

The voting rights and political culture in North Macedonia and Albania

Muaz Agushi, *Faculty of Islamic Sciences (Skopje, North Macedonia)*

E-mail: muaz_agushi@hotmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9841-9226

Abstract

Political culture is a set of attitudes and practices of people that shape their political behaviour. It includes moral judgments, political myths, beliefs, and ideas about what makes a good society while language of politics is the way of using language and words in the political arena. Words are the "currency" of power in elections.

Voter turnout is an indicator of the level of interest and civic participation in political decision making, competitive party offerings, and civic trust in political actors. Extensive participation, when it comes to a competitive system, significantly increases the responsibility of political actors for civic demands and concerns.

The aim of the article is to analyse the political culture and electoral behaviour in North Macedonia and Albania. The author makes conclusion based on the analysis presented in the article, that the process of applying democracy in these countries would face extraordinary challenges, caused by the lack of democratic traditions, as well as by established values and attitudes unfavorable for the democracy development. Important aspects of the political culture include mutual respect, contra voting, the constant and productive political dialogue, political and parliamentary collaboration, stable institutions instead of strong leaders, high level of participation in elections, and expanding the political decision-making area. All of these aspects are considered to be a fragile occurrence in all countries of Southeastern Europe and especially in Albania and North Macedonia.

Keywords: impact, political culture, electoral behaviour, language, voting rights, North Macedonia, Albania

Prawa wyborcze i kultura polityczna w Macedonii Północnej i Albanii

Streszczenie

Kultura polityczna to zbiór postaw i praktyk kształtujących ludzkie zachowania polityczne. Obejmuje to zasady moralne, mity polityczne, przekonania i pomysły na temat tego, co tworzy dobre społeczeństwo, podczas gdy język polityki jest instrumentem specyficznego używania określonych sformułowań i słów na arenie politycznej. Można powiedzieć, że słowa są walutą władzy w wyborach. Frekwencja wyborcza jest wskaźnikiem poziomu zainteresowania i partycypacji obywatelskiej

w podejmowaniu decyzji politycznych, konkurencyjnych ofert partii oraz obywatelskiego zaufania do aktorów politycznych. Szerokie uczestnictwo w systemie konkurencyjnym znacznie zwiększa odpowiedzialność podmiotów politycznych za żądania i obawy obywatelskie.

Celem artykułu jest analiza kultury politycznej i zachowań wyborczych w Macedonii Północnej i w Albanii. W wyniku przeprowadzonej analizy autor dochodzi do wniosku, że proces demokratyzacji w tych państwach stoi przed niezwykle trudnymi wyzwaniami, związanymi z brakiem dłuższych tradycji demokratycznych oraz z ukształtowanymi postawami niekorzystnymi dla rozwoju demokracji. Ważne aspekty kultury politycznej obejmują wzajemny szacunek, głosowanie, stały dialog polityczny, współpracę polityczną i parlamentarną, stabilne instytucje zamiast silnych liderów, wysoki poziom uczestnictwa w wyborach i partycypację obywatelską w podejmowaniu decyzji politycznych. Wszystkie te aspekty autor uważa za dosyć słabe we wszystkich krajach Europy Południowo-Wschodniej, a zwłaszcza w Albanii i Macedonii Północnej.

Słowa kluczowe: wpływ, kultura polityczna, zachowania wyborcze, język, prawa wyborcze, Macedonia Północna, Albania

Political culture and language are two concepts that relate mainly to political processes but seen as interrelated to the studies and interaction with linguistic, social, cultural, and economic ones. While politics is the external and structural form of creating a state or nation, culture and language are the inner essences that give its spirit and identity. In this line, there are different definitions of the concept of "political culture", but according to G. Almond and S. Verba (1989) political culture can be understood as the set of values, norms, knowledge, attitudes and feelings that determine political behaviour towards the political system. Political culture and language are the two fundamental areas of a state where excluding culture from politics and *vice versa* is very dangerous to the health of a nation. In order to function well for a state, it is required that these two components are developed in parallel, which should stimulate each other rather than fight each other.

Political communication and voting rights

„Linguistic identity is largely a political matter and languages are flags of allegiance,” – according to Kanavillil Rajagopalan, who also argues that: “This means that the instrumental view of language is fundamentally flawed. If anything, it is the pre-theoretical sense that communication is possible or desirable in given contexts or, more technically, the presence of a relatively stable speech community, that makes us postulate the existence of a common language” (Rajagopalan 2001: p.17). Furthermore, Rajagopalan states that “the stranger/foreigner or rather his symbolic presence is a *sine qua non* for the formation of language identity. Ironically, no group identity could have consolidated itself without the constitutive presence of the radically other” (Rajagopalan 2001: p.20).

In recent decades, the study of the relationship between language and political behaviour has drawn much attention in the linguistic ground (see e.g.: Carver, Pikalo 2008; Chilton 2004; Fairclough 2000; Wilson 1990). For example, Wilson (1990) argued that metaphor, a sort of language form, can achieve three main roles in political communication.

„Since metaphors allow us to think, act, and talk about one kind of experience in terms of another, they can help simplify complicated political arguments through reducing them to a metaphorical form. They may also be used to evoke emotions and emphasize particular goals. Finally, Wilson claimed that politicians may manipulate metaphors to unfold absurd images which can then be utilized to ridicule their political opponents. In other words, metaphor allows politicians to present themselves in a positive light, to disgrace their opponents, to justify their own behaviour, and to assert particular political issues” (Cheng Wen Lin 2011: p.471).

According to Helmut Gruber: “Politicians communicate directly in the medium with e.g. another politician or a journalist but wish at the same time to convince an audience, which has no opportunity for direct communicative interaction. Thus, communication takes place on two levels, and on each of them, the speaker may wish to realize differing communicative goals. Another aspect of this issue is the diversity of the audience in the case of televised politics” (Gruber 1993: p. 3). Moreover, professor Gruber argues: “In their public performances, politicians do not want to address only one target group but as many as possible. But this means that they have to convey different messages to different people at the same time. Producing coherent statements in such situations is only possible by using various forms of indirectness or vagueness because different groups of the audience may have dissimilar (and even contradictory) wants.” Thus, this aspect of vagueness is a result of “the relationship between politician and audience and relates to a special feature of the “subjective situation” which is a characteristic of mass-mediated communication” (Gruber 1993: p. 3).

The specific document concerning the right to participate in public affairs, voting rights and the right of equal access to public service is *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). In its interpretation adopted by the UN Human Rights Committee at its 1510th meeting (fifty-seventh session) on 12 July 1996, is written: „To ensure the full enjoyment of rights protected by article 25, the free communication of information and ideas about public and political issues between citizens, candidates, and elected representatives is essential. This implies free press and other media able to comment on public issues without censorship or restraint and to inform public opinion. It requires the full enjoyment and respect for the rights guaranteed in articles 19, 21 and 22 of the Covenant, including the freedom to engage in political activity individually or through political parties and other organizations, freedom to debate public affairs, to hold peaceful demonstrations and meetings, to criticize and oppose, to publish political material, to campaign for election and to advertise political ideas” (UN Human Rights Committee 1996: par. 26).

In a democracy, the concept of participation is voluntary and depends on civic consciousness. Extensive participation, when it comes to a competitive system, significantly increases the responsibility of political actors for civic demands and concerns. Also, broad participation is more qualitative than quantitative participation. The low turnout indicates that the active members of political parties have largely voted. Any high turnout suggests that the undecided people, and especially the part that is generally skeptical of political development and electoral processes, have also voted.

The elections in Albania in 2009 and 2017 proves that the two major parties have won at least 40–45% of national votes, or 20–30% more than their political activists share concerning the total number of voters. Determinative are voters, who do not have political preferences, and their decision is usually made at the end of electoral campaigns.

In the category of abstainers, there are two distinct groups of abstentions, which the researcher Jean Blondel divides into negative abstainers and positive abstainers. The first group includes those who are not interested in politics, and political events, including elections. Whereas, the negative grouping is because they have no preference for candidates or political offers of parties (Blondel et al. 1997; 1998: p.135).

Studies also demonstrate that the higher the turnout, the greater the chances of a change in the country's political direction. The lower the turnout in this election, the higher the chances of the ruling party to run for another governing mandate (Kalemaj 2015: p.11). It may be that individuals with the same socio-economic characteristics may have different degrees of participation in elections due to mobilising agents and specific circumstances.

Specific circumstances in the patterns of elections in Eastern and Southeastern Europe are, for example:

- whether the elections are related to the change of political system (1990-1991);
- whether the elections are related to the need for a new political solution (i.e. the necessary political rotation);
- whether the elections are based on programme debates or race between individuals – leader candidates for Prime Minister;
- whether the elections are held on a national or ethnic basis;
- whether the elections are held by a majority or proportional system (in the case of the latter: if the electoral rolls are closed or offer nominal chances for voters as well).

Electoral studies demonstrate that strong majoritarian competition is increasingly associated with higher turnout, as each candidate, party and electoral staff fights for every single vote. In the proportional system, especially in the closed list, turnout is lower. Citizens have no emotional connection with candidates, so they vote more for their image, leader, and leadership than candidates for deputies. In this case, neither the candidates nor the political party fight for every vote, but calculate constituencies and votes, struggling to capture the percentages that allow them to translate into mandates.

Elections and political culture in North Macedonia and Albania

The new political culture of post-communist societies is a product of processes, taking place in at least three dimensions:

- 1) *The universal dimension*, where political culture demonstrates the symptoms and features of any historical turns associated with changes of political regimes and systems, which are not merely normal political rotations.

- 2) *The regional dimension*, where its integral element is the structural changes, being characteristic for those countries, which are on the path from communism to democratic order and market economy.
- 3) *The "special way" dimension*, where the history, geopolitical conditions, and national structure of post-totalitarian states (which influence the challenges that these states face) have a differentiated character and a different range of action. (Kalemaj 2015: p.8)

North Macedonia and Albania are part of the regional dimension, which lies in the path from communism to democratic order. The political culture and language of societies that abandoned communism, according to Anna Volk-Poveska, are characterised by numerous contradictions. First of all, we can mention the conflict between the political system and the interests of society as a result of the transformation processes, and the Albanian and Macedonian societies themselves have brought to power political forces that are carrying out a reform programme completely contrary to the wishes and interests of the majority (Vajdenfeld 1999: p.47). North Macedonia and Albania find themselves in situations where the political culture and norms of the rule of law are lacking, where there is political pluralism without the ability to co-operate between political groups, people's party without people, democracy without democratic culture rules.

In the case of ethnic voting, the situation is different, ethnic parties function as nationalist parties, and as such, they have a competitive advantage over broad-based political parties, because ethnic parties do not have a large fluctuation of voting from election to election, are not heavily penalized by the electoral system, organise the campaign at a lower cost, and of course, there is less erosion in their membership than in other popular parties. Elections in North Macedonia have been significantly influenced by ethnic voting and the incitement of ethnic and nationalist parties to mobilise ethnic voters for participation and support.

The Macedonian and Albanian parties operate only in their ethnic areas, paying no formal attention to other areas. Another important factor at the levels of representation is the legal scope for the exercise of voting rights in the diaspora. In North Macedonia,¹ its citizens, living and working in other countries and continents in the world, are allowed and enabled to vote. In the Albanian case it is not possible, and thus, it is automatically expected that a large number of major voters are previously disenfranchised in the election and the internal political decision-making process.

In the former communist countries, pluralism came about when there were no owners and no business world, when most citizens lived in rural areas and when political ideology meant black and white division into communists and anti-communists. Some countries required 3-4 electoral processes during the long time, to start acting in the Western model, that is, to create electoral strata, and reasonable electoral supporters. While in Albania and North Macedonia this process is not finished yet.

¹ In the 2011 elections, which included the voters from abroad, who voted via diplomatic consular posts, the number of constituencies increased from 6 to 9, one in Europe and Africa, one for North and South America, and one for North America. And one for Australia and Asia.

When analysing other political elections besides the presidential (parliamentary elections, local elections), the level of citizen representation in elections is different. Another contributing factor to participation is the electoral model. Professional studies demonstrate that the turnout in presidential elections when the president has great power is many times greater than in parliamentary and local elections (Kalemaj 2015: p.14). An example of the Albanian experience proves that the leading factor, the factor of personal and provincial recognition, as well as the ideological factor, are more influential than the social one. For this reason, in the rich areas of the country the left-wing political parties dominate, while in the poorer suburbs the right-wing political parties dominate.

Albania has a record of voting turnout in the first political elections. In Albania, in 1991, 98.9% of voters officially participated, 36% more than in Poland, and 7–10% more than in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia. The Albanian record is specific, because in the first elections there were no opportunities and mechanisms for monitoring the accuracy of the elections, and the fictitious increase in turnout was one of the main subject of criticism in international reports on these elections. Turnout was high in both North Macedonia and Albania in the first multiparty elections, while turnout dropped (2% in Macedonia and 6–7% in Albania).

After the establishment of political pluralism, with the constitutional amendments of 1989, which enabled the formation of political parties, the voters from the Republic of Macedonia for the first time had the opportunity to vote in multi-party elections in the Socialist Former Republic of Macedonia in 1990. At the same time, there were the first multi-party fair elections, which in the same year took place in all six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In the first round of the elections out of the overall number of 1,339,021 registered voters, only 84.8% of them turned out in the elections while in the second round of 76.8%. Unlike North Macedonia, in the first pluralist elections in Albania, held on March 31, 1991, out of a total of 1,984,933 eligible voters, 1,936,568 (98.2%) participated in the elections. In the following elections in North Macedonia, there was a decrease in the turnout, while in Albania they continued to participate in large numbers in several election cycles (Agushi 2017: p. 66).

Voter turnout is an indicator of the level of interest and civic participation in political decision-making, competitive party offerings, and civic trust in political actors. In the communist period, in the former communist countries, turnout was mandatory. In some countries such as Albania, East Germany, Czechoslovakia or Romania the turnout was 99–100%, but in countries such as Yugoslavia, voting was more liberal, and even there, between 1974–1986 turnout was between 86–93% of voters (Krasniqi 2012: p.41).

Conclusions

In Albania and North Macedonia, the communist heritage is considered as one of the key elements in the formation of political culture. It has been one of the main obstacles, halting democratisation efforts. The communist heritage was the only approximately the same, because the features and functioning of the state, society, civil life, and political thought were almost unique in every country.

Albania and North Macedonia have gone through a very long and difficult process of transition to democracy. Based on the different theoretical points of view, various authors in their analyses attempted to explain this difficult and long process of transition into democracy by different factors and reasons, for which it has been affected. And some of the reasons, that are more often mentioned in explaining the fact that the actual political system of Albania and North Macedonia remains far from the models of democracy that exist in European Countries, are cultural factors. So, starting from a cultural approach, we can state that the lack of democratic political culture has affected the nonconsolidation of democracy and its institutions in Albania and North Macedonia, as far as in the prolongation of the difficult transition process.

As explained in the theories of electoral turnout, the number of voters increases when the electorate regains confidence in the process and the chances of voting for change, when there are serious new political offers and when power rotation is expected or required.

Nowadays, political leaders use social media as an important way to affect the population (excepting the traditional agitation), including live and direct discourse, or TV debates. They also try to use slogans that could affect the voters and the electorate emotionally.

Taking into consideration the case of Albania and North Macedonia, in my opinion, the process of applying democracy would face extraordinary challenges, which will make the real democratisation seem impossible, relating to the fact that Albania for almost half a century had been isolated from the outside world and democratic values and principles. This isolation, together with the lack of democratic traditions, has established values and attitudes unfavorable for the development of democracy. Other aspects of the political culture include mutual respect, contra voting, constant and productive political dialogue, political and parliamentary collaboration, stable institutions instead of strong leaders, a high level of participation in elections, and expanding the political decision-making area. All of these aspects are considered to be a fragile occurrence in all countries of Southeastern Europe and especially in Albania and North Macedonia.

Muaz Agushi – full-time professor at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje, North Macedonia, where he teaches Islamic Law. Previously Agushi lectured (part-time) in the European College "Juridica" in Kosovo, where he taught subjects on public policy analysis and political systems. He completed his Ph.D. in Political Sciences at the South East University, North Macedonia. In 2019 he received the academic title "assistant professor". His research interests focus mainly on elections, electoral systems, political parties, and political systems.

Muaz Agushi – profesor na Wydziale Nauk Islamskich w Skopje w Macedonii Północnej, gdzie wykłada prawo islamskie. Wcześniej Agushi pracował (w niepełnym wymiarze godzin) w Kolegium Europejskim „Juridica” w Kosowie, gdzie wykładał przedmioty z analizy polityki publicznej i systemów politycznych. Uzyskał tytuł doktora nauk politycznych na Uniwersytecie Południowo-Wschodnim w Macedonii Północnej. W 2019 roku został adiunktem. Jego zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się głównie na tematyce wyborów, systemach wyborczych, partiach politycznych i systemach politycznych.

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