
International Scientific Conference **Political Clientelism** in the Western Balkans 9-11 December 2020

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CONFERENCE REPORT Jovan Bliznakovski (ISPJR-UKIM)

The conference “Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans” was organized by the Institute for Sociological, Political, and Juridical Research - Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje (ISPJR-UKIM), the Faculty of Philosophy - University of Belgrade, and the Faculty of Social Sciences - University of Tirana. The event was made possible with the financial support of the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) in the framework of the project for regional scientific cooperation “Western Balkans Group on Political Clientelism”. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Western Balkans Fund.

Political clientelism is a phenomenon attracting significant cross-disciplinary scientific interest in recent decades, as well as a practice that represents a “puzzle” for policy intervention worldwide. Broadly understood as the particularistic exchange of material benefits (distributed by patrons) for political services (performed by clients), political clientelism is an important ingredient in the mobilization strategies of political parties (e.g. [Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007](#); [Stokes 2007](#); [Gans-Morse et al. 2014](#)), as well as a possible channel through which citizens may fulfil their interests and needs ([Piattoni 2001](#); [Nichter 2018](#)). There is a certain consensus that, when practiced, clientelism holds severe negative consequences towards the quality of democracy, economic performance, and the functioning of the public sector (see [Hicken 2011](#), 302-303).

Political clientelism is widely present in the Western Balkans, remains resilient to decades of liberal-democratic reforms, and contributes to the overall democratic deficit, the weak economic performance, as well as to the establishment of arbitrary redistribution policies. Despite this state of affairs, there has been a little systematic attempt to study clientelism scientifically across the region. The [conference “Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans”](#), which took place between 9 and 11 December 2020, aspired to fill this gap, as well as to create a platform for the cooperation and networking of researchers working on the topic. The conference featured a total of 29 researchers (authors and co-authors), coming from Western Balkans, EU and UK universities, research institutes, and

independent think tanks, who presented 20 papers on different aspects of political clientelism during the three-day program. All research presented was contextually focused on the six Western Balkan Fund contracting parties (WBF CPs: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), with scholars most commonly opting to study one of the WBF CPs and several papers adopting a comparative/regional perspective. The conference joined research conducted using various methodologies and based on the background of different scientific disciplines, signalling that (as elsewhere), the study of political clientelism in the Western Balkans can be accommodated within different research traditions. In addition to the presented research, the conference included an open round table dedicated to the prospects for scientific cooperation in the study of political clientelism in the region.

This report summarizes the main findings and conclusions from the presented research and the subsequent discussions. The report is structured in five thematic blocks, with each focusing on one specific aspect related to the practice of political clientelism in the Western Balkans: 1) the variety of clientelist exchanges (i.e. the many faces of political clientelism in the Western Balkans); the perspectives of 2) political patrons and 3) political clients; 4) the consequences of political clientelism, and 5) the possible further avenues of research.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

MANY FACES OF POLITICAL CLIENTELISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Political clientelism has often been credited for multifacetedness (e.g. see [Hilgers 2012](#), 8-12), and the themes covered during the conference confirmed that this is also inherent to clientelism as practiced in the Western Balkans. The conference papers examined different applications of the clientelist exchange: in political mobilization and elections (e.g. [Komar and Batrićević](#); [Drishti and Kopliku](#); [Bliznakovski](#)); in building, maintaining, and breaking party organizations ([Stanojević](#); [Vuković and Spasojević](#); [Hogic](#); [Cvetanoska](#)); in the management of public administration ([Marovic and Markovic](#); [Muk](#); [Dhoga](#)); to its use in structuring the relations between political and judicial elites ([Gjuzelov](#)), political elites and private companies ([Imami](#); [Pešić and Milošević](#); [Krstić](#)), and political and religious elites ([Obučina and Krpan](#)). Despite this multidimensionality (and different disciplinary backgrounds), the conference presenters implicitly concurred that political clientelism represents a dyadic relationship based on asymmetry of power and contingency (in line with the traditional definitions in the literature, e.g. [Scott 1972](#)) where the role of patrons is assumed by political parties, their members, and most broadly, the political elite, while the role of clients by a variety of social actors, including (but not limited to) citizens/voters, civil servants, judges, private companies and religious leaders.

The conference presentations charted a variety of benefits and services which are exchanged through political clientelism in the contemporary Western Balkan context. Political patrons across the region offer election handouts consisted of money and other benefits (Komar and Batrićević; Bliznakovski), employment positions (Drishti and Kopliku; Stanojević; Marovic and Markovic), procurement contracts (Pešić and Milošević); state property (Obučina and Krpan), construction and mining permits (Imami), and advancement in employment (Gjuzelov). Political clients reply in different ways: by voting in elections (Komar and Batrićević), through active engagement in party organizations (Bliznakovski; Drishti and Kopliku), by paying out political parties or their members (specifically in the case of private companies: Pešić and Milošević; Krstić), by publicly offering political support (e.g. in the case of religious organizations: Obučina and Krpan), as well as through favours connected to decisions in the scope of the client's public authority (specifically in the case of judges: Gjuzelov, and civil servants). Some presentations also highlighted that political patrons often turn to threats and sanctions to induce favourable behaviour from their clients (e.g. Krstić; Gjuzelov; Bliznakovski), with these "negative inducements" ([Mares and Young 2016](#)) being manifested as cutting one's access to ongoing benefits or employment, relegation in employment rank,

arbitrary inspections, and investigations directed at private companies, etc.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF PATRONS

The conference presentations also offered insights into the motivations and calculus of the actors involved in clientelist exchanges. Across the region, political parties rise to clientelist prominence from ruling positions, as the bulk of resources used for clientelism come from public sources which are made available by the parties' control of state institutions. A simple conclusion derived from the conference presentations is that political parties in the Western Balkans less frequently employ private sources for clientelist dealings, though vote-buying with party/private money and employment in the private sector is part of the "arsenal" of clientelist benefits which are being distributed across the region, as well.

Political clientelism is useful from the point of view of political parties because it is one of the available strategies through which formal power can be obtained, and, more commonly - consolidated (given the above-explained predominance of public resources in clientelist exchanges). Two conference presentations ([Beqiri](#); [Luli](#)) explicitly focused on the connection between political clientelism and the consolidation of power of incumbent parties, emphasizing the use of the state apparatus as an important mechanism in this setup.

Clientelist exchanges are not only used for the consolidation of power but also for the economic and social advancement of members of the political and economic elites. The findings presented by [Mirkov and Manić](#), based on surveys of Serbian political and economic elites, state that affiliations to interpersonal and political networks have significant effects on the incomes of their members. These findings suggest that quid-pro-quo exchanges are not only used for the consolidation of political power but also the socio-economic advancement of individuals located at the higher hierarchical levels within the patronage networks.

Two conference presentations specifically focused on the dynamics within already established patronage networks ([Vuković and Spasojević](#); [Krstić](#)), and despite being both contextually focused on Serbia they seem to offer valuable hypotheses that can be applied when studying the other WBF CPs as well. In their presentation, Vuković and Spasojević untangled the relationship between long-standing smaller-scale local patronage networks and the clientelist-minded central government, showing how local networks enjoy certain independence and the ability to adapt to the changing political circumstances. Motivated by self-interest (e.g. continued extraction of clientelist benefits), these local patronage networks often change party "colours" and are favoured participants in the

coalitions of the largest parties because of their ability to mobilize political support at the localities. Vuković and Spasojević claim that these local networks predate contemporary clientelist networks in Serbia and that, in this sense, they represent an important bottom-up push for the perpetuation of clientelist exchanges. Some of these arguments are common with the findings from Krstić's ethnographic study on Serbian "local sheriffs" - individuals who possess almost total control over political, social, and economic life within given localities, which is established by their simultaneous hold of local public office, significant informal influence and good relations with the central government. According to Krstić, this governance style (branded as "neopatrimonialism") involves monopolization of the local public resources and exclusion of broader social groups, appropriation of the local administration and the local media, as well as strong informal management of social life.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF CLIENTS

Several conference presentations delivered insights on the motivations of clients involved in clientelist exchanges (e.g. Drishti and Kopliku; Stanojević; Bliznakovski; Gjuzelov; [Mileva, Bojadjiev and Stefanovska - Petkovska](#); Obućina and Krpan). The presentation of [Drishti and Kopliku](#) offered findings from a longitudinal survey of students implemented in Albania, showing what is commonly known across the Western Balkans - that political clientelism represents a viable path towards gaining secure employment, and that, from this perspective, it can be attractive to young social groups. The qualitative study of [Stanojević](#), on the other hand, offered additional insights into the perspective of young party members in Serbia. According to Stanojević, young party members use several discursive strategies to "normalize" clientelist practices, including the assessment that clientelism is a common phenomenon ("everyone does it") and thus it is considered as a rule rather than an exception ("this is how things are done"); that it has merits, i.e. it is a way for parties to "help out" people; and that parties are pressured into clientelist dealings because people themselves "demand" clientelist favours. There is certainly a vibrant clientelist demand across the region: according to the survey of the project INFORM (presented by [Bliznakovski](#) during the conference), close to 10% of respondents in the region reported that they have turned to a political official/influential for help in the past, a manifestation of a phenomenon which Bliznakovski denotes as "clientelist benefit-seeking". Still, not all citizens are in an equal position to extract clientelist resources: Bliznakovski claimed that loyal and pro-active party members are in the best position to extract the most valuable clientelist benefits (such as stable employment), while [Komar and Batrićević](#) infer

(through field list experiment data) that political parties in Montenegro have targeted men significantly more often than women with vote-buying offers during the 2018 local elections. These findings suggested that different types of clients hold divergent possibilities and motivations to successfully extract clientelist benefits.

A group of presentations offered findings on the motivations and calculus on other types of clients (apart from regular citizens/voters), e.g. judges and prosecutors ([Gjuzelov](#)), religious organizations and leaders ([Obućina and Krpan](#)), private security companies ([Pešić and Milošević](#)) and private entrepreneurs working in localities controlled by "local sheriffs" ([Krstić](#)). In his presentation, Gjuzelov argued (based on qualitative primary data) that judges and prosecutors in North Macedonia operate under a parallel incentive structure: on the one hand they are tasked to follow formal legislation, while on the other they are requested to follow the informally shared expectations of the personal and political networks they belong to. Non-compliance with these informal expectations (which are often in contradiction with formal legislation) may have severe consequences for the careers of judges and prosecutors since the political power centres have means to block career advancement and to demote "unfavourable" individuals. The religious organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, studied by Obućina and Krpan, are, similarly, incentivized to politically align to gain control of their property nationalized during socialism and now in control of the state. The private security companies studied by Pešić and Milošević and the local entrepreneurs studied by Krstić are incentivized to enter clientelist dealings to protect their businesses, as public procurements and market inspection offices are firmly in the hands of the political centres of power and their proxies within the public institutions.

CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICAL CLIENTELISM

Several presentations raised alarm on the consequences of clientelism and other particularistic practices (e.g. corruption, nepotism, and cronyism) towards the Western Balkan region. In some of the conference presentations, political clientelism was explicitly or implicitly associated with authoritarian tendencies in political elites (Krstić; [Begiri](#); [Luli](#)), deficits in implementation of elections (Komar and Batrićević) and rule of law (Gjuzelov); fragmentation of the party system (in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina: [Hogic](#)); while in others with suboptimal economic performances ([Imami](#); Pešić and Milošević) and socio-economic inequality ([Mirkov and Manić](#)). A group of presentations underlined that clientelism represents an obstacle for meaningful reform in the public administration (on Montenegro: [Marovic and Markovic](#), and [Muk](#); and,

on Albania: [Dhoga](#)), suggesting that political elites strategically adopt reforms which would still permit party favouritism in the recruitment of public administration. There seems to be a consensus that (as elsewhere) clientelism in the Western Balkans negatively affects political and economic development, as well as state efficiency and the quality of public services.

Several presentations pointed out even more peculiar effects. The studies by [Komar and Batrićević](#) and [Cvetanoska](#) show that clientelism perpetuates gender inequality in the Western Balkans. Cvetanoska's research on women's participation in politics in Kosovo* and North Macedonia suggests that the already established male-dominated patronage networks tend to resist outsiders and, thus, represent a significant obstacle for substantial women participation. These networks are still active despite the adoption of substantial legislation intended to improve women's participation (i.e. the gender quotas). [Milosav](#)'s regional study on the relationship between individual corruption perceptions and the desire to migrate offers findings in support of the thesis that particularism is one of the important factors that contribute to the "brain drain" phenomenon in the Western Balkans. Taken as a whole, the findings presented regarding the consequences of clientelism paint a largely negative picture of clientelism's effect on the society, economy, and politics of the WBF CPs.

FURTHER AVENUES OF RESEARCH?

The findings from the conference presentations suggest that political clientelism in the Western Balkans adopts many faces and cloaks, and this is visible in the variety of relationships observed, the benefits and services exchanged, as well as in the divergent motivations for clientelist engagements of different social actors. Therefore, further scientific work will be needed to untangle this variety, as well as to examine how different exchanges and transactions are connected within larger national patronage networks.

The motivations of social actors to engage in clientelism raise an additional important research question that should be tackled while further studying this phenomenon in the Western Balkan region. Relying on the findings from the conference presentations, one may conclude that different types of actors on the supply side (political parties and elites) and on the demand side (citizens/voters, private companies, religious organizations, judges, etc.) hold divergent calculations when engaging in political clientelism. Studying the motivations of different social actors may bring us closer to answering the question of why political clientelism is practiced in the Western Balkans to such an extent.

Finally, it seems that the consequences of clientelism are overreaching in the region, and that clientelism

can be viewed as one of the culprits for the weakened democratic and economic performance of the WBF CPs. Also, it seems that clientelism contributes to serious social distortions, as it can facilitate social exclusion, untransparent and arbitrary distribution of resources, and even provide an additional basis for "brain drain" in the Western Balkans. Studying the effects of political clientelism will likely lead us to grow awareness of the negative effects of this phenomenon, which, in turn, can provide us with a foundation for more decisive policy action.

These three broad themes that could be targeted in future research may be summarized as: "description-explanation-impetus for policy intervention". Further meaningful scientific work should equip us to describe the political clientelism in the Western Balkans more comprehensively ("description") and a necessary first step which should allow us to establish more credible arguments on why this phenomenon remains resilient ("explanation"). A venture into the consequences of clientelism in the region will provide us with arguments why meaningful policy intervention is needed ("impetus for policy intervention"). Within this triad of research themes, researchers and scholars working on political clientelism in the Western Balkans, would not only contribute to the global study of political clientelism but also to the efforts to curb this phenomenon in the region. The conference "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans" made steps in advancing this research agenda, though certainly much more work will be needed before we fully understand how and why political clientelism operates in the region, as well as how it can be suppressed.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Beqiri, Dardan (Independent researcher). "Neoopatrimonialist Practice as a Soft Strategy of State Capture: The Case of Western Balkans."

Bliznakovski, Jovan (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje). "Varieties of Political Clientelism: A Typology of Patron- Client Linkages and Exchanges in the Western Balkans."

Cvetanoska, Liljana (University of Sussex). "Corruption and Women's Access to Politics: Quotas and Party Funding in Kosovo* and North Macedonia."

Dhoga, Nysjola (University of Tirana). "Civil Service's Reforms in Albania: Politicized and then Politicized."

Drishti, Elvisa and Kopliku, Bresena (University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi"). "Active Political Engagement, Political Patronage and Local Labour Markets – The Example of Shkoder."

Gjuzelov, Borjan (Queen Mary University of London). "Between Public and Private Interest: Clientelism in the North Macedonia's Judiciary."

Hogic, Nedim (Sant' Anna School of Advanced Studies). "Electoral Rules and Corruption as Drivers of Political Fragmentation in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

Imami, Drini (Agricultural University of Tirana and Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education – Economics Institute Prague).

"Corruption, Clientelism, Informality and Elections in the Context of a Transition Economy."

Komar, Olivera (University of Montenegro) and Batričević, Nemanja (Central European University). "'Buy One Get One Free': Gender and Vote-buying in Montenegro."

Krstić, Nemanja (University of Niš). "The Characteristics of the Neo-patrimonial Form of Governance in Serbia –The Status and Relationships Between the Chief and Local Sheriffs."

Luli, Elira (Albanian University). "Political Clientelism in Western Balkans - A Mechanism to Amplify Power Gain. Albanian Case."

Marovic, Jovana (Politikon Network) and Markovic, Maja (Open Dialogue Network). "Human Resources Management in Montenegrin Municipalities: A Tool for Generating Votes?"

Mileva, Ivona; Bojadjev, Marjan; and Stefanovska - Petkovska, Miodraga (University American College Skopje). "Investigation into the Potential for Clientelistic and Corruptive Behavior of Students of Private and Public Universities in R.N. Macedonia."

Milosav, Đorđe (Trinity College Dublin). "Party Membership Card or Passport? The Effects of Corruption on Migrating Motivation: The Case of the Balkans."

Mirkov, Anđelka and Manić, Željka (University of Belgrade). "The Interplay of the Economic and Political Elites in Serbia: Factors of Intragroup Economic Differentiation."

Muk, Milena (Institute Alternative Podgorica). "Public Administration Reform against Clientelism: Montenegro's Missed Expectations."

Obućina, Vedran (University of Regensburg) and Krpan, Domagoj (University of Rijeka). "How to Keep Religious Actors Loyal: Case of Law on Restitution of Religious Property in Bosnia And Herzegovina."

Pešić, Jelena (University of Belgrade) and Milošević, Marko (Freelance researcher). "Political Clientelism and Private Security in Serbia."

Stanojević, Dragan (University of Belgrade). "Discursive Strategies of 'Normalisation' of Clientelism among Young Members of Political Parties in Serbia."

Vuković, Danilo and Spasojević, Dušan (University of Belgrade). "Prêt-à-porter Clientelistic Networks: Do They Exist Before or Independently of Parties in Contemporary Serbia?"

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Mares, Isabela, and Lauren Young. 2016. "Buying, Expropriating, and Stealing Votes." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (1): 267–88.

Nichter, Simeon. 2018. "Votes for Survival: Relational Clientelism in Latin America." Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316998014>.

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