

POLITICAL PARTIES – AN INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM FOR AGGREGATING AND ARTICULATING THE INTERESTS OF CITIZENS IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Political parties, from their establishment to the present day, represent an inexhaustible source for analysis, especially of social relations within society. Their place and role in overall social processes are determined by contemporary developments, shaping them in accordance with the latest needs and challenges. They continue to maintain a monopoly in the sphere of political mobilization of citizens, with the aim of aggregating and articulating their interests. The changes within them relate to the ways, forms, and mechanisms of mobilization, aggregation, and articulation of citizens' beliefs, attitudes, and actions. The theoretical framework for defining political parties encompasses the phenomena of political ideology, political orientation, political participation, and identification. The profile of political parties in Macedonia is of particular interest to sociological and political science. In academia, opinions are divided as to which period is most appropriate to be defined as the end of the transition from the previous totalitarian system to the present democratic one. Previous analyses of political parties in the country lead to the conclusion that, during this period, they have developed certain specific features, while at the same time sharing characteristics similar or identical to established parties in Europe and beyond. If generalized, the specificities of Macedonian political parties are correlated with the specificities of Macedonian society. A scientific challenge is to determine the relationship between political parties and society, whether they merely represent an indicator of social processes or simultaneously act as their catalyst.

Keywords: *society, political parties, organization, mobilization, ethnicization*

Introduction

Politics, understood as a rationalized and conscious form of human activity, within the framework of contemporary representative democracies inevitably positions political parties as central actors in political dynamics. Their historical emergence and institutional consolidation represent the result of complex interactions among political, social, and cultural processes unfolding within the context of continuous societal transformation. The foundations upon which party organization is articulated are diverse and depend on the structural characteristics of the parties themselves, their models of functioning, as well as the strategic goals they pursue. Within the liberal-democratic order, the freedom of association for the purpose of achieving legitimate political interests constitutes a fundamental normative principle, embedded in the corpus of fundamental human rights and freedoms. In this regard, not only is membership in political parties voluntary, but intra-party activity also implies pluralism of opinions and freedom of expression, thereby creating conditions for the formation of legitimate political expectations. Hence, political parties may be conceptualized as institutionalized channels through which the selection, aggregation, and articulation of citizens' interests are carried out (Trajkovski, 2019).

The ideological differentiation of political parties conditions the prioritization of specific value systems that shape their identity matrix. In this sense, the party system functions as a dynamic space for balancing various interests, influences, and strategies aimed at achieving collective goals. The values incorporated into the internal structure of political parties, when they participate in government, are transformed into public policies of broader social significance. The historical evolution of human beings from social creatures into political subjects – citizens – reflects the transformation of their awareness of their own role within society. In this process, the social dimension is manifested through association around common goals, while the political dimension is realized through concrete action directed toward their achievement. Organizational models, principles of functioning, and mechanisms for defining goals constitute a complex system, the formation of which is profoundly conditioned by broader social and historical processes (Schnapper, 2022).

The central research question of this study concerns political parties in North Macedonia as mechanisms for the aggregation and articulation of citizens' interests, with particular emphasis on the influence of ideology and ethnic representativeness. This question is addressed through a broad theoretical framework that explains political activism and its constituent dimensions, including political affiliation, representation, and representativeness. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the study proceeds to examine the specific characteristics of the Macedonian party system. These include the legal framework governing its establishment, its practical institutional development through the formation of political parties from the introduction of political pluralism to the present day, and, finally, the distinctive role of ethnic representativeness. The identification of these defining characteristics

demonstrates that the Macedonian party system has evolved into a distinctive political phenomenon, reflecting the tension between the normative institutional framework and the realities of political practice.

Since the moment of independence, the Republic of North Macedonia has been constituted as a civic and multiethnic society, aspiring to develop a functional model of multiethnic pluralism within the framework of a liberal-democratic system. Nevertheless, empirical reality indicates that, despite such declarative commitments, the ethnic principle remains dominant in the process of party organization and mobilization. Furthermore, some political entities operate within a limited territorial scope, which further complicates their representativeness. The ideological consistency of political parties is often problematic, particularly when analyzing the dissonance between their programmatic commitments and the practical policies implemented while exercising power. At the same time, an intensified interaction and mutual penetration between political parties and the civil sector is evident, which in certain cases results in the disruption of institutional balance. The increasing influence of political parties over institutions, especially when it exceeds their legitimate role, may lead to their functional erosion. Under such conditions, further reinforced by nationalist rhetoric, preconditions are created for the weakening of social cohesion and the reduction of systemic effectiveness. In this context, the principal hypothesis of the study is that the ideological orientation of political parties is strongly influenced by their ethnic representativeness.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Political affiliation

The term “affiliation” in academic discourse is most commonly interpreted through two related, yet analytically distinct meanings. On the one hand, it is associated with the empathic dimension, that is, the individual’s ability to develop an emotional connection and identification with a particular social group or collective entity. On the other hand, affiliation is understood as a process of self-categorization through which the individual self-identifies as a member of a specific group. In both cases, these are complex socio-psychological processes in which the individual and collective aspects of identity are intertwined. In this sense, political affiliation represents a reflection of shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences within the sphere of politics. It implies a degree of alignment between individual perceptions and collective positions articulated through political parties.

Analytically, political affiliation may be examined through several key dimensions: consistency, predictability, and distinctiveness. Consistency refers to the degree of stability and continuity in political attitudes, ideological orientations, and patterns of political action. It is manifested as an integration of the party’s personnel composition and its programmatic component, which together form its identity. Although these elements are influenced by social changes and are in a constant

process of adaptation, their relative stability indicates continuity in the value orientation of political actors (Kolakovski, 1964).

The second dimension, predictability, refers to the possibility of anticipating the behavior of political actors in specific situations. It has an important mobilizing function, as it creates a sense of security and trust among citizens, which is a prerequisite for their active political participation. At the same time, predictability contributes to the stability of the political system by establishing consistent patterns of action. However, in contemporary conditions, this dimension is subject to increased criticism, particularly in the context of discrepancies between pre-election promises and post-election policies (Cerutti, 2006).

The third dimension, distinctiveness, refers to the ability of political actors to maintain a clearly differentiated identity in relation to other actors on the political stage. It implies a specific combination of personnel, programmatic, and ideological characteristics that define the authenticity of a party. In conditions of intense political competition, distinctiveness represents an essential prerequisite for survival and relevance. The disruption of this dimension may lead to identity erosion and a gradual loss of political position.

Contemporary communication and informational transformations, together with the increasing diversification of individual interests, contribute to the emergence of so-called multiple political affiliations. This phenomenon implies the simultaneous identification with different political options or groups, representing a departure from traditional models of stable party loyalty (Tajfel, 1981). In this context, the neoliberal understanding of individual freedom further relativizes the classical norms of political affiliation, while the emergence of ad hoc political actors and populist movements contributes to its structural redefinition.

1.2 Political representation

Political representation is one of the central categories in the analysis of contemporary democratic systems, particularly in the context of the mobilization of party membership and support bases, as well as in processes of public positioning and symbolic shaping of political parties. This phenomenon has a pronounced sociological dimension, as in its essence it is grounded in specific forms of social action, both within party structures and in the broader social sphere. One of the theoretical foundations of the concept of political representation can be found in *Leviathan* (1651) by Thomas Hobbes, where an analogy is established between religious forms of representation and political mechanisms of authorization. In this perspective, representation is not reduced solely to formal representation, but implies an active form of acting “on behalf of” others, that is, the delegation of political authority. Such an approach emphasizes the transformation of individual will into collective political action.

Within sociological theory, a significant contribution is provided by Talcott Parsons, who conceptualizes politics as a form of “generalized leadership” within the social system, aimed at achieving collective goals. According to this perspective,

political representation takes place through the interaction between social groups that articulate specific interests and institutional actors who implement those interests through public policies. Political power, within this framework, is understood as the result of the support that elites receive under conditions of competitive political struggle (Parsons, ed. Burdick and Brodbeck, 1959).

In contemporary political thought, an important place is occupied by the analysis of Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, who focuses on the procedures and rules through which representatives act on behalf of those they represent. Her approach emphasizes the correlation between the socio-demographic characteristics of voters and elected representatives, highlighting that sharing similar experiences and social positions increases the likelihood of more effective understanding and articulation of interests. In this sense, political representation is not only an institutional mechanism, but also a social process grounded in perceptions, trust, and identification (Pitkin, 1967).

1.3 Political participation

The definition of the concept of political participation in academic literature faces certain conceptual challenges, particularly due to the existence of related terms such as political involvement and political action. Although these concepts are close in meaning, they are not entirely identical, which creates the need for a clear analytical distinction between them. In this regard, Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) distinguish between political interest and concrete action, emphasizing that talking about politics or following political events does not constitute participation in the strict sense of the term. Political participation, according to them, implies active forms of engagement through which citizens directly influence political processes, while political involvement refers to a broader spectrum of interest and engagement without necessarily involving action. In this context, political participation should be understood as a structured and goal-oriented process rather than a set of spontaneous or unsystematic activities. It implies planned and rationally designed steps aimed at achieving specific political objectives. As such, participation has an evolutionary character, as it develops on the basis of accumulated experience and empirical knowledge. Contemporary political organizations, especially those with a higher level of institutionalization, rely on strategic planning, which includes the definition of goals, identification of resources, and assessment of potential risks and benefits.

The influence on political participation is multifaceted and largely determined by the cultural values and socio-economic conditions within society. As a social phenomenon, it has the potential either to reduce or deepen existing inequalities, depending on the degree of inclusiveness and accessibility. At the same time, participation affects the formation of citizens' political preferences, as well as the functioning of political organizations themselves, particularly in terms of their internal democracy and responsiveness. Contemporary communication technologies and new forms of interaction contribute to the transformation of models of political action, enabling greater immediacy and intensity in communication between

members and leadership. On the one hand, this increases the efficiency and mobilizing capacity of organizations, but on the other hand, it may generate internal tensions and conflicts, especially in conditions of insufficiently clearly defined decision-making procedures. In this context, the mode of governance-whether based on the principle of majority legitimacy or hierarchical control-represents a key factor for understanding the dynamics of political participation (Barnes, Kaase, 1979).

2. Methodology and Research Limitations

This study is based on a mixed-methods research design that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches. The objective of this methodological framework is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of political parties as institutional mechanisms for the aggregation and articulation of citizens' interests in the Republic of North Macedonia. The first component of the research focuses on the legal dimensions of the establishment, operation, and functioning of political parties. To this end, the study employs the classical doctrinal (dogmatic-normative) legal method, which enables a systematic interpretation of legal norms and an assessment of their internal coherence. The analysis encompasses:

- constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of association and political pluralism;
- the legal framework governing the establishment and registration of political parties;
- regulations concerning party financing, transparency, and accountability; and
- electoral legislation as the institutional mechanism through which party competition is organized and regulated.

The second component of the methodology examines the establishment and development of the multiparty system in North Macedonia through an analysis of data on the registration of political parties, their principal political orientations, and their political activities. The third and fourth components focus on the contemporary profile of parliamentary political parties. Through a qualitative content analysis of party manifestos prepared for the 2024 parliamentary elections, this study examines the principal programmatic characteristics of the parliamentary parties. The findings are subsequently subjected to an additional verification using electoral results. This verification does not constitute a separate analytical procedure but serves as a validation of the principal findings derived from the content analysis. The analysis is structured around the following analytical categories:

- Ideological positioning, value orientation, and socio-economic orientation.
- Identity orientation and the articulation of citizens' interests.

These analytical categories are examined through a deductive coding matrix constructed on the basis of the theoretical literature on political parties and the central

research question. The categories are operationalized through the following indicators:

- Definition of core ideological principles (positioning along the left - right ideological spectrum and references to social democratic, conservative, liberal, or nationalist values);
- Socio-economic orientation (the role of the state in the economy, taxation policy, and the welfare state);
- Value orientation (positions on religion, gender equality, human rights, and multiculturalism);
- National identity orientation (national identity, language, culture, and patriotism); and
- Approach to social groups (identification of target groups and the representation of their interests).

2.1 Research Limitations

Although the mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive analytical framework, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, normative legal analysis does not necessarily reflect the practical implementation of legal provisions, while the analysis of party manifestos is inherently constrained by their declarative nature. Furthermore, no official data are available on the membership structure of political parties. Consequently, patterns of political mobilization are assessed indirectly through electoral outcomes rather than organizational members. An additional limitation concerns the availability of party manifestos. Some of the smaller political parties do not maintain sufficiently developed official websites or other accessible sources containing comprehensive programmatic documents. In many cases, these parties participate within broader electoral coalitions and therefore rely on joint coalition programs rather than independent manifestos. For such parties, the analysis draws upon alternative sources, including official social media content and media reports covering their political activities. Despite these limitations, the proposed methodological design provides an integrated analytical framework for examining the legal, programmatic, and societal dimensions of political parties. It thereby enables a well-founded assessment of their actual role in the aggregation and articulation of citizens' interests and, within this broader context, the relationship between ideology and ethnic representativeness.

2. The social role of political parties in North Macedonia

3.1 Legal - normative framework for the establishment and functioning of political parties

The legal aspects of the formation, functioning, and activities of political parties in the Republic of North Macedonia represent a complex normative system in

which constitutional principles, legal rules, and electoral legislation create an institutional framework for political pluralism. The analysis of these aspects requires a systematic interpretation of legal norms, their hierarchy, and their interrelation. In this context, the following were analyzed:

- the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia;
- the Law on political parties;
- the Law on financing of political parties;
- the Electoral code.

From a constitutional and legal perspective, political parties are based on the principle of free political association as an essential element of the democratic order. The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia establishes political pluralism as a fundamental value, alongside the rule of law, the separation of powers, and democratic elections. Political pluralism is not treated solely as a political principle, but also as a constitutionally guaranteed mechanism through which citizens articulate their political will. Article 8 of the Constitution defines political pluralism and free democratic elections as fundamental values of the state system, while Article 20 guarantees freedom of association, including the right to establish political parties. The constitutional framework establishes a dual balance: on the one hand, it guarantees freedom of political association, and on the other, it sets limitations regarding the objectives and activities of political parties. The Constitution prohibits programs and activities aimed at the violent overthrow of the constitutional order, the incitement of ethnic, racial, or religious intolerance, as well as the formation of paramilitary structures. This indicates that freedom of association is not absolute, but is conditioned by the protection of the democratic and constitutional order.

The legal framework for the establishment and registration of political parties is regulated by the Law on Political Parties, which concretizes constitutional guarantees. The legal nature of a political party is defined as a voluntary organization of citizens founded for the purpose of achieving political goals and participating in the exercise of power. The establishment of a political party requires the fulfillment of formal conditions, including the adoption of a statute and a program, the definition of governing bodies, and the securing of a minimum number of founders. Registration is carried out before a competent court, which emphasizes the role of the judiciary in verifying the legality of political organization. Judicial registration has a constitutive character, since a political party acquires legal personality upon entry into the official register. This model represents a mechanism of preventive legal control through which the compliance of the party's program and statute with the Constitution and laws is assessed. From the perspective of systematic interpretation, the legal framework functions to prevent arbitrariness in party formation, while at the same time it must not create excessive administrative barriers that would restrict political pluralism. Therefore, legal regulation must ensure a balance between institutional stability and the right to political competition.

Financing of political parties represents a particularly important area, as it directly affects equality in political competition. Macedonian regulations provide for a mixed financing model, which includes public funds, membership fees, donations, and other permitted sources. The law establishes restrictions on funding sources in order to prevent unlawful influence on the political process. A key element is the principle of transparency. Political parties are obliged to keep financial records, submit reports, and publish them publicly. The supervisory function is carried out by institutions such as the State Audit Office and other competent bodies, which enables institutional control over the legality of financial operations.

Electoral legislation represents an institutional phase through which political parties realize their activities. The Electoral Code regulates the candidate nomination process, electoral districts, electoral administration, campaigns, and the distribution of mandates. In this way, the electoral system becomes a legal mechanism for transforming political support into institutional representation. In the Macedonian electoral model, the proportional electoral system enables a higher degree of political representation and creates conditions for a multi-party system. The system of closed lists stimulates and maintains the power and influence of party leaderships in shaping the personnel structure of parliamentary groups, and through them, political parties in general.

A systematic analysis shows that the legal framework for political parties in North Macedonia represents a normatively interconnected system in which constitutional guarantees, statutory rules, and electoral law function as interdependent elements. The Constitution establishes the foundation of political pluralism, laws operationalize the organization and functioning of parties, while electoral legislation institutionalizes their political role. The legal framework has a dual function: to enable free political organization and at the same time to ensure the stability, transparency, and legitimacy of the democratic process.

3.2 Establishment of the multi-party system in Macedonia

The starting point of pluralization in North Macedonia is associated with the end of the one-party socialist system, in which the political monopoly of the League of Communists limited institutional competition and autonomous political articulation. In such a context, political mobilization was mediated through centralized ideological and organizational mechanisms, resulting in a relatively low level of political pluralism. A key normative-institutional moment is represented by the adoption of the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Social Organizations and Associations of Citizens, as well as the constitutional amendments of 20 September 1990. Through these interventions, the legal preconditions for the formation of political parties were established and the multi-party system was institutionalized. Of particular importance is the constitutional provision according to which citizens are defined as holders of sovereignty, which they exercise through representative institutions and forms of direct democracy. This represents a

fundamental transformation from a centralized to a pluralistic conception of political legitimacy.

The number and structure of political parties in North Macedonia, from the beginning of the political transition in 1990 to the present day, are characterized by continuous fluctuation. These transformations do not represent merely an empirical phenomenon of party proliferation, but also an indicator of the broader process of institutionalization of political pluralism as a fundamental feature of the post-socialist political order. The aim of this analysis is not a descriptive inventory of political actors, but a sociological reconstruction of the process through which the pluralist system is constituted as a structural foundation of the contemporary political system.

In the early phase of the transition, political parties in North Macedonia were not structured according to consolidated ideological axes in the classical sense (left–right). Instead, their primary differentiation was based on their positions regarding the state status of the Republic, namely the dilemma between remaining within a federation and achieving state independence. During this period, ideological declarations mostly had a programmatic and normative character, without fully developed institutional and doctrinal coherence. Hence, political parties in the initial phase can be understood as organizational formations in the process of ideological crystallization. Professor Mojanoski describes this transitional phase as a condition of political restraint and institutional conservatism, referring to Macedonia as a “frightened republic,” that is, a society showing limited openness toward radical political innovations (Mojanoski, 2000). This points to a specific form of gradual democratization in which institutional changes occur without abrupt discontinuities.

Over the following decades, the Macedonian party system gradually transitions from a phase of declarative pluralism to a phase of institutionalized political competition. Parties evolve from initial political initiatives into stable organizational structures with relatively consolidated electoral bases. However, this process does not lead to full ideological stabilization in line with Western European models; instead, in certain periods and cases it results in a hybrid system in which ideological, ethnic, leadership, and pragmatic factors are intertwined. Nevertheless, Macedonian pluralism, similarly to the European one, has gradually been building its authenticity over the past thirty-six years, striving to compensate for the lost time under one-party rule and to align itself with contemporary trends in pluralism. Illustratively, the extent of the development of party choice and structure, compared from its beginnings to the present day, is shown in the two tables below. The nearly threefold increase in the number of political parties signifies a significant change in the aggregation and articulation of citizens’ interests.

Table 1.

Overview of the first political parties formed in Macedonia in 1990, by date of establishment.

No.	Political party	Date of establishment
1	Movement for All-Macedonian Action MAAK	04.02.1990
2	League for Democracy	11.02.1990
3	Party for Macedonian Workers' Unification	04.03.1990
4	Social Democratic Party of Macedonia	18.03.1990
5	People's Party of Macedonia	12.04.1990
6	Democratic Union – Party of Farmers	16.04.1990
7	Party for Democratic Prosperity of Macedonia	15.04.1990
8	People's Democratic Party	23.04.1990
9	Party of the Yugoslavs	26.05.1990
10	Christian Democratic Party of Macedonia	09.06.1990
11	VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	17.06.1990
12	Workers' Party	26.06.1990
13	SKM – Party for Democratic Transformation	03.07.1990
14	Young Democratic-Progressive Party of Macedonia	12.07.1990
15	Socialist Party of Macedonia	13.07.1990
16	Party for Human Rights	20.07.1990
17	Party for Full Emancipation of the Roma	12.08.1990
18	Union of Reform Forces of Macedonia	05.09.1990
19	Political Party of the Unemployed	12.09.1990
20	Workers–Farmers Party	15.09.1990
21	Democratic Union of Turks	22.09.1990
22	Democratic Union of Educators	15.11.1990
23	Balkan Federation – Balkans without Borders	15.12.1990

Source: Basic Civil Court - Skopje

Table 2
Political Parties in Macedonia as of 01 March 2026

No.	Political Party	No.	Political Party
1	New Alternative	34	Macedonian Alliance
2	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	35	Union of Roma in Macedonia
3	Democratic Party of Turks of Macedonia	36	Workers–Agrarian Party of the Republic of Macedonia
4	VMRO – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	37	Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia
5	Socialist Party of Macedonia	38	Democratic Union
6	Party of Democratic Action of Macedonia	39	Party for Movement of Turks in Macedonia
7	Liberal Democratic Party	40	Party of the Vlachs of Macedonia
8	Serbian Progressive Party in Macedonia	41	United Macedonia
9	Democratic Union of Vlachs of Macedonia	42	Party of United Democrats of Macedonia
10	Democratic Union for Integration	43	VMRO–People’s Party
11	Permanent Macedonian Radical Union	44	Party for Full Emancipation of Roma in the Republic of North Macedonia
12	Democratic Forces of the Roma	45	New Social Democratic Party
13	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia	46	Democratic Party of Albanians
14	Social Democratic Union	47	United for Macedonia
15	New Liberal Party	48	Dignity
16	Movement for National Unity of Turks	49	United Party for Equality of Roma
17	Democratic Party of Roma	50	Workers’ Party
18	Pensioners’ Party	51	The Right
19	Civic Option for Macedonia	52	Serbian Party in Macedonia
20	Party for Social and Economic Progress	53	Party for Democratic Prosperity of Roma
21	BESA Movement	54	Alliance of Albanians
22	Left (Levica)	55	Macedonian Action MAAK
23	VOX for Macedonia	56	Bosnian Democratic Union
24	Democrats	57	Central Democratic Union
25	Roma United for Macedonia	58	Your Party

26	INTEGRA – Macedonian Conservative Party	59	Macedonian Era Third / Independent Sovereign Lists
27	Party for Full Emancipation of Roma in Macedonia	60	Movement for Democracy, Rights and Freedom
28	Rodina Macedonia	61	European Civic Movement
29	Political Party DESNA	62	European Democratic Party
30	Democratic Movement	63	Movement POPULI
31	Union of Roma	64	Movement ZNAM
32	Bosnian People’s Party	65	Alternative
33	Political Party Macedonian Concept	66	OPRE – ROMA

Source: Basic Civil Court - Skopje

The development of the pluralist party system cannot be interpreted solely as a quantitative increase in the number of political parties, but rather as a qualitative change in the nature of political representation. The contemporary party system is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation of ideological profiles and a strong influence of ethnic and contextual factors. Therefore, pluralism in North Macedonia should be understood as a dynamic and evolutionary process rather than a static institutional condition, whereby political parties remain key actors in mediating between citizens and the state in conditions of continuous social transformation.

3.3 Ideological positioning, value orientation, and socio - economic orientation

In contemporary pluralist systems, political parties are not merely electoral organizations, but also carriers of value-based and ideological concepts that shape political culture, institutional dynamics, and public discourse. In the context of North Macedonia, political pluralism has developed under conditions of post-socialist transition, ethnic segmentation, unstable institutional consolidation, and strong influence from external political processes. These factors contribute to a party system that is not fully structured along classical ideological lines, but rather around a combination of historical, national, ethnic, leadership-based, and pragmatic elements. Therefore, the ideological and value orientation development of political parties in Macedonia cannot be analyzed exclusively through the traditional left–right divide, but requires a broader examination of programmatic orientations, public communication, and value consistency.

The aim of this analysis is to determine the degree of ideological coherence which includes the value and socio-economic components among fifteen relevant political parties, as well as to identify whether their programs represent consistent ideological systems or contain a mixture of different concepts and political

orientations. Ideological consistency represents the degree to which a party's programmatic goals, political positions, and public rhetoric are aligned with a particular political ideology. In classical political theory, ideology implies a relatively stable set of values, assumptions, and normative positions that provide a framework for political action. In the Macedonian political context, ideological coherence and consistency are conditioned by:

- the legacy of transition;
- the dominance of leader-centered parties;
- ethnic mobilization;
- electoral pragmatism;
- the need for coalition compromises.

Table 4

Synthesis of the ideological, value, and socio - economic orientations of political parties

Political party	Definition of core ideological principles	Value orientation	Socio - economic orientation
VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	Popular - conservative orientation, Centre - right positioning, national identity, patriotism	Traditional family values, national and Christian values, rule of law, respect for human rights	Market economy with a developmental role of the state, support for entrepreneurship, reduction of the tax burden, capital investments
Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	Social democratic orientation, Centre - left positioning, social justice, equality, European values	Gender equality, human rights, multiculturalism, inclusiveness, civil society	Welfare state, public investment, social protection, regulated market economy
Democratic Union for Integration	Centrist orientation, European integration, multiethnic character, implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement	Equal representation, binationality, human rights, integration processes	Mixed economic model, public investment, regional development, employment generation

Levica	Democratic left orientation, anti - liberal stance, economic sovereignty, anti - oligarchic approach	Social equality, sovereignty, traditional positions on certain social issues	Strong state intervention, nationalization of strategic resources, expansion of the welfare state
Movement for our Macedonia	Centrist and pragmatic orientation, institutional reforms, anti - corruption agenda	Moderate conservatism, rule of law, civic equality	Mixed economy, support for business development and investment, efficient public administration
Alternative	Conservative Albanian party, Centre-right orientation, traditional and European values	Traditional family values, religious freedom, multiculturalism	Market economy, private investment, support for small and medium - sized enterprises
Movement BESA	Conservative-centrist orientation, European orientation	Traditional family values, human rights, equality	Liberal economy, entrepreneurship, local economic development
Alliance for Albanians	Conservative, Centre-right orientation, European integration, civic and ethnic pluralism	Equal representation, binationality, protection of collective rights	Market economy, regional development, investment promotion, tax incentives
Liberal Democratic Party	Liberal, pro - European orientation, civic state model	Gender equality, human rights, LGBT rights, multiculturalism	Free-market economy with social corrective mechanisms, digital economy
Democratic Party of Albanians	Conservative, national orientation	Traditional values, family, protection of ethnic rights	Market economy, private sector development, foreign investment
Socialist Party of Macedonia	Socialist orientation, left -wing positioning, social	Social solidarity, equality, traditional values	Expansion of the welfare state, state control over strategic sectors

	justice, state interventionism		
New Social Democratic Party	Social democratic orientation, Centre - left positioning, European left orientation	Gender equality, human rights, multiculturalism	Welfare state, public services, progressive social policies
Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia	Centrist positioning, protection of the Serbian community, European orientation	Protection of cultural identity, minority rights, multiculturalism	Local and regional development, support for entrepreneurship
Movement Populi	Populist and pragmatic orientation, anti-corruption rhetoric	Social cohesion, traditional values	Support for the domestic economy, social measures, development of local self - government
Movement of Turks in Macedonia	Centrist positioning, protection of the Turkish community, European orientation	Multiculturalism, cultural autonomy, minority rights	Local economic development, support for education and small businesses

3.4 Political mobilization, ethnic representation, and the articulation of citizens' interests

Political parties represent intermediary mechanisms between citizens and the institutional order through which social interests are articulated, political competition is organized, and collective identities are constructed. In contemporary democracies, parties do not function solely as electoral organizations, but also as structures that mobilize different categories of the population on the basis of values, interests, ideologies, ethnic affiliations, and social positions. In North Macedonia, the process of political mobilization is further complicated by the multiethnic structure of society. The party system has developed in the context of historical transitional processes, ethnic segmentation, institutional pluralism, and a specific model of consensual democracy. In such an environment, parties do not mobilize exclusively on ideological grounds, but often through ethnic representation, cultural identification, social status, and civic values. Ethnic support for political parties, in addition to being examined through their programmatic communication with the electorate, which constitutes the subject of analysis in this paper, is further assessed through a straightforward examination of electoral results in electoral units with different ethnic compositions. In this regard, the spatial distribution of votes serves as an empirical indicator of the degree of parties' ethnic embeddedness. Even a cursory examination

of electoral support clearly reveals the ethnic and territorial differentiation of the influence of political parties. Macedonian parties predominate in predominantly Macedonian ethnic areas, Albanian parties in predominantly Albanian ethnic areas, and the same pattern is evident in the case of Turkish and Serbian parties.¹

Table 5

Synthesis of political mobilization, ethnic representation, and the articulation of citizens' interests by political parties

Political party	Political mobilization	Ethnic representation	Articulation of citizens' interests
VMRO - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	Mobilization through issues related to economic development, the fight against corruption, national identity, and institutional reforms.	Formally a civic party, but predominantly mobilizes voters from the Macedonian ethnic constituency. It also addresses all citizens.	General public policies (economy, healthcare, education, infrastructure), with an emphasis on national interests.
Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	Mobilization through European integration, social justice, democratic values, and economic policies.	Civic and multiethnic orientation, with a predominance of the Macedonian ethnic constituency.	Inclusive policies aimed at all citizens, with an emphasis on social equality and human rights.
Democratic Union for Integration	Mobilization through the protection of the collective rights of Albanians, European integration, and equal representation.	Predominantly an ethnic party representing the Albanian community. It also addresses other ethnic communities.	Combines ethnic demands with development-oriented and European policies.
Levica	Mobilization through anti-corruption, anti -	Civic party addressing all ethnic	Universal social policies, with an emphasis on

¹ See: State Election Commission of the Republic of North Macedonia, <https://www.sec.mk/>

	elitist, and socio-economic issues, as well as sovereigntist discourse.	communities, with a particular appeal to the younger population.	economic equality, workers' rights, and state sovereignty.
Movement for our Macedonia	Mobilization through pragmatic solutions, the fight against corruption, and institutional efficiency.	Civic orientation, addressing all ethnic communities, although Macedonians predominate among its supporters.	General development policies aimed at improving public services and promoting economic development.
Alternative	Mobilization of the Albanian electorate through European integration, education, and economic development.	Ethnic party representing the Albanian community, with multiethnic rhetoric.	Representation of the interests of the Albanian community within broader reform-oriented policies.
Movement BESA	Mobilization through political change, the fight against corruption, and local development.	Ethnic party representing the Albanian community.	Development oriented policies combined with the protection of the collective rights of Albanians.
Alliance for Albanians	Mobilization through the rule of law, European integration, and political equality.	Ethnic party representing the Albanian community.	Balances ethnic representation with broader civic and economic policies.
Liberal Democratic Party	Mobilization through liberal values, individual freedoms, and European integration.	Declaratively a civic party, addressing all ethnic communities, although Macedonians nevertheless predominate among its supporters.	Universal policies concerning human rights, a market economy, and institutional reforms.

Democratic Party of Albanians	Mobilization through the protection of the political rights of Albanians and economic development.	Ethnic party representing the Albanian community.	Articulation of the interests of the Albanian community, with a moderate focus on public policies.
Socialist Party of Macedonia	Mobilization through social justice, workers' rights, and social security, as well as themes associated with the socialist period.	Declaratively a civic party, addressing all ethnic communities, although Macedonians essentially predominate among its supporters.	Universal social policies, with an emphasis on workers, pensioners, and vulnerable groups.
New Social Democratic Party	Universal social policies, with an emphasis on workers, pensioners, and vulnerable groups.	Declaratively a civic party, addressing all ethnic communities, although Macedonians essentially predominate among its supporters.	Social justice, public services, and human rights.
Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia	Mobilization of the Serbian ethnic community	Ethnic party representing the Serbian community.	Protection of the cultural, educational, and political rights of Serbs, combined with local development.
Populi Movement	Mobilization through populist and anti - corruption rhetoric.	Civic orientation, with an overwhelming predominance of Albanians among its supporters.	Social and economic policies aimed at the broader population, without a

			pronounced ethnic agenda.
Movement of Turks in Macedonia	Mobilization of the Turkish ethnic community through issues concerning education, culture, and local development.	Ethnic party representing the Turkish community.	Representation of the interests of the Turkish community, combined with support for multiculturalism and equal representation.

3. Discussion

The research findings indicate that the party system in the Republic of North Macedonia represents a hybrid model of political competition in which ideological profiling is significantly relativized by ethnic mobilization. Although the majority of parliamentary parties declaratively position themselves within the traditional ideological spectrum, their programmatic orientations and mobilization strategies do not always correspond to classical ideological models. On the contrary, the analysis suggests that ideology often functions as a means of political legitimation, while actual political competition is structured around identity-based, ethnic, and institutional lines.

In this respect, the findings only partially confirm Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) thesis that party systems constitute an institutional expression of enduring social cleavages. While the classical model assumes the predominance of class, religious, or urban–rural divisions, the Macedonian case demonstrates that ethnic affiliation represents the most stable and politically relevant basis of party mobilization. Even among parties that declare themselves civic and multiethnic, electoral support remains predominantly concentrated within their respective ethnic constituencies, indicating that the ethnic cleavage supersedes class-based and ideological differentiation.

At the same time, the considerable programmatic flexibility and combination of different ideological elements confirm Kirchheimer's (1966) thesis concerning the transformation of mass ideological parties into catch-all parties. Among the major political parties, there is a tendency toward mitigating ideological differences and adopting pragmatic programmatic solutions aimed at maximizing electoral support. Nevertheless, the Macedonian case demonstrates that this transformation is not universal. Ethnic parties, due to the nature of their political legitimation, remain considerably more confined to their respective ethnic communities, thereby limiting the possibility of fully realizing the catch-all model.

Furthermore, the findings correspond to Katz and Mair's (1995) concept of the cartel party. The reduced degree of ideological differentiation, frequent coalition-building among ideologically diverse parties, and pronounced orientation toward institutional positioning indicate that party competition increasingly revolves around access to state resources and mechanisms of governance, rather than clearly differentiated programmatic alternatives. Under such conditions, ideological consistency has a limited mobilizing function, while institutional capacity and coalition-building potential become key factors of political success.

These tendencies are also consistent with Sartori's (1976) understanding that the essence of a party system derives not from the number of political parties, but from the nature of their interaction and competition. Although the Macedonian party system is formally characterized by a high degree of pluralism, the analysis shows that political polarization is not primarily ideological, but predominantly identity-based and ethno-political. Consequently, political competition is much more frequently structured around issues of national identity, ethnic representation, and the distribution of political power than around classical socio-economic and value-based conflicts.

Perhaps the theoretical approach that comes closest to explaining the Macedonian party system is Lijphart's theory, according to which political stability in deeply divided societies is not secured through classical ideological competition, but through the institutionalized sharing of power among the segments of society. His model of consociational democracy rests on four pillars: grand coalition, proportional representation, segmental autonomy, and minority veto rights over vital interests (Lijphart, 1977). The unique Macedonian model that operated until 2017, whereby governing coalitions were formed according to the “winner-with-winner” principle, provides confirmation of the principles of consociational democracy. This is particularly evident given that the criterion for determining the “winners” is the number of votes obtained by the parties representing the two largest ethnic groups in the country, regardless of their ideological orientation. Furthermore, the influence of the ethnic dimension is reinforced by the veto right, or the so-called Badinter voting mechanism, through which, in essence, ethnic legitimacy is conferred upon legislation in the country.

It can therefore be concluded that the Macedonian party system does not reject classical theories of political parties, but rather modifies them under the influence of a specific post-transition and multiethnic context. Ideology remains a relevant element of party identification, but it does not constitute the dominant mechanism of political mobilization. Instead, political competition is shaped through the interaction of ideological, ethnic, institutional, and pragmatic factors, making the Macedonian party system a distinctive example of the combination of classical models of political representation with contemporary tendencies toward programmatic flexibility and ethnic political mobilization. Nevertheless, such political mobilization is limited to a level of support encompassing approximately 60

percent of the population, as over the past two decades, approximately 40 percent of citizens have consistently identified themselves as undecided.² This level of limited support nevertheless falls within European and global standards and does not constitute a threat to the influence of political parties. The everyday functioning of 66 political parties, with developed organizational structures extending across cities, towns, villages, streets, and households in a small country such as Macedonia, is in itself sufficient evidence of the position and role of political parties in the aggregation and articulation of citizens' interests. The research confirmed its hypothesis that political parties in Macedonia are the principal actors in the aggregation and articulation of citizens' interests, predominantly through ethnic rather than ideological channels.

Conclusion

Political mobilization and the articulation of citizens' interests in North Macedonia take place within a complex and multilayered party system that cannot be explained solely through classical ideological models. The analysis of party programs, public communication, territorial distribution of support, and thematic priorities demonstrates that political parties function as intermediaries between social groups and the institutional order, although their mechanisms of mobilization vary significantly depending on historical context, ethnic structure, and political competition. A considerable number of parties articulate interests through ethnic representation, whereby political legitimacy derives from representing a specific community rather than exclusively from ideological or programmatic orientation. This model is particularly visible among ethnic parties, where political communication is directed toward the protection of collective rights, institutional representation, and symbolic affirmation of group identity. If the analysis had also included extra-parliamentary political parties (which are not the subject of the present analysis), among which small ethnic minority parties predominate, this conclusion would be even further reinforced.

At the same time, Macedonian civic-oriented parties attempt to construct mobilization through economic, institutional, and value-based themes. Their discourse is dominated by issues related to economic development, social justice, anti-corruption, the rule of law, and European integration. Nevertheless, despite their formal orientation toward a civic model, their actual support often remains concentrated within specific ethnic or regional environments, indicating a limited capacity to fully transcend identity-based divisions. The spatial distribution of political support reveals a pronounced regional concentration, which further confirms the structural segmentation of the political system. Support for certain parties follows ethnic, urban-rural, and historical lines, meaning that political mobilization is not

² See: Handbook on 2024 Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of North Macedonia – Second updated edition, October 10, 2024. https://idscs.org.mk/mk/2024/10/10/priracnik-parlamentarni-izbori-2024-dopolneto-izdanie/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

uniformly integrated at the national level. This creates a model in which parties often represent specific segments of the population rather than universal social coalitions.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that parties do not articulate interests solely through classical ideological categories, but also through a combination of pragmatic, symbolic, and emotional narratives. Some parties utilize economic insecurity as a basis for mobilization, others emphasize cultural belonging, while still others position themselves as anti-system actors representing dissatisfaction with political elites. Consequently, political articulation does not represent a simple transmission of interests from citizens to institutions, but rather a process of shaping, selecting, and interpreting those interests.

Overall, it may be concluded that political parties in North Macedonia mobilize and articulate citizens' interests through a hybrid model that combines ethnic representation, ideological orientation, social mobilization, and pragmatic political communication. Rather than clearly differentiated ideological parties, the dominant actors are parties that adapt their messages to specific groups, contexts, and political needs. This makes political mobilization simultaneously inclusive and segmented: inclusive because different interests receive political articulation, yet segmented because these interests often remain organized within ethnic, regional, and identity boundaries.

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