Finding political power after genocide: Albanian parties in Serbia

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Paper presented at Western Political Science Association

March 24-27, 2016, San Diego, CA

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Ethnic political parties in Serbia were created to give voice to the ethnic minorities throughout the country. These political parties were supposed to provide a means for citizens to influence their government; however, research in Serbia suggests that personalist party affiliations actually fractured the already marginalized voices of the Albanian people to the point where they no longer effectively represent their constituents. The creation of national minority councils in 2010, gave Albanians and other minorities an alternative to the ethnic political parties as their only voice in the political institutions. The Albanian National Minority Council has formulated a strategic plan to better represent Albanian concerns within Serbia, which suggests that the Albanian political parties in Serbia were viewed as inadequately representing their citizens.

**Introduction**

It is a widely held view that in the creation and growth of the European Union (EU), Europe has left nationalism, with all of its ugly rhetoric and separatism, behind in the aftermath of World War II (Muller 2008). However, as Muller notes, ethnonationalism (the creation of states around ethnic or national identity) was the actual aim of post WWII policies. “European stability during the Cold War era was in fact due partly to the widespread fulfillment of the ethnonationalist project. And since the end of the Cold War, ethnonationalism has continued to reshape European borders” (Muller 2008, 19). The increase in ethnic political parties suggests that ethnonationalism has returned to Europe once again.

Benedict Anderson (2006) labeled national identity an “imagined community” meaning that it was an identity created by the members of the community rather than an overt physical feature such as skin color. One implication of the term “imagined community” is that this is something that can be changed, and is only in the mind of its creators. However, as Muller (2008) points out, imagined or not, ethnic identity is still a very powerful force and one that draws people together while keeping others out; it creates a sense of belonging and self-awareness.

With the collapse of communism, many ethnic groups found their voice and demanded that they be allowed to participate in the new political institutions and processes. The easiest and perhaps most obvious way for previously disenfranchised groups to participate in the political process is through the party system. The creation of ethnic political parties, composed solely of members from one ethnicity pushing for policies supportive of their identity and goals, occurred almost immediately after the collapse of the authoritarian political systems in East-Central Europe and the Balkans. It was widely assumed at the time that these parties would be the most efficient means for ethnic groups to help shape the agenda of a national government. In Serbia, in particular, Hungarians in the province of Vojvodina and Albanians in the Preševo Valley moved quickly to put together parties for local and national elections. This research will focus on the question of the efficacy of ethnic political parties; do these parties enfranchise their constituents or do they increase resentment between the majority ethnic group and minority groups? The Albanian political parties in Serbia will serve as a case study.

**National Identity, Nationalism, and Identity Politics**

Although closely related, nationalism and national identity are two separate concepts. National identity has come to mean a more benign form of self-identity related to finding and giving political and social voice to previously excluded groups; the term “ethnic identity” is often used as a synonym for national identity. National identity has formed the basis for a number of movements advocating for everything from rights to educate in a language other than the national language, and cultural recognition, all the way to demands for autonomy (e.g. Albanians in southern Serbia) to outright independence (e.g. Catalans in Spain). National identity movements can become violent (e.g. Kurdish groups in Turkey) however, often such violence is viewed as at least somewhat justified by the initial actions or response of the state government.

Nationalism as a term has a pejorative meaning associated with at best, overt pride in country and at worst, xenophobia, genocide and ethnic cleansing. Fascist Italy is often used as an example of nationalism gone to the extremes. The Yugoslav civil war in the mid-1990s is one of the more recent examples of nationalism (Serbian) leading to genocide/ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs and perceptions of ongoing Serbian nationalism detrimental to ethnic minorities and has formed the basis of the current ethnic Albanian party formation in Serbia.

The literature further divides nationalism into two separate categories; civic nationalism and cultural nationalism. “Civic nationalism” is used to illustrate a sense of belonging rooted in a set of laws and encompassing all other identities (Smith 2005). Cultural nationalism as defined by Smith is what more commonly is referred to as ethnic identity. This sense of identity is based on a shared culture, history, language and sometimes religion. Smith suggests that both civic and cultural nationalism involve “some sense of political community, however tenuous” (Smith 2005, 177). That political community or idea of a political community in turn implies “some common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. It also suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the member's identify and to which they feel they belong” (Smith 2005, 177). Ethnic political parties utilize the shared cultural identity and its attendant sense of political community to promote their goals and objectives and tie them to the recognition of political and economic rights for ethnic Albanians in Serbia.

Nationalism (as a xenophobic, restrictive concept) and national or ethnic identity (as a self-identified group) have both been used as tools by groups to gain political power. The term “identity politics” has been used to describe “any mobilization related to politics, culture, and identity…” (Bernstein 2005, 48). Bernstein suggests that research on nationalism should compare nationalist movements with those based on other status identities (e.g. gender, sexual preference, disabled, etc.). She notes that states differ in levels of recognition regarding ethnic status when granting social welfare benefits, for example (Bernstein 2005). States experiencing a transition from an authoritarian form of government where ethnic identity is suppressed, to a more democratic and open form of government, often have difficulty gaining the trust of previously excluded groups. These groups have usually experienced a violent process of ethnic segregation in the past and thus are wary of losing the opportunity to shape their future (Muller 2008) while at the same time do not trust that the new political system will include them.

“Nationalism, John Breuilly tells us, is, above and beyond all else, about politics and politics is about power” (Beissinger 1996) and ethnonationalism is attractive because it posits the idea that members of a nation are a part of family bound together by blood (Muller 2008). The desire for power, political or otherwise, particularly following a period of genocide or ethnic cleansing, and the ability to control that power has been a driving force behind the increased expression of ethnic identity in transitioning states. The desire for power has also been the cause of the deliberately constructed ethnonationalism and its unpredictable consequences. In many non-democratic states, prior to a transition to a more democratic political system, one ethnic group has historically controlled the political, social, and economic power whether in the name of empire, or the communist authorities (Muller 2008). After a transition to a more democratic political system, previously disenfranchised minority groups move to at the very least enfranchise themselves, and further up the spectrum, move to achieve autonomy or independence. The states in which these actions occur are understandably nervous that such actions will lead to the dismemberment of the state. Whatever their ultimate goals, minority leaders take as their first move the creation of political parties. These parties are presented as the necessary path for a group to gain or regain recognition and political power within a state.

In this research we employ the more widely used term “ethnic identity” to denote the use of a cultural or national identity in the political arena. Ethnic identity is obviously not a new or even a rediscovered concept, especially in the Balkans. What has changed are the political structures in that region which now allow for the freer expression and advocacy of those identities within political institutions and processes.

**Ethnic political parties**

Political parties provide one of the most effective means for citizens wishing to have some influence on their government and ethnic political parties are assumed to give greater voice to their constituents. Do ethnic political parties decrease inequalities due to their ability to provide access to the political system to previously disenfranchised or marginalized minorities, or do they contribute to inequalities and resentments between ethnic groups in the political system through their advocacy of group rights and privileges? Much of the research on parties focuses on the contributions parties make to democratic consolidation and to general satisfaction with democracy. Parties provide a primary and important link between governing institutions and citizens and as ethnic political parties emerged in many states in the Balkans, they appeared to provide that needed link to the political institutions for ethnic minority groups.

The fall of communism in East-Central Europe and the Balkans enabled the formation of multi-party pluralist systems in those newly independent states. Academics and analysts watched the growth of these parties and the new party systems with a great deal of interest. Indeed, “[f]or many political theorists and analysts of comparative politics, parties and democracy go together like the proverbial horse and carriage” (Colton 2004, 174). Ethnic parties were among the first to emerge following the opening of the political system to competition. Ethnic political parties are generally defined as those parties in which membership is restricted to individuals belonging to ethnic groups in society as defined by cultural, linguistic and, in some cases, racial (e.g. Roma) and religious (e.g. Sandjak/Bosniak) differences from the majority. Parties based on ethnic or cultural groups exist in Western Europe, but in general they are not strong players in their respective national parliaments; none of them, with the exception of Belgium, hold ministries in the government (and those are cultural and linguistic differences rather than specifically ethnic differences). In contrast, ethnic political parties quickly emerged as strong actors in many states in East-Central Europe and the Balkans.

In the post-communist countries in the Balkans, parties (ethnic or otherwise) and other groups were among the early motivators of regime change. The appearance of independent political parties was hailed as a great step forward in the transition of a state from a communist political system to a democratic or pluralist political system. “The presence of powerful political parties in the electoral arena may yield a positive sum game in which parties, interest groups, and sometimes even social movements alike jointly reach higher levels of mobilization and influence in the policy process” (Kitschelt et al 1999). Ethnically based parties were among the first to appear in the post-communist period, advocating for rights in education, language, and culture on behalf of their specific group. Have they been effective advocates for their constituents or have they contributed to further separation?

Parties are viewed as one of the most effective means for groups in society and citizens to make their policy preferences known within the political system. Parties are better at this than other groups, because as Kitschelt et al note, unlike other groups in society parties include politicians, or would-be politicians and field candidates for office. “Parties help citizens and politicians to overcome collective action problems in mobilizing demands and resolving problems of social choice in coordinating a myriad of diverse policy preference schedules” (Kitschelt et al 1999, 46). Rosenblum (2000), looking at the party system in the United States, notes that of all the voluntary associations within civil society, parties are the ones principally committed to making democracy function. While other organizations may be political in nature, “[p]ut simply, the right to be on the election ballot is what separates a political party from other political associations. No other group is engaged in recruiting and nominating candidates and educating citizens about candidates and issues…” (Rosenblum 2000, 814-15). In a functioning civil society, all organizations are supportive of the system within which they exist, but political parties, unlike other groups, are specifically designed to allow direct access to and participation in the political system. The collapse of the previous system, the move towards the creation of a more open and accessible political structure and the perceived ability to create and impact policy makes parties the preferred means of organization for ethnic minorities in transitioning states.

However, contrary to the widely held view that parties are the best way to influence policy-making, Burstein and Linton (2002) find that the policy impact of parties in general is less than expected. They note that “political organizations affect policy no more than half the time; parties and nonparty organizations affect policy about equally often” (Burstein and Linton 2002, 381). This conclusion raises a question of why analysts expect that parties will have a significant impact on policy decisions and additionally, questions the necessity of specifically ethnic political parties given that the authors found that when the public favors an issue all major parties will come to support that issue and regardless of the balance between parties, that policy will be enacted. “The direct impact of party, as conventionally measured, will be zero…This will be especially likely when the public is intensely concerned about an issue, because it is then that elected officials can be most certain that their actions will influence citizens’ party choice. When the public is relatively indifferent, parties and elected officials may have more freedom to act on the basis of differing ideologies; then the party balance may matter” (Burstein and Linton 2002, 384). These findings suggest that while different parties and organizations may have some influence over policy, their role is not as great as generally assumed by scholars and activists. Such a conclusion would seem to indicate that ethnic political parties, while providing greater visibility to a particular ethnic group perhaps, do not influence the political system in a consistently positive manner.

The construction and maintenance of a party system primarily affects how and when political parties function in transitioning democracies. Ethnic parties, and those they purport to represent, in particular are vulnerable to changes in the policy agendas of the major parties. Stojarova notes that when it comes to the Balkans “…the development of party politics was influenced by the turmoil of war, the subsequent installation of non-democratic regimes in several countries, and the delayed process of nation and state building in several of them” (Stojarova 2010, 1). Emerson and Šedo (2010) and Stojarova (2010) find in Macedonia that the party system is dominated by ethnicity and that due to the turmoil of nation-building in that state, some of the parties aligned themselves with others whose interests were counter to their own.

Bieber (2003) takes a different approach and suggests that the opposition parties in Serbia are partially to blame for the duration of the Milošević regime as well as participating in its overthrow. He suggests that Serbian nationalism overwhelmed the oppositions’ desire to truly compete against the ruling parties. “If we take (a) the identity and nature of the party; (b) its relationship to other parties; and (c) the relationship between government and opposition as the key measures for party systems, Serbia during the 1990s was far removed from established systems in western Europe and consolidating systems in Central and Eastern Europe” (Bieber 2003, 74). This does not directly explain the formation of ethnic political parties in Serbia, but hints at the idea that such parties formed not only to advocate for their ethnic group, but in response to a growing nationalism on the part of the majority ethnic group which appeared to be overwhelming all other concerns.

The literature appears divided as to whether ethnically based political parties help or hurt the search for equality in the post-communist states. Ishiyama (2001) suggests that the degree to which parties convince their electorates to play by the rules of the democratic game, determines whether ethnic parties contribute to democratic consolidation. Ishiyama is primarily concerned with how and why what he terms ethnopolitical parties, contribute to the process of democratic consolidation, and does not directly examine issues of equality or inclusion. However, he does point out that the appearance of radical parties forced the moderate parties to adopt more radical positions themselves in order to maintain their presence in the political arena. “Whether ethnopolitical parties act in constructive or destructive ways depends heavily upon…the degree to which groups are represented proportionally” (Ishiyama 2001, 28). In his examination of parties in India, Chandra (2005) also finds that parties representing the same ethnic groups will begin to outbid each other in their radical stances in an effort to undermine each other and gain more party members or supporters. This outbidding, Chandra (2005) points out, can lead to parties originally willing and able to work within the political system moving further and further away from the mainstream. More radical parties reflect back on the ethnic group, thus increasing distrust and resentment between ethnic groups.

Others have suggested (e.g. Barany 2000) that ethnic mobilization in transitioning states can have a deleterious effect on the ability to build a state, let alone a political system. He notes that “the violent outcomes in these cases reflect the fact that even during regime transition, when state control typically weakens, governments – especially federal states – are likely to do their utmost to block the mobilization efforts of ethnic minorities perceived as threatening to the state’s territorial integrity” (Barany 2000, 82). This especially applies to Albanians in Serbia as arguments over the future of Kosovo and the desire of ethnic Albanians in the Preševo Valley for autonomy demonstrate. States can try to suppress the activities of ethnopolitical parties in the interests of stabilizing the state, but this allows those parties to emphasize and reinforce the idea of a government dominated by an ethnic majority with no interest in the rights of minority groups.

Bielasiak argues that the rise of ethnic and regional nationalism has given political parties “…a major challenge in how they handle the process of change. At the same time, the weak performance by ‘historical’ parties has indicated the room for new political forces in the democracies of Eastern Europe” (Bielasiak 1997, 16). Those new political forces include political parties dedicated to the advancement of a specific ethnic group. The rise in ethnic and regional nationalism poses a threat to the continuation of the state when groups begin arguing for autonomy for certain areas (Macedonia) or independence (Kosovo).

In early research into the phenomena of ethnic political parties, Kasfir (1979) suggests that ethnic identities are but one avenue used by citizens to express political preferences. Ethnic identity becomes politically and internationally expedient during times of political change. Kasfir notes that when political participation is based on ethnicity, indicators such as language, culture, territory, etc. become highly salient.

Whether these objective indicators are the product of a history of traditional usage or the ***result of recent manipulation***, subjective perception by others involved in the same political situation is essential for credible political participation. Shared perception permits, but does not necessarily create, sufficient social solidarity to turn individuals assigned to an ethnic category into an active ethnic group. Even then, the likelihood of social solidarity being channeled into participation depends on the opportunities created by the specific political situation. (Kasfir 1979, 366; emphasis added).

Chirot (2005) has noted that different ethnic groups have long been able to live as members of the same community and neighbors while not particularly fond of each other. It is not until state authority in the form of legislation, police action or other official statements, highlights and exacerbates the differences between groups that those groups become outwardly hostile towards each other. It seems that in the aftermath of such manipulation that ethnic parties are seen as necessary to publicizing and promoting the concerns of their particular constituency and at the same time convincing that constituency that they, the party, are the only ones who will speak and advocate for members of their ethnic community.

In all of the discussion and analysis surrounding ethnic political parties, one question has been answered incompletely – are these parties effective at bringing issues of equal treatment and representation of ethnic minorities to the national level and provide increased access to political institutions through their activities or do they increase resentment between ethnic groups and strand their group outside of the political structure? Using Serbia as a case study, this research will begin to answer this question.

**Serbia**

For this research, a case study method, using Serbia as the case, was employed to examine the relationship between ethnic political parties (specifically Albanian parties) their goals, attitudes of ethnic groups towards one another and the success of the parties in linking their constituents with the current political institutions. Party platforms were examined with regard to their goals. Were they simply interested in social welfare gains, did they want more representation in Belgrade or a change in borders between Serbia and Kosovo? The platforms of ethnic parties in Serbia were analyzed, interviews with academics in Belgrade were conducted, as well as interviews with Albanian party leaders in southern Serbia. In addition, data from surveys were utilized to try to provide a backdrop for the actions and policies of the Albanian parties and the reaction of the Serbian public and government.

True opposition parties, including ethnic political parties, entered the Yugoslav political system in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While a great deal of analytical and media focus in the west has been on Albanian political parties, all ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia formed parties designed to advance the interests of their particular ethnicity; this includes Hungarians and Romanians in Vojvodina, Albanians in the southwest and Kosovo, Sandžaks (Bosniaks – Bosnian Muslims) in Bosnia, and Roma, Ruthenians, Ukrainians and Bulgarians throughout the country. Together, in 2002, 12 distinct ethnic groups accounted for roughly 16% of the total population; Serbs were almost 63%, Albanians just under 17% and “others” accounting for just over 4% (Bugajski 2002).

Given such small population numbers it is curious that so many of the parties claiming to represent ethnic groups split off from each other and divided their support almost guaranteeing a failure to gain any representation in parliament. Interviews with party leaders and news stories suggest that many of the splits were due to disagreements between party leaders over the direction and goals of the party. In Serbia, multiple Albanian party leaders were adamant that their party was the most truly representative of Albanian interests and the best choice to convince the Serbian government of this fact. Three parties did merge together in 2009 to form the Democratic Union of Albanians (DUA); the Democratic Union of Albanians from Bujanovac, the Citizen’s Group from Preševo, and the Democratic Progress of Integrations from Medvedja came together and elected Rahmi Zulfiu as their president (Ismaili 2009). This move brought the number of Albanian parties in Serbia down to seven and made DUA the second party after the Party of Democratic Action (PDA) to represent all three municipalities, Bujanovac, Preševo, and Medvedja, which together hold roughly 90% of the Albanian population of Serbia (without Kosovo). PDA is the only Albanian party to have a representative (Reza Halimi) in parliament in Belgrade.

Interviews conducted by Jones in Preševo in 2010 with the leaders of the Albanian parties in Serbia revealed many similarities between party platforms as well as hinting at the reasons for the splits. Speaking with four party leaders, two of them, Orhan Rexhepi, leader of the Albanian National Movement and Ragmi Mustafa, leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians and mayor of Preševo, argued for an independent Kosovo and the merger of the Preševo Valley with Kosovo. They suggested that this would be accomplished by giving the northern Serb-dominated area of Kosovo to Serbia in exchange for the Preševo Valley becoming a part of Kosovo. Both Rexhepi and Mustafa suggested that this was one of their primary political goals. Rexhepi went on to argue that Albanians in the region have asked for autonomy since 1992, when Albanians voted on a referendum to declare political and territorial autonomy and the right to merge with Kosovo, as evidence that such a move has long been supported both by Kosovo and Albanians in the Preševo Valley. He argued that the 1992 referendum and ethnic parties influenced Albanians to take control of local governance. Rexhepi believed that the role and influence of ethnic Albania parties would increase convincingly if the Assembly of Preševo Valley would announce the territorial and political autonomy of the Preševo Valley. He suggested that in such a situation, the international community would have to “deal seriously with the Presheva [sic] Valley.” Rexhepi argued that Serbs and Serbia were difficult to live with and thus slowed the ability of Albanians to gain political power and influence.[[1]](#footnote-1) In a system where programmatic or policy-based parties were the norm, given their similar goal of unification of Kosovo and the Preševo Valley, one would expect that Mustafa and Rexhepi would be members of the same party and work together toward their goals. However, while both are members of the Assembly of Preševo Valley, the head different parties.

Two other party leaders, Rahmi Zulfiu, leader of DUA, and Dr. Skender Destani, leader of the Democratic Union of Preševo Valley, favored an approach that focused on the economy and working within the currently existing system. In this aspect they agreed with a fifth party leader, Reza Halimi[[2]](#footnote-2) of the Party of Democratic Action, who has argued that working within the system is the most effective means for Albanians to advance their cause; Halimi is one of two Albanians to be elected to the national parliament in Belgrade. About working within the existing system, Zulfiu stated “…it’s the only way because we live here.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Regarding the economy, Zulfiu specifically focused on a lack of jobs as the primary reason individuals leave the area. He argued that the potential for a “brain-drain” in such movement out of the region increased the need for investment in the Preševo Valley area by the national government. Destani was less specific in his economic prescriptions for the region, but argued that ensuring the rights of all people were respected, not just those of Albanians, would vastly improve the situation in the Preševo Valley. In general, he was more optimistic than Zulfiu regarding the future of the region and that of Albanians in Serbia more generally. Like Rexhepi and Mustafa, Destani and Zulfui appear to share a similar approach and goals, yet Destani left DUA to create his own party. Here again, Zulfui and Destani share a view (best to work within the current system ( and goals (grater Albanian voice in Belgrade) with Halimi, but both left Halimi’s party to form their own, and Destani ultimately left the DUA. Three parties share the view that working within the system is the most effective way to advance the cause of Albanian rights, but they essentially refuse to work with each other.

Elections in 2014 in Serbia saw Halimi’s party gain their second seat in parliament. Serbian electoral law provides for a lwer threshold for ethnic parties than than others (1% vs. 5%) but nevertheless, this suggests that perhaps Albanians are beginning to view Halimi as more effective compared to the others.

Both Destani and Mustafa agreed that the national government in Belgrade is not as ready as it claims to be for general integration of Albanian parties with the broader political system. Mustafa recalled how the president of the G-17 party came to Preševo to ask for their support for his party; in return he would bring up Albanian issues in parliament. Mustafa says he was agreeable and turned out the necessary votes. “And I told him we are ready to keep our laws and our people here only if you are able to fulfill three requests... And when he went to Belgrade he just turned down all these names saying that “I never asked for the votes of Albanians in Preševo.”” Mustafa claims that integration of the Preševo Valley into mainstream Serbian politics is institutionally problematic; the government in Belgrade is not ready to integrate.[[4]](#footnote-4) Destani has also suggested that his argument for a consociational system with set-asides in parliament would help to integrate Albanians into the national political structure. However, he has reached the same conclusion as Mustafa, that Belgrade has no real desire for such integration.

This brief overview of party platforms and goals demonstrates that Albanians in Serbia have a difficult time agreeing on how and when to go about gaining more political influence over their region and over broader government policy with regard to Albanian and minority rights. However, given Burstein and Linton’s (2002) argument that the policy influence of smaller parties is less than generally expected, it appears that if Albanian parties in Serbia focus on local control and governance, as have Hungarian parties in Vojvodina, they may fare better.

Albanian parties in Serbia argue that they support and fight for language, culture, political and social rights for their citizens. However, one major split came when Riza Halimi, leader of PDA, suggested that the best way to ensure Albanian rights in Serbia was to participate in Serbian government, get Albanians elected to parliament and work from the inside. Ragmi Mustafa, disagreeing, left the PDA and formed the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). Zulfiu agrees with Halimi that working within the system is the best way to guarantee Albanian rights in Serbia, however the coalition group, Democratic Union of Albanians, does not include Halimi’s Party for Democratic Action. The primary area of disagreement between DPA and DUA appears to be over whether Albanians will fare better under majority ethnic Serbian government or under a majority Albanian government in Kosovo. Other leaders, such as Destani, feel that a consociational, Belgian-style government, would serve Albanian interests best as it would provide guaranteed seats in parliament, thus ensuring that Albanian interests are always represented. All party leaders argued that they had only the best interests of constituents at heart and the official platforms and statements reflect that. However, by forming new parties over a disagreement over tactics gives the appearance, at least, of unwillingness to compromise, the heart of democratic politics. Personalist parties form around the personality of the leader and that is what is occurring in the Preševo Valley.

**Other avenues to recognition and power**

Serbia has experienced severe inter-ethnic violence within the last 25 years and has emerged with a more or less democratic political system and a constitution that recognizes minority rights and creates national level political institutions to promote and protect those rights. The 2002 Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities contained the provisions for the creation of national minority councils but did not specify how exactly those rights were to be protected and exercised (OSCE 2010). In 2009, the Serbian Parliament adopted a new Law on National Minority Councils which details the position and responsibilities of these minority bodies. The Law on National Council of National Minorities along with the 2002 Law of Protection of Freedoms and Rights of National Minorities sets out a firm legal basis for the protection of minorities in Serbia and also for the creation of National Councils of National Minorities (Albanian National Minority Council 2013).

These national minority councils are designed to allow each minority group to elect governing members to their respective national council; those members are then the conduit for information exchange between the national government and the minority group and according to the new law on national minorities, the national councils are the bodies through which cultural autonomy can be achieved properly in Serbia. The Albanian minority in Serbia elected a minority council, in June 2010. A report from the Centre for European Policy Studies suggests that the failure to set up an Albanian national council “is telling about their attitude towards the Serbian state and also about their internal political dynamics” and suggests that one reason for the failure to create an Albanian minority council was that doing so would “imply acceptance of the fact that their country is Serbia” (Huszka 2007, 6).

In an effort to make recommendations to Albanian politicians, Huszka (2007) argues that the failure to set up an Albanian National Council is behind the failure of the national parliament in Belgrade to implement national minority rights for Albanians (Huszka 2007). The report recommended that Albanian politicians should “give up insisting on the usage of symbols of the Albanian state” and “speed up the integration of Albanians into the [Serbian] public sector” (Huszka 2007, 8). In making these recommendations, the Centre for European Policy Studies report implies that not only are the existing Albanian parties ineffective, but also they are not taking advantage of the opportunities and institutions that are actually offered to them through Serbian law. The CEPS report concluded that responsibility for Albanian minority party ineffectiveness “lies not only with the Serbian government, but also with local Albanian politicians who should pursue a politics of cooperation rather than confrontation” (Huszka 2007, 8).

The failure to institute a national minority council for Albanians in Serbia was corrected in June 2010 when a full National Council of Albanian National Minority in the Republic of Serbia was established “in a very difficult context, thanks to foreign Embassies, OSCE Mission and other relevant international institutions” (ANMC 2013). The council consists of 29 members, six commissions, additional sub-commissions, and an executive body of seven members; it focuses on issues of education, information, culture, and language (ANMC 2013).

The Law on National Minority Councils also gives the National Councils of National Minorities the authority to govern in the field of minority “culture, education, information and official use of languages and scripts, as well as the procedures for the election of national councils, their funding and other issues relevant to the work of national councils” (ANMC, 2013, 114). The Albanian National Minority Council is also responsible for the oversight in the establishment of institutions, companies, and other organizations developed relevant to Albanian minority issues (ANMC, 2013, 114). All of the authority and responsibilities granted to the National Minority Councils are goals also laid out by the Albanian political parties. The Albanian National Minority Council is acting where the parties either could not or would not act. However, it is acting without the support of Mustafa and the Democratic Party of Albanians. Mustafa insists that while he supports the creation of the ANMC in principle, it is primarily a tool used by Belgrade to look good for the international community (Ismaili 2010).

In 2012, the Albanian National Minority Council laid out a four-year Strategic Plan of the Albanian National Minority Council. This Strategic Plan is a part of the first steps of the 29-member Council. The National Council’s strategic plan “defines the objectives, activities and resources necessary to improve the current situation of the National Council in the area of jurisdiction” (ANMC, 2013, 114). According to the 2002 demographic data of the Strategic Plan, the council is responsible for the 61,647 Albanians that live in Serbia. Articulated as a percentage, the Albanian minority represents 0.82% of the total population in Serbia (ANMC, 2013, 114).

**Conclusion**

Do ethnic parties in Serbia increase representation or resentment? The answer appears to be yes…both representation and resentment are increased by the actions of the ethnic parties. The ethnic parties in Serbia can be defined as personalist parties rather than programmatic; there is little to no difference in political goals, rather the disagreements arise between leaders regarding tactics with such disagreements ending in fragmentation of parties. The leaders of each party, more so than any platform issue, are why voters support any one party. Many of the Albanian party leaders hold some moral authority as a result of their actions during the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s (Rexhepi spent time in prison for his activities as a militia leader and considers himself to be a former political prisoner). However, as is the case in many transitioning states, once independence has been won, or the fighting has stopped, the question of how to govern and who should govern pulls apart previously strong allies.

Do ethnic political parties in Serbia help or hurt their constituents? Again, the evidence suggests the answer is yes to both helping and hurting. The Albanian parties in Serbia cannot agree on whether or how to participate in the government in Belgrade. This stalemate hurts Albanians in the long run as their issues do not make it on to the national political agenda. Their active support for an independent Kosovo and Albanian territorial and political autonomy have not won them many friends in Belgrade either as their actions are viewed as destructive to the Serbian state.

In an apparently ironic development, the Serbian government has provided better opportunities and avenues to power than have the parties claiming to advocate on behalf of Albanian rights. The Albanian National Minority Council is still in the process of fully acting on its authority, but it appears to enjoy greater support among average Albanians in Serbia.

Traditional cleavages as outlined by Lipset do not appear to exist in Serbian politics. Or, if they do exist, they are not the primary focus for ethnic political parties. The primary cleavages in Serbia are found between those who favor a closer relationship with the European Union, up to and including membership in that organization, and those who wish to have nothing to do with Europe, particularly in domestic political matters. However, right now, for Albanians in Serbia, the EU and the US provide their most effective support structures. Finally, the laws in Serbia that prohibit those who are not considered a minority from joining an ethnic-based political party inhibit the ability of ethnic political parties from spreading their message more widely and perhaps gaining support across cleavages and even being able to confront and disabuse stereotypes. Recent polls indicate that younger Serbs and Albanians would not want to live near or have to deal with each other. As long as parties remain ethnically segregated in membership and personality focused in leadership, it will be very difficult for them to improve the situation and begin to truly represent their constituents in an effective manner.

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1. E-mail correspondence with Jones, 30 April 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Due to scheduling conflicts, Jones was unable to speak with Mr. Halimi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with the Jones, 30 April 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interview with Jones, 30 April 2010, Preševo, Serbia. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)