 197-217

Vujo Ilić**Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,
University of Belgrade, Serbia*

PARLIAMENTARY AND ELECTION BOYCOTTS IN HYBRID REGIMES: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE**

Abstract

Why do some opposition parties in hybrid regimes escalate their strategies of contention from parliamentary to election boycotts, while others do not? Opposition parties in hybrid regimes engage with a repertoire of extra-institutional strategies, including protests, parliamentary, and election boycotts. These strategies challenge the authoritarian dimension of the regime and aim to level the electoral playing field, but the election boycotts strategy carries more risk than the others, as it can marginalize the opposition. I argue that the opposition parties in hybrid regimes are less likely to take part in elections when the expected incumbent's electoral advantage is high, and when lower-risk extra-institutional strategies such as protests, and parliamentary boycotts are exhausted or not viable. The article presents evidence from Serbia, including data collected through interviews with the members of parliament and opinion polls, tracing the process that led the opposition parties to escalate the 2019 parliamentary boycott towards the 2020

* E-mail: vujo.ilic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

** This article was realized with the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realization and financing of scientific research. The draft paper benefited from feedback at the conference "Elections – Democracy – Covid-19. Lessons from Europe". Some of the empirical data was collected in 2019, together with Tamara Branković and Tara Tepavac, as part of a project on parliamentary boycotts in the Western Balkans, funded by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

boycott of the elections, despite being aware of the likely adverse effects. I also conduct a comparative analysis of opposition parties in similar contexts of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania that boycotted the parliament but always took part in the elections. The article brings together the detached literature on parliamentary and electoral boycotts and contributes to a better understanding of opposition strategies in hybrid regimes.

Keywords: political parties, opposition, election boycott, parliamentary boycott, hybrid regime, Serbia, Balkans

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of mass anti-government protests in Serbia in late 2018, most opposition parties left the National Assembly. The parliamentary boycott that began in February 2019 escalated into the boycott of the 2020 general elections. The outcome was that the main opposition parties became extra-parliamentary, and the ruling majority comprised an astonishing 97% of MPs. Early elections were called for April 2022, and by the end of 2021, as a wave of new environmental protests was spreading across Serbia, the opposition parties decided to run in the elections again. While the parliamentary boycott was temporary and could have been reversed, the consequences of the elections boycott were more durable and momentous, resulting in the opposition's almost four-year absence from the parliament.

The environment for opposition parties in Serbia shares many similarities with other countries in the region, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, but their opposition parties did not go down the same path. The opposition in these three countries followed similar extra-institutional trajectories: the parties boycotted local elections, organized or supported mass, sometimes violent protests against the government, and boycotted the parliaments. Yet, the opposition never boycotted the general elections, instead, it used the leverage of extra-institutional strategies to call for early elections. Why did the opposition parties in Serbia escalate their strategy from parliamentary to election boycott, while the opposition in comparable circumstances in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania did not?

Motivated by this empirical puzzle, this article's main goal is to explain the logic of opposition parties' escalation to high-risk contention strategies in hybrid regimes. It contributes to the literature on opposition parties' behavior in hybrid regimes by bringing together explanations of

parliamentary and election boycotts. It argues that the opposition parties' choice of election boycott, as a high-risk strategy, depends on the actors' understanding of the potential risks and gains, but they always relate it to their assessment and viability of other competing strategies: electoral participation and lower risk contention strategies.

Opposition parties in hybrid regimes operate in an environment in which they contest the rules of the game and have to play by them (Schedler 2006). To do so, the opposition chooses between a narrow scope of strategies that aim to delegitimize the ruling party, mobilize electoral support, or both. Taking part in the defective democratic institutions legitimizes them, and by choosing extra-institutional strategies, parliamentary boycotts, anti-government protests, or election boycotts, the opposition parties delegitimize the undemocratic dimension of the hybrid regime. However, these strategies carry different costs for the opposition (Kelley 2011). While the protests can galvanize opposition supporters, electoral boycotts are risky, as they can marginalize the opposition parties and hurt their electoral prospects. Even though the opposition parties may be aware of the higher risks, they opt for these strategies when other low-risk ones are exhausted or unfeasible.

The empirical part of this article examines a series of parliamentary boycotts in Southeastern Europe in the last decade. It focuses on an in-depth case study of the 2019-2020 transition from the parliamentary to the election boycott in Serbia, followed by a comparative analysis of three other cases from Southeastern Europe. It first explains the context of the hybrid regimes in which the opposition parties chose between different strategies, followed by a close evaluation of the possible risks and gains of the boycott in the case of Serbia, and an analysis of the sequences of events that led to the opposition escalating from low risk parliamentary to high-risk election boycott. In the final part of the article, I contrast this sequence of decisions to comparable environments in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, where opposition relied on lower-risk strategies, and where parliament boycotts were not followed by election boycotts. The article ends with the discussion of wider ramifications for the understanding of opposition strategies in hybrid regimes.

OPPOSITION STRATEGIES IN HYBRID REGIMES

The quality of democratic governance has been in decline globally, but unlike the collapses of democratic polities in the past, which were usually violent, the latest wave of autocratization is characterized by

a gradual decline (Diamond 2015; Bermeo 2016). The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been hit hard by the latest wave of autocratization. Following the Great Recession, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and Serbia were among the five countries that experienced the sharpest decline in V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Alizada et al. 2021).

These autocratizing countries have moved from liberal or electoral democracies to electoral autocracies (Lührmann et al. 2018). Different authors pointed out, more than two decades ago, that regimes with characteristics of both democracies and autocracies are not transitional but stable forms (Levitsky and Way 2002; Carothers 2002). Many authors expected that countries would transition to consolidated democracies or return to being autocracies, but instead, competitive autocracies, the most common type of hybrid regimes, essentially autocratic but maintaining democratic form, have proliferated since the early 2000s (Schedler 2006; Levitsky & Way 2002; 2010; 2020).

The autocrats in modern hybrid regimes rely on democratic mechanisms to gradually disassemble democracies (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019). Leaders come to power in democratic elections, and then concentrate power and modify the institutional setting to secure the upcoming elections (Scheppelle 2018). Democratic institutions become a facade, concealing entrenched power in the formal institutions, ensuring that while elections are held, the transfer of power becomes unlikely (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018).

Hybrid regimes present a specific type of environment for the opposition parties (Hauser 2019; Helms 2021; Laštro & Bieber 2021). The opposition always has to play at two levels, it challenges the rules of the game that tilt the playing field in the incumbents' favor, and still has to participate in that game (Schedler 2006; Williamson 2021). Most of the time opposition competes in elections and condemns the government for democratic shortcomings at the same time, but sometimes the opposition parties retreat from participation and switch to extra-institutional means of contestation.

Opposition in hybrid regimes chooses among a limited repertoire of extra-institutional strategies (Schedler 2002; Hauser 2019). One of the most common strategies is mass protests, which signal to the government and voters the dissatisfaction with the regime or its policies (Beaulieu 2014; Brancati 2016). The level of contention of the protests can increase, from peaceful and legal demonstrations to acts of civil disobedience, such as blockades (peaceful but illegal), to violent demonstrations (neither peaceful nor legal). Yet, mass protests are a result of the collective action

of large numbers of people who are often a part of social movements, and not always organized by the opposition parties.

Parties can also choose whether to take part in the democratic process or not. Different forms of electoral boycott exist, but here it will refer to what Beaulieu (2006) considers a major election boycott, one which involves a majority of the opposition at the national level. Different aspects of electoral boycotts, from causes to consequences have been studied extensively (Beaulieu 2006; Kelley 2011; Smith 2014; Buttorff & Dion 2017). This is not the case with parliamentary boycotts, prolonged absences of elected representatives from the parliament, as a sign of protest, which are less often studied (Spary 2013). Burke (2019) is a rare example that analyzes both parliamentary and electoral boycotts, though in the context of new democracies, not hybrid regimes. Therefore, less is known about why some opposition parties in hybrid regimes escalate their strategies from parliamentary to opposition boycotts while others do not. This article explores the variation in outcomes across several cases in Southeastern Europe, where parliamentary boycotts occur often, but electoral less so.

HYPOTHESIS AND METHOD

The opposition parties in hybrid regimes compete in an environment in which they choose between different institutional (representation in parliament, competing in elections) and extra-institutional strategies (boycotts of parliament and elections, protests). Building upon the existing literature, we can first expect there is a hierarchy between them, with participation in elections coming at the top for the opposition parties. Opposition parties' primary path to power is through winning elections. When participation is not effective, and when the incumbent has an unfair electoral advantage, opposition parties weigh the instrumental value of the secondary, extra-institutional strategies, and choose the ones that carry the least risks and bring them closest to electoral success. Opposition can then switch between strategies, for example, from participation to boycott, or combine them, for example, relying on different forms of protests together with parliamentary boycotts. Finally, there is also a logic of escalation, changing a strategy with a more contentious one, to increase pressure on the government and change the rules of the game.

Opposition parties favor participation in elections when there is some chance of transfer of power. Yet, as the playing field in hybrid regimes is tilted to the incumbents' advantage, the opposition lacks equal access to resources and communication, necessary to mobilize electoral

support. When the ruling parties' advantage is greater, the opposition is more likely to combine the electoral participation with low-risk extra-institutional strategies such as protests or parliamentary boycotts, aimed to upset the existing balance, mobilize support, and increase their chances. Thus, opposition parties will participate when the incumbent's electoral advantage is low and will continue even when the advantage is higher, as long as they can pursue low-risk contention strategies. When this is not the case, for instance, when the opposition cannot mobilize their supporters, or when following the logic of escalation, these strategies are already exhausted, they will be more prone to boycott the elections.

Based on these empirical expectations, the hypothesis relates electoral participation as a dependent variable, and the incumbent's electoral advantage and the availability of two main extra-institutional strategies as independent variables, and can be stated as follows: *Opposition parties in hybrid regimes are less likely to take part in general elections when the expected incumbent's electoral advantage is high, and when lower-risk extra-institutional strategies of contention, such as parliamentary boycotts and protests, are exhausted or not viable.*

The scope conditions for this hypothesis are contemporary competitive autocracies, which developed during the last wave of autocratization. It refers to the contentious strategies of relevant national-level parties, which excludes marginal parties, and national minority parties. As described earlier, parliamentary boycotts are prolonged absences of major opposition parties' representatives from the national parliaments, which excludes temporary events such as walkouts, as well as prolonged boycotts of upper houses in bicameral parliaments, or from federal parliaments, unless this is the only directly elected representative body. Finally, the hypothesis explains participation in elections for the legislature, excluding second-order elections, such as local or regional, or federal, unless these are the only direct national-level elections, supranational elections, such as the election of Members of the European Parliament, presidential elections, as well as referendums.

The hypothesis is tested in the empirical part of this article, which consists of two parts, the case study of the 2019-2020 parliamentary and election boycotts in Serbia, and the comparative analysis of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania. A case study method is first used to explain the electoral boycott in Serbia, which failed to happen in similar circumstances before or after, as well as in neighboring countries. It is first argued why the parliamentary boycott was a low and election boycott a high-risk strategy for the opposition. This is followed by tracing the process through which the opposition parties assessed their position

while paying attention to specific causal patterns that can explain their behavior (Gerring 2004; George & Bennett 2005).

In the second part, I present a comparative analysis of three countries, following broadly a method of difference (Ragin 2014). The analysis covers the main opposition actors in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, from the outset of the Global Recession to the present. Comparing similar cases of autocratizing countries, controls most differences, and helps isolate, to an extent it is possible, the variation in incumbents' electoral advantage, protests, and parliamentary boycotts as the independent, and election participation as the dependent variable.

THE PARLIAMENTARY AND ELECTION BOYCOTT IN SERBIA

Boycotts in Serbia have not been a common phenomenon, however, their frequency followed a pattern. They were recurring more during the periods when Serbia was a hybrid regime (1990-2000, 2014-2022) than during the period of consolidation of democracy, from 2000 to 2014 (Ilić, Branković & Tepavac 2019). During the rule of the Socialist Party of Serbia, the first boycott of the parliament by a nationwide group of the opposition parties was in 1995, caused by the suspension of the parliament's live broadcasts. The largest election boycott occurred in 1997 when a newly formed opposition coalition objected to the deteriorating electoral conditions (Goati 2013). After the 2000 change of government, when the Democratic Party (DS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) were switching in power, both parliamentary and election boycotts became less frequent. A single opposition party briefly boycotted the parliament in 2005, and one opposition party boycotted the 2006 constitutional referendum. The next election boycott in Serbia happened only in 2020, after the 2012 change of government, when Serbia again developed features of a hybrid regime (Lührmann et al. 2018; Bieber 2018; Vladisavljević 2019; Levitsky & Way 2010; 2020; Alizada et al. 2021).

In line with the empirical expectations, the opposition parties in Serbia were more prone to use extra-institutional strategies, when the electoral advantage of the ruling authoritarian parties effectively made transfers of power through elections less viable. During the period when parties could challenge the ruling party in elections, the opposition fully relied on institutional strategies. Yet, this does not explain at what point exactly the opposition parties switch to different strategies, and for what reasons, which depends not only on the electoral advantage of the

incumbent but also on the viability of other low-risk strategies.

When the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012, it started concentrating power in the executive branch and dominating the party system. Media pluralism was deteriorating, followed by the electoral conditions (Spasojević 2021). Following the 2016 election upset, when a large number of opposition parties managed to pass the electoral threshold, the conditions for the opposition parties in the parliament worsened. The government became an almost exclusive initiator of legislation, the majority expanded the use of urgent procedures, and the minority's oversight role was drastically reduced. The majority also began filibustering, joining discussions about several pieces of legislation, and introducing hundreds of amendments, to use the time for debate. This became a regular practice in 2017 and there was no debate about the 2018 budget at all (Tepavac 2021).

The first calls for a parliamentary boycott started after the presidential elections in April 2017, which the SNS leader Vučić won decisively in the first round. These were followed by a walkout, called the 'Boycott of warning' in May, while the boycott was still a divisive, unpopular strategy. However, it was increasingly discussed in the public from the winter of 2018, following the formation of an opposition coalition "Alliance for Serbia", the mass "1 in 5 million" protests, and the polarizing local elections in four municipalities, three of which the opposition boycotted.¹ The boycott of the parliament eventually began in January 2019, when 55 out of 88 opposition MPs stopped attending the sessions (Ilić, Branković & Tepavac 2019).

The parliamentary boycott began when the domination of the ruling party became overwhelming, after waves of mass protests in this period – the 2016 "Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own" and 2017 "Against Dictatorship", culminated with the 2018-2019 "1 in 5 million" protests. The opposition aimed to delegitimize the institutions that were increasingly out of their reach by boycotting local elections in 2018 and the parliament in 2019. However, while this addition of low-risk strategies is predictable, it does not explain the further escalation to a high-risk election boycott strategy.

As the protests subsided in early 2019, and there was no new mobilization, the election boycott started to be signaled as a possible way to increase the pressure on the government. Confronted with such a prospect, the ruling party deferred to some of the demands, and engaged in the first Interparty dialogue on electoral conditions in July 2019, initially organized by domestic civil society organizations. This

1 The opposition boycotted the elections in Kladovo, Kula and Doljevac, and ran in the Lučani municipality, held on November 11, 2018 (Crta 2019a).

was followed in autumn by the second round of dialogue, mediated by the representatives of the European Parliament. By the end of 2019, the government introduced several changes in the electoral laws, and formally improved some parliamentary procedures.

The opposition did not consider these concessions a sufficient improvement of electoral conditions that could balance the playing field. In addition, after months of weekly protests that culminated in the April of 2019, the opposition could not repeat such mass mobilization and lacked any other means to escalate the contention, other than following through with the election boycott. In the autumn of 2019, major opposition parties decided to boycott the elections, scheduled for April 2020 and postponed to June because of the Covid-19 state of emergency. Due to the pandemic and the boycott campaign, the 49% turnout was the lowest in the thirty years of multiparty elections, producing a parliament with almost no opposition (Bursać & Vučićević 2021).

The year before the regular 2020 elections is critical for understanding the escalation of strategy. By the spring of 2019, the opposition already used the whole extra-institutional repertoire – supporting mass protests, boycotting local elections, and the parliament. Participating in the Interparty dialogues did not affect the electoral balance, it had de-escalating effects, leaving the opposition with very few other options to increase the pressure on the government other than to call the election boycott. How exactly did the opposition parties make this choice of pursuing a high-risk strategy?

CHOOSING BETWEEN EXTRA-INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES IN SERBIA

The main motive of the opposition boycott in hybrid regimes is to remove the veil from the undemocratic aspects of the regime and press for its change. Yet as power is still secured through democratic elections, the opposition has to weigh how much would the abandoning of institutions hurt their electoral chances. When choosing between different extra-institutional strategies, opposition parties are confronted with this delegitimization-marginalization trade-off, which will be analyzed further.

The opposition in Serbia used the boycott to bring the quality of democratic institutions to the forefront of the political debate. By engaging in the Interparty dialogue, mediated by the EU, the government recognized that there was a crisis of democratic institutions, after years of ignoring the opposition's grievances. To some extent, the boycott also

damaged the legitimacy of the parliament and external support for the regime. The European Commission and Parliament's reports were more critical of the state of democracy in Serbia already in 2019, but the relations of European democracies with the government have not significantly worsened, and Serbia continued opening new chapters (clusters) in accession negotiation. Finally, the new parliament lacked pluralism, but it also improved procedures during 2019, continued legislating after the elections, and even successfully initiated constitutional changes in 2021 (European Commission 2019; 2020).

The parliamentary boycott was partially effective and did not cost the opposition parties much, but the marginalizing consequences of the election boycott were more substantial. After the election boycott, the opposition parties lost the seats in the parliament, and with them all institutional support. Without public funding, the asymmetry of resources with the incumbent became even more pronounced. Boycotts also caused divisions within and between parties. Out of 14 parliamentary actors that signed one of the two joint opposition declarations in 2018 and 2019, seven eventually backtracked and participated in either local or general elections, while all four largest parliamentary parties went through divisions or defections related to the boycott.² Finally, the boycott passivized the opposition supporters. The opposition never succeeded in building support for the boycott with their voter base, and as an unintended consequence of the boycott, opinion polls started showing decreased support for the opposition parties (Rujević 2020).

The parliamentary boycott has already dented the legitimacy of the rules of the game, with no high cost for the opposition, but by boycotting the elections, the opposition was taking a greater risk with almost certain costs and unpredictable gains. What mechanisms led to this choice?

The election boycott strategy started gaining traction during 2018, following the formalized cooperation between opposition parties, and protests that mobilized opposition supporters. The demands made at the protests that were not organized by the opposition, but were endorsed by it, were cited by the MPs as one of the key drivers for leaving the parliament.

2 “Joint conditions of the opposition for free and fair elections” signed on December 14, 2018, and the “Agreement with the People” from February 2019. The signatories, Democratic Party, Dveri, People's Party, Party of Freedom and Justice, Movement for Reversal, Fatherland, and Civic Platform boycotted the elections. Social Democratic Party and Together for Serbia participated in the 2020 local elections, Healthy Serbia, New Party, Party of Modern Serbia, Democratic Party of Serbia and Enough is Enough participated in all elections. Democratic Party, Dveri, People's Party, and Social Democratic Party experienced defections or splits.

An opposition MP said in an interview in March 2019 that:

“...the citizens demanded of us, members of parliament, to leave because this is no longer a legitimate parliament.”³

Others felt the heat coming from the streets. Another opposition MP said:

“We were told... our names would be booed if we participated in the session.”

However, the concurrently conducted polling showed that the support for the boycott was not as widespread as the MPs have thought. This dissonance can be explained through the ‘loudest voices’ fallacy: the MPs were responding to the most radical protesters’ demands, which did not necessarily reflect the sentiments among their wider base.⁴

Not all opposition MPs and parties shared this view either, and many had serious doubts about the boycott. However, they were conforming to the dominant view, which emerged following the newly established closer coordination between the opposition parties, and the perception that the opposition voters support the boycott strategy. One of the MPs said in the interview:

“We just couldn’t find a sufficient number of sufficiently determined MPs that would stand up against the boycott.”

In addition, even though the protesters started calling for the election boycott as early as February 2019, the primary aim of the MPs was not to escalate the parliamentary boycott. Only one of 42 interviewed MPs considered an election boycott as a possible next step. Instead, most MPs saw improved parliamentary practices and electoral conditions as the main goals of the parliamentary boycott.

However, by the summer of 2019, the circumstances have changed. The Interparty dialogue showed the ruling parties had no intention of substantially leveling the playing field. With elections in less than a year, the polls were not conducive either. Because of the calls for a boycott, many opposition supporters were not expressing voting preferences.

3 Opinions about the boycott were collected through short structured interviews in March 2019, from 42 opposition MPs from all parliamentary groups, including those that boycotted and those that did not.

4 In 2019, around 10% of respondents supported the boycott as a means of political struggle. Opinions about the boycott were collected twice, in March and September, on a sample of 1.115 (1.028) respondents, representative of the adult population of Serbia (Crta 2019b).

Most importantly, the protests had lost momentum in the spring, and the opposition could not mobilize the protesters to a degree comparable to late 2018. It was at this point, in September 2019, that the opposition decided to boycott the elections (Martinović 2019).

This section showed that, as the 2020 elections were getting closer, the repertoire of viable strategies for the opposition was narrowing towards the election boycott, as expected by the hypothesis. The electoral advantage of the incumbent was high and stable, the parliamentary boycott, local election boycott, and the protests, as lower-risk extra-institutional strategies, did not succeed in straightening the playing field, and could not be further escalated. The protest dynamic, which was not controlled by the opposition parties, was not conducive to the mobilization of electoral support. The 2018 winter protests had lost momentum and the opposition parties' attempts to mobilize supporters ahead of the 2020 elections were unsuccessful. If the opposition parties wanted to escalate the pressure on the government, the only still viable strategy was a high-risk election boycott.

If the analysis is extended to the only comparable election boycott in Serbia in 1997, the process that led to it was quite similar to the one that led to the 2020 boycott, which additionally supports the hypothesis. The political environment in the 1990s in Serbia can be best described as a form of hybrid regime, with the authoritarian Socialist Party (SPS) winning unfair, or, on some occasions, fraudulent elections. The 1993 parliament was the stage for the first major boycott by the national political parties. The SPS had formed a government with a slim majority, the opposition in the parliament was substantial and increasingly challenged the majority party. In July 1995 the majority voted to cease the live broadcast of parliamentary sessions, and the opposition parties had left the parliament in protest and did not return in a full capacity until the end of the mandate (Milošević 2000).

While the parliamentary boycott was ongoing, an attempt of electoral fraud at the 1996 local elections triggered a wave of protests during the winter of 1996-1997. After the external involvement of the OSCE representative, the SPS government eventually conceded, and the opposition parties won control of most major cities. The protests lost momentum in early 1997, and the opposition block dissolved in a power struggle. The opposition parties, that did not do well at the previous federal level elections, were now internally divided and confronted with even more unfair electoral conditions at the national level, and some of them decided to boycott the upcoming general elections in September. A group of parties, including the parliamentary Democratic Party, the

Democratic Party of Serbia, and the Civic Alliance boycotted the 1997 elections, which was the only instance of the relevant opposition parties boycotting the parliamentary elections in Serbia in the 1990s, while the Serbian Renewal Movement, Serbian Radical Party and the others ran in the elections. The 1997 elections were once again won by the Socialist Party of Serbia, which stayed in power until its downturn on October 5, 2000 (Goati 2013).

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: NORTH MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO, AND ALBANIA

So far, the hypothesis has been tested in the positive case of the boycotts in Serbia. To confirm its external validity, it should also be tested in other settings, and it should also be able to explain negative cases, instances in which the electoral boycott did not follow after the parliamentary boycott in similar circumstances, or in which ‘the dog didn’t bark’. This section of the article presents a comparative analysis of 2009-2021 North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, countries from the region that also experienced democratic decline and parliamentary boycotts in this period, but where the opposition did not escalate its strategy to election boycott.

There are important differences between these four countries; different historical backgrounds, sizes, levels of economic development, and diverging foreign and domestic politics. But they also share some features of the wider political environment in which opposition parties operate. They have similar issues with rule of law, power concentrated in the executive, marginalized parliaments and insufficient systems of checks and balances, politicized public administration, and mistrust in political institutions and political parties. Elections are characterized by pressures on voters, especially public employees, clientelistic practices, extensive patronage systems, and abuse of public resources. The countries also lack professional, objective public media, but have an abundance of biased media outlets and sensationalist print, often owned by entities related to ruling parties. Also, while all countries have experienced periods of democratic declines, the EU, with high linkage and leverage, was the main mediator in relations between government and the opposition (Way & Levitsky 2007). Controlling for many of these similarities allows for a comparison where the variation in the dependent variable, electoral participation, and the independent - incumbents’ electoral advantage, protests, and parliamentary boycotts, can be reasonably well isolated.

North Macedonia organized elections on average almost every two

years, three presidential elections were scheduled, and four parliamentary elections were held early. The party system consisted of two major parties, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO-DPMNE) was in power until 2016, after which the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) formed the government. In addition, the ruling coalitions have always included Albanian minority parties.⁵

From 2009 to 2020, the North Macedonian opposition participated in all general elections and almost constantly used extra-institutional strategies. The opposition frequently boycotted the parliament, occasionally boycotted the local elections, as well as the 2018 referendum, and staged or supported protracted protests that lasted for months. After the early decisive electoral victories of VMRO candidates, the opposition parties first began boycotting the parliament – half a year before the 2012 elections. Ahead of these elections, the advantage of the incumbent VMRO and their Albanian coalition partner DUI was large, but the opposition increased the pressure through extra-institutional means, hoping to dent their majority, especially after the public outcry because of the closure of critical media outlets. For the next two years, the opposition obstructed the parliament, which escalated on ‘Black Monday’ when opposition MPs and journalists were forcibly evicted from the building. Even though the VMRO’s advantage was considerable in this period, the opposition could escalate the pressure through organized protests and blockades, and it participated again in the 2014 general elections when the VMRO won the plurality of seats.

In 2014 North Macedonia entered a political crisis, starting with SDSM accusing the ruling party of election fraud, and boycotting the parliament. The crisis was exacerbated in 2015 after the release of wiretap recordings implicating officials in corruption and fraud. A record number of protracted mass protests followed across the country, and the SDSM took part in these, using them to mobilize electoral support. After the EU-mediated political agreement, PM Gruevski resigned in 2016, to allow a pre-electoral transitional government, which included opposition members. After these elections, the SDSM and Albanian minority parties formed the new government, the roles reversed, and now VMRO began prolonged protests, boycotting the parliament and the 2018 referendum. However, as opposition, VMRO participated in the 2019 and 2020 elections, which the SDSM managed to win with a slim margin, the former again only after the formation of the technical government.

5 See: Aleksov et al. 2019, European Commission reports 2010-2021, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final reports 2009, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020, Freedom House Nations in Transit 2010-2018, 2020-2022.

Montenegro organized six general elections during the observed period; the 2009 and 2012 elections were early, and the two presidential and parliamentary elections were scheduled. Party life has been dominated by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) since the first multiparty elections in 1990. Unlike in North Macedonia and Albania, the main opposition parties were more fragmented, have been changing over time, and formed different coalitions. Even so, the DPS advantage has always been slim, and it needed coalition partners to form the government, up until 2020 when it lost elections for the first time.⁶

The opposition in Montenegro participated in all general elections. After 2015 it extensively relied on extra-institutional strategies, boycotting the parliament, and local elections, and organizing anti-government protests. In the wake of the convincing success of DPS in the 2009 general elections, the opposition initially boycotted the local elections and engaged in protests. However, ahead of the 2012 general elections, the ruling party's advantage was not as great, and DPS head Đukanović resigned as Prime Minister. The opposition was incentivized to return fully to institutional competition, using parliamentary inquiries and participating in the elections, which eventually gave DPS plurality but not the majority of seats. The opposition carried on challenging the ruling party at the presidential elections which the DPS candidate won by a narrow margin.

The small electoral advantage of the ruling coalition was not a sufficient incentive to maintain the opposition on the institutional track. In 2015, the opposition escalated protests against corruption and against Montenegro joining NATO. The scale of protests, and excessive use of force by the authorities, pushed the country into a political crisis. After the EU mediation, some opposition parties entered the power-sharing arrangement ahead of the 2016 elections, in which the DPS again won with a plurality of seats. The arrest of a group for alleged planning to disrupt the 2016 elections, which implicated the largest opposition party Democratic Front (DF) leaders, caused new turmoil, the opposition left the parliament and did not return fully until 2020. During this period, opposition escalated the pressure through a boycott of local elections, and following new corruption allegations, and the discontent with the new Law on Religious Freedoms that the Serbian Orthodox Church opposed, it managed to mobilize continuous mass protests, which culminated in the 2020 elections the opposition eventually won.

⁶ See: Kovačević 2019, European Commission reports 2010-2021, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final reports 2009, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020, Freedom House Nations in Transit 2010-2018, 2020-2022.

Albania, unlike the previously analyzed cases, elects the president indirectly by the parliament, and it held ‘only’ three scheduled parliamentary elections. The party system consisted of two main parties, the Democratic Party (DP), in power until 2013, and the Socialist Party (PS) which formed the government since then. Throughout the period, the opposition parties have participated in all general elections and boycotted the parliament and local elections in several instances, as well as organized mass protests.⁷

During the time it was the opposition, the Socialist Party boycotted the parliament from 2009 to 2012, as well as some local elections, accusing the government of the 2009 election fraud. In the lead-up to the 2013 elections, through a process mediated by the EU, it returned to the parliament, however, it lost the local election in Tirana by only 93 votes difference, and on the wave of anti-corruption protests, some of which turned violent, successfully increased the pressure on the government. In these circumstances, the PS did not have incentives to boycott the general election of 2013, which they won by a wide margin.

The Democratic Party began its opposition phase with the 2014 boycott of the parliament, which they repeated, for a couple of months, just before the 2017 general election. The DP participated in the local elections, in which the PS showed it had a stable, significant advantage. However, the parliamentary boycott, coupled with mass street protests, triggered a crisis, which, again through EU mediation, led to the technical power-sharing agreement ahead of the election, which incentivized the DP to run in the election. After another electoral loss in 2017, the DP intensified the extra-institutional pressure, by permanently resigning from the parliament, boycotting the 2019 local elections, and increasingly contentious demonstrations, which resulted in casualties, ahead of the 2021 elections. Even though there was no power-sharing agreement as in 2017, the DP 2021 electoral participation was driven by the escalation of extra-institutional strategies in the pre-election period.

The comparison of these three countries demonstrates different ways in which the opposition responded to democratic decline, by combining institutional and extra-institutional strategies, but as opposed to the Serbian case, stopping short of an electoral boycott. When the advantage of the ruling parties was smaller, the opposition participated in the elections. When the advantages were larger, the opposition escalated the pressure on the government through strategies that were

7 See: Krasniqi 2019, European Commission reports 2010-2021, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final reports 2009, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2021, Freedom House Nations in Transit 2010-2018, 2020-2022.

meant to enhance electoral mobilization. The comparative analysis also showed that the responses of the government to the opposition demands mattered. Temporary power-sharing agreements have been offered by the incumbents as a way to end political deadlock in all three cases, usually through external mediation. These should however be seen as mostly confirming the hypothesis, as power-sharing agreements can significantly reduce incumbents' electoral advantage, and therefore incentivize the opposition to participate in elections.

CONCLUSION

Parliamentary boycotts are becoming a more frequent form of contention as the number of hybrid regimes increases. In circumstances of pronounced power asymmetry, opposition parties aim to challenge the authoritarian dimension of the regime and level the electoral playing field. Parliamentary boycotts can send a powerful protest message, they don't require mass mobilization, 'just' the discipline of party members, and they are temporary and reversible.

On the other hand, the literature on election boycotts in hybrid regimes paints a bleak picture regarding its short-term effects on democratization but acknowledges some effects may emerge in the long term. While the effects of the election boycott are an important element of the existing literature, there was no sufficient explanation about the reasons opposition parties in hybrid regimes chose this high-risk extra-institutional strategy, and especially not how it interacts with competing or complementary strategies, such as parliamentary boycott.

The article was driven by the empirical puzzle of Serbian opposition escalating the boycott from parliament towards elections, while the North Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Albanian oppositions never abandoned electoral participation. The comparative analysis of these four cases showed that these different outcomes can indeed be associated with specific configurations of strategies of contention available to the opposition parties.

Evidence collected from Serbian opposition MPs that started the parliamentary boycott in 2019 showed that the extra-institutional turn was directly tied to the mass anti-government protests. But, due to the dynamic of the protests that were not controlled by the opposition parties, it could not have had instrumental value for electoral mobilization, as was the case in the three countries in the comparative analysis. The leaders of the mass protests in Serbia, just as in Montenegro, called the opposition parties to boycott the elections, but the opposition in Montenegro, similarly to

the other two cases, did not have incentives to follow through with these demands. The options of the opposition in Serbia, on the other hand, were narrowed down. They faced high incumbents' advantage, exhausted parliamentary boycott, and faded protest mobilization, leaving only high-risk strategies such as election boycott. The situation changed only in late 2021 when intense environmental protests and civil disobedience improved the outlook for opposition electoral mobilization, and all major parties participated again in the 2022 elections.

The empirical evidence presented in the article gives sufficient support to the hypothesis that the opposition parties in hybrid regimes are less likely to participate in elections when the incumbent's electoral advantage is high, and when lower-risk extra-institutional strategies of contention are unavailable. These findings contribute to the literature on opposition parties and elections in hybrid regimes, by emphasizing that electoral boycotts are a part of a wider extra-institutional repertoire of strategies available to the opposition. The logic of opposition parties' escalation to high-risk contention strategies in hybrid regimes is always conditional on this wider context.

The increased propensity of opposition parties to boycott the parliament can in given conditions drive parties towards the election boycott, as was demonstrated in this analysis, which can in turn deepen the crisis of democratic institutions. As hybrid regimes continue to proliferate globally, this makes the question of opposition strategies in dealing with the dilemma of participation or boycott even more urgent and politically relevant.

REFERENCES

- Aleksov, D., Aleksoska, R., Dimitrioski, Z., Daniloska-Jurukoska, L. & Jurukoska, A. 2019. Case Study, Republic of North Macedonia. In *Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans*, ed. E. Atanasovski, pp. 88-107. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
- Alizada, N., Cole, R., Gastaldi, L., Grahn, S., Hellmeier, S., Kolvani, P., Lachapelle, J., Lührmann, A., Maerz, S. F., Pillai, S. & Lindberg, S. I. 2021. *Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021*. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.
- Beaulieu, E. 2006. *Protesting the contest: Election boycotts around the world, 1990–2002*. San Diego: University of California.
- Beaulieu, E. 2014. *Electoral protest and democracy in the developing world*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Bermeo, N. 2016. On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1), 5-19.
- Bieber, F. 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 34 (3), 337-354.
- Brancati, D. 2016. *Democracy protests. Origins, Features, and Significance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burke, A. E. 2019. *Thinking outside the box: Extra-parliamentary strategies and their effects on the development of good governance in new democracies*. Doctoral dissertation, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois.
- Bursać, D. & Vučićević, D. 2021. Election boycott in a hybrid regime: The case of 2020 parliamentary elections in Serbia. *New Perspectives* 29 (2), 187-196.
- Buttorff, G. & Dion, D. 2017. Participation and boycott in authoritarian elections. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 29 (1), 97-123.
- Carothers, T. 2002. The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of Democracy* 13 (1), 5-21.
- Crta. 2019a. *Lokalni izbori 2018. Finalni izveštaj Crta posmatračke misije*. Beograd: Crta.
- Crta. 2019b. *Javno mnjenje o učešću građana u demokratskim procesima Srbije 2019*. Beograd: Crta.
- Diamond, L. 2015. Facing up to the democratic recession. *Journal of Democracy* 26 (1). 141-155.
- European Commission [EC], SWD(2019) 219 final, Serbia 2019 Report, 29.5.2019.
- European Commission [EC], SWD(2020) 352 final, Serbia 2020 Report, 6.10.2020.
- European Commission. 2021. Reports. Last accessed 01. 05. 2022. <https://ec.europa.eu/>
- Freedom House. 2022. Nations in Transit. Last accessed 01. 05. 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>
- George, A. L. & Bennett, A. 2005. *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Gerring, J. 2004. What is a case study and what is it good for? *American political science review* 98(2), 341-354.
- Goati, V. 2013. *Izbori u Srbiji i Crnoj Gori od 1990. do 2013. i u SRJ od 1992. do 2003*. Beograd: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju.

- Hauser, M. 2019. *Electoral strategies under authoritarianism: Evidence from the former Soviet Union*. London: Lexington Books.
- Helms, L. 2021. The nature of political opposition in contemporary electoral democracies and autocracies. *European Political Science* 20, 569–557.
- Ilić, V., Branković, T. & Tepavac, T. 2019. Case Study, Serbia. In *Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans*, ed. E. Atanasovski, pp. 108-128. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
- Kelley, J. 2011. Do international election monitors increase or decrease opposition boycotts? *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(11), 1527-1556.
- Kovačević, M. 2019. Case Study, Montenegro. In *Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans*, ed. E. Atanasovski, pp. 68-87. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
- Krasniqi, A. 2019. Case Study, Albania. In *Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans*, ed. E. Atanasovski, pp. 7-29. Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
- Laštro, C. & Bieber, F. 2021. The Performance of Opposition Parties in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes: Three Case Studies from the Western Balkans. *European Political Science* 20 (4), 617-629.
- Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D. 2018. *How democracies die*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Levitsky, S. & Way, L. A. 2002. Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2), 51-65.
- Levitsky, S. & Way, L. A. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levitsky, S. & Way, L. A. 2020. The New Competitive Authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy* 31 (1), 51-65.
- Lührmann, A. & Lindberg, S. I. 2019. A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?. *Democratization* 26 (7), 1095-1113.
- Lührmann, A., Tannenberg, M. & Lindberg, S. I. 2018. Regimes of the world (RoW): Opening new avenues for the comparative study of political regimes. *Politics and Governance* 6 (1), 60-77.
- Martinović, I. 2019. Koraci posle odluke o bojkotu izbora u Srbiji. Radio Slobodna Evropa, 17.09.2019.
- Milošević, M. 2000. *Politički vodič kroz Srbiju 2000*. Beograd: Medija centar.

- OSCE/ODIHR. 2022. Election Observation Mission Reports. Last accessed 01. 05. 2022. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>
- Ragin, C. 2014. *The Comparative Method. Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Rujević, N. 2020. Povratak Dosta je bilo u pandemijskom metežu. Dojče vele, 19.12.2020.
- Schedler, A. 2002. The nested game of democratization by elections. *International Political Science Review* 23(1), 103-122.
- Schedler, A. 2006. The logic of electoral authoritarianism. In *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition*, ed. A. Schedler, pp. 1-26. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Scheppele, K. L. 2018. Autocratic legalism. *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85 (2), 545-584.
- Smith, I. O. 2014. Election boycotts and hybrid regime survival. *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (5), 743-765.
- Spary, C. 2013. Legislative protest as disruptive democratic practice. *Democratization* 20(3), 392-416.
- Spasojević, D. 2021. Political Parties in Serbia. In *Undermining Democracy. Processes and Institutions in Serbia 2010-2020*, ed. D. Spasojević, pp. 109-132. Beograd: Crta.
- Tepavac, T. 2021. The Parliament of Serbia. In *Undermining Democracy. Processes and Institutions in Serbia 2010-2020*, ed. D. Spasojević, pp. 81-108. Beograd: Crta.
- Vladislavljević, N. 2019. *Uspon i pad demokratije posle Petog oktobra*. Beograd: Arhipelag.
- Way, L. A. & Levitsky, S. 2007. Linkage, leverage, and the post-communist divide. *East European Politics and Societies* 21(1), 48-66.
- Williamson, S. 2021. Elections, legitimacy, and compliance in authoritarian regimes: evidence from the Arab world. *Democratization* 28 (8), 1483-1504.

* The manuscript was received on May 10, 2022, and the paper was accepted for publishing on October 10, 2022.