

The Left in Macedonia: Obstacles and opportunities for revival



Biljana Vankovska

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje, North Macedonia

Abstract:

This article explores the underexamined issue of left-wing politics in Macedonia, a region often overlooked in broader academic discussions on political transformation in the former Yugoslavia. It addresses key challenges faced by the Left in the post-socialist era, including ideological fragmentation, neoliberal economic policies imposed by the West, and the rise of ethno-nationalist elements in the Macedonian political landscape since 2001. These factors have significantly weakened the influence of leftist ideology in a country marked by ethnic division and largely under Western influence. The article argues that Macedonia's so-called leftist parties, mainly remnants of the former regime, have increasingly adopted neoliberal policies, distancing themselves from traditional socialist values and eroding their connection to the working class. The rise of Levica (The Left), a political party born from a grassroots social movement, offers a potential avenue for revitalizing democratic participation and political transformation in the country. A central focus of the article is the viability of genuine left-wing ideology and policy within the constraints of Macedonia's NATO and EU orientation. The article concludes that Levica's future success will hinge on its ability to balance national identity concerns with broader social and economic goals and effectively challenge the entrenched political establishment.

Keywords: political transition; political participation; leftist ideology; Macedonia; The Left

Received: 11/10/2024

Accepted: 30/11/2024

Published: 17/06/2025

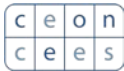
Corresponding author:

Biljana Vankovska

Correspondence email:

biljanav@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

DOI: [10.5937/politeiao-55755](https://doi.org/10.5937/politeiao-55755)



1. INTRODUCTION

More than three decades after the onset of the so-called democratic transition in the former socialist bloc—including Yugoslavia, which was never part of the USSR's geopolitical orbit—academic consensus in political science and related disciplines paints a bleak picture. A brief overview of the situation and the accompanying literature highlights a sobering reality. The only notable shift lies in terminology: the concept of “transition” has been largely replaced by “failed” or “impaired Europeanization.” The so-called transition from socialism to liberal democracy appears to be a closed chapter. Most of these states have, at least nominally, embraced neoliberal values, institutions, and policies, with euro integration as their ultimate goal, regardless of the EU's ongoing challenges and internal decline. This transformation is often portrayed as irreversible, as dominant political and intellectual forces cling to the TINA principle (There Is No Alternative).

Yet, the outcomes of this process have already been widely criticized, with diagnoses of “new authoritarianism” emerging as a key feature of governance in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2020). Hence no wonder many authors now examine the reasons of the failure

of such a wonderful solution for transformation of the post-socialist world. While the respective Western Balkan states may demonstrate firm geopolitical loyalty to Western power centers, the reality on the ground remains deeply unsatisfactory. There is a vast literature that has been trying to detect the obstacles and problems in the international state-building process, and predominantly, the conclusions are related to the weak state capacities and corruption, captured states (Auerbach and Kartner, 2023; Cvetičanin et al. 2023), and eventually – the appearance of stabilitocracies (Pavlovic 2017). To paraphrase David Chandler's excellent notion of *Empire in denial* (2006) – the locals are to be blamed for the failures, while the EU/Western medicines are perfectly fine. To put it bluntly, the premise is that there is nothing wrong with neoliberal capitalism (despite its cyclical crises and turning to the far-right) and its democratic outcomes. On the contrary, the guilt should be sought with the local leaders and political parties, and even the citizens, who should work harder to become Europe (even if such Europe/EU does not exist anymore, especially after the beginning of the Ukraine war). Only few critical scholars put things the other way around by pointing out that the causes for the failed “transition to democracy” lies in the western economic and political model in decline, or more directly – Western imperialism that

has been only rebranded into European and Euro-Atlantic integration (Fouskas and Gökay 2019; Lapa-vitsas 2019). It took almost two decades under such negative tendencies and growing dissatisfaction of the population, for the first social movements and leftist alternatives to appear throughout the region. Yet, the national specifics made them isolated one from another and often hard to even understand that they have been struggling against the same imperial forces.

This paper contextualizes the state of affairs with the left political forces in the Macedonian society in a specific national constellation. But it is important to stress that the starting (albeit thought-provoking) premise is rather different: the alleged transition to democracy was not about democracy at all, but rather about a liberal march of expansion to the East through implementing soft neocolonialism. Many authors would agree that the so-called democratic transition in the territory of former Yugoslavia has a different turn in comparison to the other Central and Eastern European states due to the violent collapse of the socialist federation. Accordingly, the democratization had to deal with the imminent conflict mitigation and resolution through direct Western interventionism, which often did not exclude military means of “pacification”. The fall of Berlin Wall helped open the Pandora’s box of Yugoslav internal complexities and contradictions, so the liberal medicines *de facto* let the seeds of dissolution spread around in an (un) controlled manner. In a recent YouTube interview for the RFE, one of the leaders of the Slovenian League of Communists who was a protagonist in the demise of the Yugoslav communist party (League of Communists of Yugoslavia) overtly referred that their slogan “Europa Zdaj” (Europe Now) was far-reaching and very progressive, disregarding the costs in human lives paid for that goal anticipated by Slovenian and Croatian allegedly progressive forces who sought for Yugoslavia’s dissolution (RFE 2018).

Once the wars and conflicts of the 1991-2001 period were contained through foreign interventions—such as the Dayton Agreement, Kumanovo Agreement, and Ohrid Agreement—the stage was set not only for international state-building, characterized by interventionism and the limited sovereignty of newly established states, but also for the imposition of what Michael Pugh (2016) describes as liberal (corporate) peace as part of the broader “integration story”, which was *de facto* robbery of the remaining resources and capital in the region. As aptly described by Srećko Horvat and Igor Štikš (2015), the territory of former Yugoslavia was transformed into a desert of post-socialist neoliberal transition. Even worse, the

Macedonian republic that used to be the poorest federal unit – now has been facing its worst days in socio-economic terms.

Constitutional engineering and economic policies rooted in the Washington Consensus systematically dismantled every vestige of socialist achievement, deeming it incompatible with the new political and economic regime. On the other hand, a new elite class emerged, consolidating power across politics, business, media, and even academia. This dominant group, enriched by the neoliberal transformation, secured its position at the expense of broader social equity, contributing to the erosion of public trust and democratic values in the region. The Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ohrid-made Macedonia since 2001 remain *sui generis* cases in the regional political (and constitutional) landscape (Vankovska 2022). Despite the similarities between the two (in terms of power-sharing, or consociational political system), in this text we put emphasis on the Macedonian characteristics that affect the political life, the political parties and particularly, the left options.

In the following sections of this article, we shall elaborate in more depth the appearance of the left-wing movements and the obstacles they face even today. Generally speaking, the Macedonian leftist political landscape has long been characterized by ideological fragmentation, weakening of traditional bases, and a shift towards neoliberal economic policies. There is one exception on the political scene: the political party Levica that was born in 2016 and now is represented by six MPs in the parliament (Sobranie). This article delves into the obstacles that the Left faces today, its transformation from a social movement to a political party, and explores opportunities for revitalization within the Macedonian political spectrum.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE LEFT IN MACEDONIA

The roots of leftist ideas in the territory of today’s Macedonian state can be traced back to before World War II, reflecting broader regional trends. However, Macedonia uniquely embodies these ideals through the 1903 Ilinden Uprising and the Kruševo Republic. Although it lasted only ten days, the Kruševo Republic is remembered as one of the earliest examples of republican and socialist self-governance in the Balkans and beyond. This brief yet profound moment holds a central place in Macedonian historical identity and is symbolically enshrined in the preamble of the country’s current constitution (Vankovska, 2024). Genera-

tions of Macedonians and other citizens of the former Yugoslav socialist republic were raised with a sense of pride in their alignment with progressive socialist ideals, internationalism, and the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which championed an independent foreign policy. These values were central to the identity of the socialist Yugoslav state, instilling a belief in the region's alignment with broader struggles for social justice, equality, and sovereignty.

Fukuyama's much-discussed proclamation of the "end of history" (1992) was never a reflection of popular will in the post-socialist world—citizens were neither consulted nor given a chance to articulate their vision for the future. Instead, the central question of the time revolved around the survival or dissolution of Yugoslavia. The country's disintegration, a prolonged process influenced and accelerated by Western economic, financial, and political interventions, framed the debates of the early 1990s. For Macedonia, this culminated in the 8 September 1991 referendum, posing the Hamletian question: to be or not to be an independent and sovereign state?

Yet, even before independence, liberal values imported from the West had already begun shaping the ideological trajectory of the new state. In this context, any vestiges of leftist or socialist ideals were quickly marginalized. Communism and left-wing ideologies became collateral damage—whether through negligence or deliberate strategy—under the narrative that democracy, human rights, and progress were inherently tied to Western models. This rhetoric dismissed alternative systems and achievements from non-Western parts of the world as regressive, primitive, or authoritarian, reinforcing a binary worldview that left little room for ideological plurality in the nascent state.

In summary, the Cold War-era logic of vilifying the "reds" prevailed in the post-socialist period. While being leftist, socialist, or communist was not legally prohibited within the emerging multiparty system, it was socially stigmatized and politically marginalized. The message was clear: leftist ideologies were neither desirable nor respectable. In the coming years, the relevant European institutions (such as Council of Europe, the EU, and some other initiatives) embarked into a formal political and legal condemnation of communism as totalitarian system along with the Nazism. Under intense external and internal pressures, the post-socialist political left largely succumbed to self-censorship, conforming to the new framework dictated by nationalist and neoliberal elites. Operating within this constrained paradigm, the left occasionally

adopted a rhetorical emphasis on human rights and social justice, but these commitments were superficial at best. In practice, the political left largely accepted the dominant socio-political order, engaging in performative dissent rather than mounting a substantive challenge to the prevailing neoliberal and nationalist consensus. As Balunović (2025, pp. 2–3) rightly argues, this was an era characterized by anti-socialist hysteria, where the left's resistance was diluted to mere symbolic gestures, leaving its transformative potential unrealized.

Left-wing parties are not uncommon across Europe, yet their position remains particularly fragile in the region formerly known as "socialist" during the Cold War (for classification and spread of left-wing parties in Europe, see March, 2008). For Macedonian leftists, the key questions are: how far left is "left enough"? And how much leftist ideology is permissible within the framework of Europeanization? Ironically, the turn-coated former communists/social democrats (i.e. those expected to champion social justice and protect collective rights) instead facilitated the privatization of societal welfare, public assets, and natural resources. Meanwhile, conservative opponents wrapped themselves in nationalist rhetoric, wielding patriotic slogans and vilifying Macedonia's Yugoslav past as its darkest period—claims starkly detached from historical reality.

Amidst the so-called "flourishing party pluralism," marginal individuals and small groups attempted to preserve communist ideals. However, they failed to gain traction with the disoriented masses, who had been promised independence and democracy in exchange for their social rights and worker self-management. The painful truth is that Macedonia lacked prominent dissidents or intellectual figures capable of countering the anti-socialist hysteria and offering an alternative vision.

In this climate, genuine left-oriented individuals and groups found themselves constrained by external agendas and internal ideological fragmentation. This left them unable to effectively address the needs of a population grappling with the dual losses of social guarantees and national cohesion. The Macedonian case highlights the broader challenges of reviving leftist movements in a region where neoliberalism and nationalism dominate the political landscape.

However, Macedonia stands as an exception to the pattern of Yugoslavia's violent disintegration, being the only republic to gain independence peacefully. This unique context complicates the application of argu-

ments typically used to explain the ethno-nationalist fervor and militancy that sidelined leftist forces in other parts of the region. Instead, Macedonia's intra-ethnic tensions, particularly between Macedonians and Albanians, played a significant role in polarizing society. From the outset of independence, many Albanians were reluctant to see their future within the framework of the Macedonian state, further exacerbating societal divisions and overshadowing any potential for leftist political consolidation.

As mentioned, the former League of Communists of Macedonia quickly rebranded itself as the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), adopting the social-democratic label to maintain its place on the left of the political spectrum—albeit not too far left. Amid the transition to multiparty democracy, SDSM focused primarily on the urgent task of establishing Macedonia as an independent and internationally recognized state. However, this shift in focus coincided with a period of criminal privatization, during which many of the party's most influential members positioned themselves as the new business elite by exploiting the privatization of collective property. Despite these practices, SDSM has consistently portrayed itself as the “most statehood-devoted political party” in Macedonia's history.

In practice, state and national issues overshadowed ideological debates for all political parties, regardless of their size or platform. External pressures, particularly from neighboring countries such as Greece and Bulgaria, profoundly shaped the internal political orientation. These states actively questioned the very existence of Macedonians as a distinct people and nation, creating persistent challenges to national identity.

Internally, the political landscape was further complicated by ethnic divisions. The Albanian population, from the outset of independence, showed limited interest in contributing to a unified national body (*demos*). Instead, Albanian political actors pursued greater autonomy and equality as a constituent nation. These tensions culminated in the 2001 military conflict, which resulted in a significant redefinition of Macedonia's constitutional framework. The post-conflict power-sharing model institutionalized ethnic divisions, creating a complex governance structure that continues to influence the country's political dynamics. Twenty years later, ethnicity has been deeply constitutionalized and institutionalized in Macedonia, shaping the very framework of its political and social systems. As a result, even a straightforward call for the establishment of a (liberal) democratic community based on

the rule of *demos*—a civic conception of political membership—instead of *ethnos* is often perceived as a subversive or treacherous act. Such aspirations are frequently framed as threats to the country's European future and the fragile peace achieved after the 2001 conflict, despite their alignment with fundamental democratic principles.

The consociational model of bi-ethnic state did not resolve any essential problem of the already weakened state, while the political economy of the ethnic conflict remained not addressed at all. Under such circumstances, the mainstream political life was limited between the standard political and ethnic divisions, with no space for citizens' participation and even less for left-oriented policies of unification under the banner of social justice and internationalism. The state's performances to provide elementary public services and satisfy needs of the impoverished population were dramatically going downwards. The moment was ripe for the birth of the so-called new left in Macedonia.

3. THE RISE OF LEVICA: FROM GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT TO POLITICAL PARTY

Boris Buden's book *Transition to Nowhere* (2020) has proven to be a particularly apt description of the Macedonian experience. The country has endured both an unsuccessful “transition to democracy” and persistent stagnation at the doors of NATO and the EU, hindered by identity-based blockades from its neighbors. The public sphere has been dominated by mainstream political parties and a proliferation of NGOs, all promoting the neoliberal agenda. Yet, pockets of resistance began to emerge in unexpected corners of society, providing space for unconventional actions and the dissemination of leftist ideas.

It is difficult to pinpoint who initiated this wave of dissent, but young people were at the forefront, driving political actions that were unprecedented in the country's recent history. One notable example occurred in 2003, when a small group protested the U.S. intervention in Iraq by chanting, “We do not drink oil,” signaling their rejection of imperialist motives. Notably, the Macedonian government and military were part of the U.S.-led Coalition of the Willing. This group soon became the nucleus of the leftist movement for social justice known as “Lenka.” Early activism can be traced back to 2006, with “Lenka” officially registered as a citizens' organization two years later. Around the same time, other similar movements emerged, most notably “Solidarnost.” Even the traditionally weak and

subdued labor unions began to show signs of resistance, raising the red flag on May Day—a symbolic echo of the communist era.

In 2014, a new dimension of public participation and dissent arose with the student and professor-led movement known as plenums, which organized horizontally to challenge the entrenched ruling coalition. This coalition consisted of conservative Macedonian parties and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), a political faction led by former Albanian fighters. The mounting dissatisfaction eventually culminated in the so-called Colorful Revolution, spanning nearly two years. Initially, it instilled hope across various societal groups that the entrenched bi-partisan and bi-ethnic status quo could be broken.

However, the revolution turned out to be no revolution at all. It was co-opted by the opposition Social Democrats (SDSM), who were backed by well-organized Western power centers, resulting in widespread disappointment. What could have been a transformative spring instead ended in frustration, culminating in the country's controversial name change in 2018. The political elite touted NATO membership as a reward for this concession, but for many, it was a bitter reminder of lost sovereignty and unrealized revolutionary potential. (Vankovska 2023).

This dramatic period presented significant challenges for various social and left-wing movements in Macedonia. Fractions and internal disagreements were inevitable, as the turbulent times left little room for reflection or the consolidation of strategies. Debates emerged over whether to reject mainstream politics entirely or to combine both horizontal grassroots activism and vertical engagement within institutional frameworks. Inspired by similar experiences in the region—particularly in Croatia, Serbia, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina—some groups were compelled to redefine their approach. The devastating effects of NGO-ization, which often diluted and co-opted social dissent, pushed many leftists toward the idea of forming a political party.

Levica was born out of this necessity. Emerging from the remnants of “Lenka,” “Solidarnost,” and the nearly invisible Communist Party of Macedonia (which had failed to re-register in 2007), Levica brought together various activists and left-oriented individuals. On November 14, 2015, these groups officially announced their intention to collect the signatures necessary to register a political party. By early 2016, Levica was operational, though it immediately faced a test of its

cohesion during the Colorful Revolution. Some members saw an opportunity to join the Social Democrats (SDSM), a party overtly supported by Western powers, leading to an internal split. Despite this, the majority resolved to stay independent, making the bold decision to participate in elections alone.

In the 2016 parliamentary elections, Levica defied the odds, securing approximately 12,000 votes, or 1% of the total. The following year, in the 2017 local elections, the party won three council seats. By 2020, Levica's perseverance bore greater fruit: the party gained two MPs in the Macedonian Parliament, marking a significant milestone. Prof. Dimitar Apasiev, already a well-known figure for his eloquence and principled stance, became the face of the party. However, the second MP, Boris Krmov, surprised many by demonstrating steadfast integrity, resisting attempts at co-optation (bribery) and standing firmly by his comrade throughout their mandate. Levica's share of the vote grew to 37,426, or 4.10%, in this election.

The party's real breakthrough came during the 2021 local elections, where it received 50,181 votes, translating into 49 municipal council seats across the country. This unprecedented success earned Levica recognition as the fastest-growing leftist party in the region. By 2024, Levica had further consolidated its position, entering the Macedonian Parliament with a formal parliamentary group comprising six MPs. With this achievement, Levica firmly established itself as a significant political force, uniquely positioned in the Macedonian political landscape.

Levica has positioned itself as a socialist and anti-capitalist movement, championing direct democracy, workers' rights, and a staunch rejection of the neoliberal policies that have shaped Macedonian politics since independence. The party has grown into a voice for those disillusioned with the entrenched political elite, particularly among younger Macedonians. Its advocacy for anti-austerity measures, social justice, and environmental sustainability has struck a chord with a population grappling with deepening inequalities and a precarious social safety net.

One of Levica's defining features has been its unapologetic approach to addressing systemic issues. The party has boldly confronted income inequality, the erosion of social security, and the deterioration of public healthcare, while also tackling the sensitive national questions surrounding the ongoing negotiation of Macedonian identity (Levica 2024). By weaving a left-wing critique of neoliberalism but preserving the idea

that Macedonian patriotism is not incompatible with the struggle for socialism, Levica has managed to attract a diverse support base, including youth, labor unions, and activists concerned about social justice and economic disparities. At the same time, it's belief that the national issues are a matter that the left should care about and its strong opposition to NATO membership and EU neoliberal medicines, including the activism against the Prespa Agreement brought it a negative image produced by the mainstream media and other power centers. The harshest critics (ironically, calling themselves “leftists” – even though financed by Western funds) argue that this party is de facto far-right, anti-Western, fascist and populist. Some young scholars joined the chorus on a rather controversial argument basis (for instance, [Bosilkov 2021](#)). The well-known pro-Western think-tank BiEPAG described Levica arguing that “in its campaigning process in 2020, which has focused on “Prespa agreement” and its campaigning for a more eclectic positioning of the country vis-à-vis the West in what it claims to be a multipolar world.” ([Veljanov 2024](#)).

Due to its effective parliamentary blockade of a law that would generously subsidize the national TV media channels, and even more because of its radical agenda that proves attractive to the young population, Levica has been practically banned/canceled in the mainstream media space. Its only free space for spreading its positions are a few portals, occasional public debates, and social media activism.

4. CURRENT OBSTACLES FACING THE LEFT IN MACEDONIA

At first glance, the leftist forces in Macedonia appear to demonstrate unprecedented political success, particularly when compared to other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Far-left parties with parliamentary representation are rare in the region, with such representation found only in Macedonia, Slovenia, and, to some extent, Croatia. This distinct position underscores the resilience and appeal of the Macedonian Left within a challenging political and social landscape.

However, the broader regional context paints a more complex picture. The disintegration of Yugoslavia not only fractured political and social ties but also diminished regional cooperation and mutual engagement. This fragmentation has led to a lack of interest in and understanding of each other's specific challenges, despite shared histories and experiences.

As a result, comparative analyses of leftist political parties across the former Yugoslav states are scarce, often overlooking Macedonia's unique circumstances. The specific challenges faced by the Macedonian Left— such as addressing ethnic divisions, external identity pressures, and the struggle against entrenched neoliberal and nationalist frameworks— remain largely understudied in the context of regional leftist movements. These differences underscore the need for a nuanced examination of the Macedonian Left, its unique role in shaping not only national politics but also regional political landscapes.

Over the past three decades, the Republic of Macedonia has undergone systematic de-Macedonianization, a process driven by prolonged blockades, embargoes, and vetoes from neighboring Greece and Bulgaria. These pressures culminated in two controversial agreements: the Treaty of Friendship with Bulgaria (2017) and the Prespa Agreement with Greece (2018). For many, these treaties represented a capitulation, requiring significant concessions on national history, identity, and culture in exchange for the promise of NATO and EU membership.

Compounding this issue is the consistent political consensus among mainstream parties, which prioritize Euro-Atlantic integration over nation-building and the preservation of national interests. This unwavering stance has left little room for dissent within the political establishment. Levica, however, stands as a notable exception. It is the only political party in Macedonia that has explicitly embedded an anti-NATO position in its electoral program, and its activists have long been dissenters to the country's NATO membership. While Levica's stance on the EU is less definitive, the party critiques the current form of the Union as a corporate and militarized entity that marginalizes smaller nations like Macedonia. Levica does not oppose EU integration per se but rejects the idea of joining under the present conditions, which it believes undermine the country's sovereignty and dignity.

This uncompromising stance has led to Levica being blacklisted both domestically and internationally, as it directly challenges the dominant narrative and disrupts the established political order. The party's critique of NATO and the EU resonates with a growing segment of Macedonians who feel betrayed by the concessions made in the pursuit of external validation and EU integration. Levica's positions offer an alternative to the prevailing political discourse, advocating for a reassertion of national sovereignty and independence, and positioning itself as the voice of those disillusioned by

the current trajectory of the country. Levica's foreign policy orientation sharply contrasts with the dominant Western mindset and subservience. The party stands as the sole political force in Macedonia advocating for a departure from NATO, the restoration of international recognition for Israel and the recognition of a Palestinian state, as well as the removal of sanctions against Cuba, among other stances. These positions are nearly unheard of in the public discourse, with little to no other party daring to voice similar views.

It is evident that Levica strongly opposes foreign interference in Macedonia's internal affairs, emphasizing the party's commitment to protecting the nation's sovereignty, identity, and national interests in international relations. Gjorgjioska (2024, p. 8) also accurately notes that Levica supports the concept of a multipolar world, where power is more evenly distributed across regions, rather than being concentrated in a few dominant countries. Levica advocates for Macedonia's active participation in international organizations and alliances that reflect these principles, promoting global peace, stability, and cooperation. Despite its evident growth, Levica has chosen a more challenging and prolonged path to success. Its originality, provocative stance, and powerful rhetoric act as a double-edged sword—attracting some while alienating others who remain on the sidelines due to fear or opportunism. Like many leftist parties, Levica is no stranger to internal strife and frequent clashes, which are further exacerbated by the perception of the party as aggressive, not only by its political rivals but also by internal factions.

The party's evolution has been marked by cycles of fragmentation and growth, often peaking around election periods. However, the era of ideological fragmentation, which characterized its early years, appears to have come to an end. A significant turning point was the December 2023 Plenum, where party leader Dimitar Apasiev (2019) articulated a clear and unified vision, solidifying the party's ideological credo. This was a continuation and echo of the previously set path of consolidation has positioned Levica to navigate future challenges with greater coherence and focus, allowing it to build on its foundations and expand its influence in Macedonian politics:

“... The idea for Levica began in 2015, when we realized that NGO activism through “Lenka” was bearing no fruit. When we saw that we were exhausting ourselves in vain, without bringing any real change to society. [...] Leftism is always accompanied by “coups,” which, surprisingly, were always well-covered by media con-

trolled by a single center of power—one that historically proved to be an even greater enemy to us than Gruevski's regime. That center is funded by Soros. Unfortunately, these voices still spew venom against Levica. [...] I feel ideologically compelled to say that the new course for Levica will be left-wing populism. And here, the term populism (derived from the Latin *populus*, meaning “the people”) is not meant in a pejorative sense. In the field of my intellectual and academic work, there is an imperative that has endured since the Middle Ages—Leonardo da Vinci referred to it as “unyielding rigor.” In other words, it means that when one deals with political issues, which by their nature are always heavily burdened by emotions, one must resist a temptation inherent in our profession, which states: “One must never succumb to the tyranny of words!” Or, to express it in Freudian terms, in the future, we must avoid making concessions to hesitation—because, first, we concede to words we deem “politically incorrect,” and then, little by little, we begin to deviate from the essence! [...] The structure of Levica is predominantly that of a youth-oriented party, and from this, two universally present characteristics of our future left-populist politics will emerge: (1) direct engagement with the common people (the plebs); and (2) anti-elitism.”

It's noteworthy to stress that in addition to these postulates of its political activism, Levica has given herself an indicative “nickname” – The Children of the Transition. (The slogan under which they entered the first-ever parliamentary elections in 2016 was “Spark in the Darkness”). The left-oriented philosopher and university professor Trajče Stojanov (2015) tried to explain the roots of this self-determination in the following way:

“First, we were left to be raised and educated by generations whose belief system collapsed before their very eyes. Imagine a generation raised on faith in communism, watching that faith crumble right in front of them. And what could such a generation pass on to ours, the transitional generation? What values could they teach us? Nothing, except fear. As a result, our transitional generation became a psychotic, neurotic one, raised by frightened fathers and mothers. These fearful parents were incapable of passing down anything of value because they had witnessed how everything they held valuable disintegrated in an instant. Subconsciously, they were haunted by mistrust—what could they teach their children? What was worth passing on when nothing seemed to have any value?”

The slogan “the children of transition” serves two key purposes. First, it identifies the primary electoral base:

those who never experienced the benefits of socialism but have witnessed the hardships of the transition to capitalism. This creates a generational line of self-identification. Second, it highlights their social and familial origins—predominantly from the lower strata of society, those who never belonged to the “red bourgeoisie” of the socialist era (a group that later evolved into the capitalist, oligarchic class). This positions them as individuals with a clean and honest political background. The slogan aims to appeal to voters by encouraging them to support a new generation of honest individuals who gained their resilience and courage during the toughest times when their families were impoverished and pushed to the margins of society. There is, however, a significant flaw in this political stance: the Macedonian population is aging rapidly, while disillusioned young people increasingly join the wave of brain drain. It appears that the Levica leadership is not fully aware that it is unintentionally alienating a substantial pool of potential sympathizers and voters. Even though the charismatic leader is one of the most popular among the otherwise apathetic and apolitical youth, that’s not enough for making the party position more stable and embracing. The occasional review of the registered party membership displays the worrisome outflow of young people.

One might expect a left-wing party to thrive under the dire socio-economic circumstances in Macedonia, one of the poorest countries in Europe. However, several factors work against this expectation. The traditional working class has been replaced by the precariat—a vulnerable and dependent social layer that is more submissive to their economic overlords. Moreover, it is well-documented that poorer populations tend to have less access to education, making it harder for them to engage with the rhetoric of political philosophers and leaders. Even more critically, the daily struggle for survival often leaves them apolitical and disengaged.

Adding to these challenges is the highly negative portrayal of Levica in the media, compounded by the inflammatory rhetoric of top politicians. For instance, during a parliamentary Q&A session, the prime minister publicly referred to all Levica members as “junkies.” Systemic issues further undermine the party’s prospects. These include an ethnonationalist, power-sharing constitutional framework; an unfair electoral system that heavily favors larger political parties, both structurally and financially; entrenched clientelism and hierarchical discipline that discourage dissent; and the professional marginalization and mistreatment of Levica members. Finally, the party faces a near-total boy-

cott from mainstream media, which further limits its ability to reach the electorate.

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR REVITALIZATION OF THE LEFT

Against all odds, Levica remains a vital political force with substantial untapped potential to establish itself as a permanent actor in the Macedonian political system. Following the 2024 parliamentary elections, a significant shift occurred within the so-called left spectrum of Macedonian politics, marked by the dramatic decline of the (formerly ruling) Social Democratic Union (SDSM) and its Albanian coalition partner, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). With just six MPs and only a few months into their mandate, Levica has already earned the distinction of being regarded as “the only real opposition” in parliament. This status has been further solidified by the new ruling coalition’s failure to deliver on key electoral promises, particularly in socio-economic and national-related matters.

Macedonia’s precarious position, caught between the nationalistic demands of Sofia and the pressures exerted by Brussels, has driven many Macedonians to view Levica as their voice of defiance—a popular tribune unafraid to challenge dominant narratives, even at the risk of being labeled “nationalist” or “fascist.” However, Levica’s lack of a well-established international network among leftist movements in the region and globally remains a significant limitation. Compounding this issue is Macedonia’s relatively low profile on the global stage; despite the blatant violations of human and collective rights in this small peripheral country, its plight garners little international attention or solidarity.

The experience of the European far-left offers crucial lessons for Levica. The deep crisis facing far-left movements across Europe is not merely a product of their marginalization or organizational inefficiencies but rather a reflection of systemic constraints. The fate of initiatives like DiEM25, which sought to democratize the EU from within, underscores the structural impossibility of achieving farleft goals within the confines of a corporate and imperialist EU framework, heavily reliant on U.S. influence. Similarly, the rise and fall of Greece’s Syriza demonstrate the limited space for far-left action within national borders and the inherent challenges of navigating the pressures of international finance and geopolitics.

For Levica, the path forward lies in embracing a broader, internationalist perspective. While firmly rooted in addressing Macedonia's specific challenges, the party has also signaled its commitment to fostering inter-party cooperation with like-minded forces in Russia, China, and even the United States. This approach aligns with its worldview and its inclination toward a new, cooperative multipolar global order.

Domestically, Levica faces the challenge of meeting voters' expectations, which often revolve around immediate, everyday issues. As an opposition party, it can articulate these concerns but lacks the means to resolve them directly. Nevertheless, national issues—particularly the perceived colonial treatment of Macedonia, the imposed treaties for the country's name change, and the erasure of its historical and cultural identity—continue to resonate deeply with the public. These emotional and symbolic grievances provide a potent rallying point for mobilizing support, allowing Levica to maintain its relevance and influence within the Macedonian political landscape.

6. CONCLUSION

The Left in Macedonia faces significant obstacles, but the rise of Levica presents a crucial opportunity to revitalize progressive politics in the country. By addressing national challenges through a progressive lens, fostering youth engagement and grassroots activism, and forming broader coalitions, the Left can position itself as a compelling alternative to the entrenched political establishment. Levica's success will hinge on its ability to balance national identity with social justice and economic equality, offering a vision for Macedonia that is inclusive, sustainable, and forward-thinking. If these opportunities are effectively seized, the Left could re-emerge as a transformative force in Macedonian politics, shaping the nation's future while contributing to a more just and equitable global order.

This task, however, must grapple with a broader disillusionment with Europe's current trajectory. Increasingly, leftist thinkers and philosophers argue that the European Union, especially after the crises in Ukraine and Gaza, its de-industrialization, and the decline of democratic values, no longer serves as a viable framework for progressive change. Rastko Močnik (2022) captured this sentiment when he stated:

“The path to socialism cannot begin within the current European Union. Many comrades believe that the Union can be reformed and opened to a socialist path. I

do not share that assessment. Neither under a reformist scenario nor a revolutionary one is it possible to build socialism in a single country within the framework of the EU, nor within the current international order. Any such attempt would immediately be attacked by international reaction with sanctions, and perhaps even military intervention, in the name of democracy, human rights, and similar pretexts. Therefore, socialist initiatives today have a chance only if they are internationalist. If it were possible to create a bloc of states with a socialist project, then the chances would be realistic. For peripheral countries, there is actually no other perspective. And this is also the perspective for the oppressed and exploited masses worldwide. In fact, it is the perspective for humanity as a whole.”

Močnik's analysis underscores the necessity of internationalism for the Left, not just in Macedonia but globally. For small or peripheral countries like Macedonia, the prospects for socialism—and by extension, meaningful progressive change—lie in the creation of international alliances and a shared vision that transcends the limitations of the existing international order. This path is arduous, but it may be the only viable way forward for those committed to systemic transformation and global justice.

Endnotes

“Lenka” is the title of a poignant poem by Kosta Racin, one of Macedonia's most renowned communist poets and partisans. In this work, Lenka symbolizes the tragic victim of social exploitation, embodying the struggles and injustices faced by the oppressed underclass. The poem's evocative imagery and profound social critique have made it an enduring symbol of leftist ideals and resistance against inequality. For those interested, the original Macedonian version, alongside its English translation, can be accessed here: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/yugoslavia/racin/lenka.htm>.

REFERENCES

1. Apasiev D. Za novata populistička Levica. 30 December [Internet]. 2019 [cited 1 December 2024]. Available from: <https://levica.mk/pres-centar/svecheni-obrakana/za-novata-populistichka-levica/>.
2. Auerbach KR, Kartner J. How Do Political Parties Capture New Democracies? Hungary and North Macedonia in Comparison. *East European Politics and Society*. 2023;37(2):538-562. [Crossref] [Google Scholar]
3. Balunović F. *The Revival of the Left in the Balkans: Counter-Hegemonic Activism and Ideas that Fueled It*. Routledge: NY and London. 2025. [Crossref] [Google Scholar]

4. Bieber F. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020. [Google Scholar]
5. Bosilkov I. The state for which people? The (not so) left populism of the Macedonian far-left party Levica. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*. 2021;8(1):40-55. [Google Scholar]
6. Buden B. *Transition to Nowhere*. [Internet]. Archive Books. 2020 [cited 15 November 2024]. Available from: https://monoskop.org/images/9/97/Buden_Boris_Transition_to_Nowhere_Art_in_History_After_1989_2020.pdf.
7. Chandler D. *Empire in Denial The Politics of State-Building*. London: Pluto Press. 2006. [Google Scholar]
8. Cvetičanin P, Bliznakovski J, Krstić N. Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. 2023;24(1):41-62. [Crossref] [Google Scholar]
9. Fouskas V, Gökyay B. *The Disintegration of Euro-Atlanticism and New Authoritarianism Global Power-Shift*. Cham: Springer Nature. 2019. [Crossref] [Google Scholar]
10. Fukuyama F. *The End of History and the Last Man*. NY: Free Press. 1992. [Google Scholar]
11. Gjorgjioska MA. *North Macedonia Political Briefing: Analysis of the Party Programs in Macedonia's 2024 Parliamentary Elections*. China-Cee Institute Weekly Briefing. [Internet].2024 [cited 9 December 2024];72(1). Available from: https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024p04_North-Macedonia.pdf. [Google Scholar]
12. Horvat S, Štikl I. *Welcome to the Desert of post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia*. London and NY: Verso. 2015. [Google Scholar]
13. Lapavistas C. *The Left Case Against the EU*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2019. [Google Scholar]
14. Levica, *Izborna programa 2024* [Internet]. [cited 9 December 2024]. Available from: <https://levica.mk/izborna-programa-2024-cela/>.
15. March L. *Contemporary Far Left Parties in Europe. From Marxism to the Mainstream?*. [Internet]. FES: International Policy Analysis. 2008 [cited 20 November 2024]. Available from: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/05818.pdf>.
16. Močnik R. *Borba za socijalizam i opstanak čovečanstva*. *Novosti*. [Internet].2022 [cited 1 November 2024];19.01. Available from: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/tema-ideja-komunizma-borba-za-socijalizam-i-opstanak-covecanstva>. [Google Scholar]
17. Pavlovic S. *West is best: How 'stabilitocracy' undermines democracy building in the Balkans*. *LSE Blog*. [Internet].2017. Available from: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilitocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans/>. [Google Scholar]
18. Pugh M. *Corporate Peace*. In: Debiel T, Held T, Schneckener U, editor(s). *Peacebuilding in Crisis. Rethinking Paradigms and Practices of Transnational Cooperation*. London: Routledge. 2016. [Google Scholar]
19. RFE. *Trebaće još 100 godina da vidimo ko je bio u pravu*. YouTube [Internet]. 2018 [cited 25.11.2024]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_c7G82vFrQ.
20. Stojanov T. *Deca na tranzicijata*. *Potrta Faktor*. [Internet].2015 [cited 1 December 2024];13.10. Available from: <https://faktor.mk/detsa-na-tranzitsijata>. [Google Scholar]
21. Vankovska B. *Društveni ugovor u kontekstu međunarodne izgradnje države na Balkanu: slučaj Makedonije*. *Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta u Zagrebu*. 2022;72(4):1015-1036. [Google Scholar]
22. Vankovska B. *Memory in the Halls of Power: The 1903 Ilinden Uprising and Macedonian State-Building*. *Central European and Balkan Studies*. 2024;vol. XXXIII:355-372. [Crossref] [Google Scholar]
23. Vankovska B. *The Chimera of Colorful Revolution in Macedonia: Collective Action in the European Periphery*. *Balkanologie*. [Internet].2020 [cited 10 November 2024];15(2):1-23. Available from: <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/2583>. [Crossref] [Google Scholar]
24. Veljanov Z. *Much Ado about Nothing? Party positioning in North Macedonia and what to expect from the 2024 elections*. *BiEPAG Blog* [Internet]. 2024 [cited 18 December 2024]. Available from: <https://www.biepag.eu/blog/much-ado-about-nothing-party-positioning-in-north-macedonia-and-what-to-expect-from-the-2024-elections>.

Левица У Македонији - препреке и могућности за препород

Сажетак:

Овај чланак се фокусира на недовољно истражено питање левичарске политике у Македонији, т.ј. део региона који се често занемарује у ширим академским дискусијама о политичкој трансформацији у бившој Југославији. Текст се бави кључним изазовима са којима се левица суочава у постсоцијалистичкој ери, укључујући идеолошку фрагментацију, неолибералну економску политику коју намеће Запад и пораст етнонационалистичких елемената у македонском политичком пејзажу од 2001 година наовамо. Ови фактори су значајно ослабили утицај левичарске идеологије у земљи обележеној етничким поделама и у великој мери под утицајем Запада. У чланку се тврди да такозване македонске левичарске партије, углавном остаци бившег режима, све више усвајају неолибералну политику, дистанцирајући се од традиционалних социјалистичких вредности и нагризајући своју везу са радничком класом. Успон Левице, политичке партије рођене из друштвених покрета одоздо, нуди потенцијални пут за ревитализацију демократског учешћа и политичке трансформације у земљи. Централни фокус чланка је одрживост истинске левичарске идеологије и политике у оквиру ограничења оријентације Македоније на НАТО и ЕУ. У чланку се закључује да ће будући успех Левице зависити од њене способности да уравнотежи питања националног идентитета са ширим друштвеним и економским циљевима и ефикасно изазове укорењени политички естаблишмент.

Кључне речи: Политичка транзиција; политичко учешће; левичарска идеологија; Македонија; Левица