

Civil Society in New Democracies: What is Old and What Is New in the Relationship between the State and Civil Society?



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Abstract¹

Civil societies in the post-Communist new democracies are largely regarded as underdeveloped and not sufficiently influential in national politics. After the initial stages of democratization, when the role of civic mobilization and pluralistic associations was recognized in several instances, the predominating picture has become that of a weak civil society. This evaluation is even more relevant with regard to the new East European democracies. These conclusions are derived predominantly from research on the NGO sector, while other associations, such as trade unions and business associations, are far less studied. The analysis in this article is based on fresh empirical data on the political behavior of civil society and interest groups in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The author focuses on classic themes in interest groups literature, including the characteristics and structure of the populations of national interest groups, their organizational characteristics and their relationships with political institutions. The analysis shows that, sharing similar contexts of democratization, Europeanization, and with a shared past in a federal state, interest groups in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia show remarkable similarities. Most of the research findings are in line with the literature on interest groups in old democracies, but there are a number of differences that indicate the rather poor quality of the relationship between the state and civil society.

Key words: civil society, interest groups, democratization, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

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Introduction

The existing literature on civil society in post-Communist new democracies, with very few exceptions (for example, Fink-Hafner 1998 on Slovenia; Cox and Vass 2000, and Cox, Ilonzi and Vass 2007 on Hungary; Fagan and Sircar (eds.) 2017 on several Southeast European countries), concludes that civil societies there are underdeveloped, weak and not sufficiently influential in national politics (Howard 2002; Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Pérez-Solórzano Borrágán 2006; Lane 2010; Sissenich 2010; Borzel 2010; Dolenjec 2013, etc.). Although the role of civic initiatives and pluralistic associations in the initial stages of democratization in particular countries has been recognized, the picture of a weak civil society still predominates. This evaluation is even more common with regard to the new East European democracies, some of which experienced wars and ethnic conflicts, as is the case of the former republics of Yugoslavia.

These assessments, however, have mostly been based on the research of the NGO sector. Along with this, studies have been conducted on industrial relations/collective bargaining, and more recently, on social movements. However, much less attention has been directed at other types of politically active associations, also known as interest groups, such as business and trade associations, trade unions, or associations defending the interests of professions. Notably, there is no systematic information available on central themes of interest groups research from any cross-national study on a large number of actors covering these various types of interest groups.

This article presents new data on the mobilization and political behavior of various types of interest groups in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The study explores classic themes in interest groups literature: the characteristics and structure of the populations of national interest groups; the organizational characteristics of interest groups (size, membership, resources); their contacts with and access to a variety of national institutions, etc. Looking at these results, the author presents an overview of her research findings and the main elements that differentiate these interest groups from those in Western democracies.

The analysis concludes that in several aspects, interest groups in these and other new democracies differ significantly from their Western counterparts, especially in terms of their relationship with political institutions.

Civil society, interest groups and democratization

The development of civil society is an important, challenging and controversial topic in sociological, political and other social science research, especially as concerns the relationship between civil society development and democratization. Starting from the early writings on democratization (Schmitter 1993; Linz and Stephan 1996; Morlino 1998), the development of this “arena” of democratization is considered crucial for the stabilization and effectiveness of democracy in the long run. This development was expected to occur after the establishment of a constitutional basis for the political systems and of functioning institutions. In view of the large-scale historical changes that took place after the fall of Communism, large expectations were set on the future role of the so called “revived” civil society. Scholars and practitioners alike shared optimism regarding the flourishing of citizen initiatives, which had supposedly been suppressed under Communism. As many analyses have shown, these expectations turned out to be far from reality in the subsequent two decades or more (Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Howard 2002). Even the severe economic and structural reforms undertaken during the 1990s took place amidst the surprising absence of civic mobilization or protests (Cisar and Navratyl 2015) and civil society actors were too weak to prevent the aggravation of serious democratic deficits in a number of countries – deficits such as widespread corruption, suppressed media freedoms, weak institutions, and the absence of rule of law. Of course, there were some islands of civic activity, mobilization and formation of new associations aiming to defend various public causes and marginalized social groups. This was predominantly done by the so-called NGOs – professionalized associations with a small membership base or no members at all, funded by international public and private donors. In addition, new tripartite institutions were created based on the corporatist model of interest intermediation between business, labor and the state. But so far, these institutions have not managed to play their expected role in society and are often subordinated to the state.

In the last several years, however, a new wave of optimism is arising from recent large-scale mobilization and popular protests in a number of East European countries. Unsatisfied with the underachievement of politicians and political institutions on the path to democratic consolidation, these protests shed new light on the state of civil society and its potential. Across

countries, citizens have shown disappointment with, and revolted against, the current state of democratic and economic development; they have mobilized (spontaneously and partly through existing civil society organizations) to express their dissatisfaction with the political establishment. Such protests, for example, succeeded in overturning Nikola Gruevski's rule in Macedonia.

Since the early studies of democratization and until the recent developments, not much empirical research has been done on civil society. In existing democratization literature, more attention is given to the study of political institutions (Ekiert 2015). Other organizations that are part of a wider definition of civil society, have likewise rarely been examined². These are the so-called interest groups – very important actors that are independent from the state, but important for its economic activity. Cox and Gallai (2014) differentiate between two strands of research devoted to civil society and interest groups: the **civil society approach** and the **polity approach**. They suggest that the findings from one of these, arguably the civil society approach, overshadow the findings of the other and lead to somewhat biased conclusions about the state of civil society. The civil society approach explores the role of civil society in regime change and democratization. Its research strategy is focused mainly on the civil society actors and on studying the weaknesses discussed above. The two authors conclude that civil society has substantially contributed to regime change only in a few instances (e.g., Slovenia and Poland), and much less than expected, to the consolidation of democracy. As an example of this approach, they cite the work of Howard (2003), which is centered on analysis of survey data regarding the participation of citizens in associations. To these studies, we may add similar findings by Sisenich (2010) and studies on the countries in question³ by Novak and Fink-Hafner (2015)³. However, newer strands of research implicitly using the civil society approach have come to

² Authors do not always agree on what they consider civil society to be. In the definition I use here, alongside citizen associations, which are undoubtedly always included in the different definitions, I also look at other intermediary associations that voluntarily organize to represent different segments of society, and that do not always have individuals as members. These are foremost the so-called economic interest groups: trade unions, business associations, professional associations, and other types of organizations such as think tanks. Sports and cultural associations, which are important in social capital research, are excluded from my working definition since they rarely lobby institutions. They primarily exist to provide services to their members or organize joint leisure activities.

³ In the countries examined here, citizen participation in associations is much lower compared not only with Western democracies, but also with the Central European countries (Novak and Hafner-Fink 2015).

somewhat different conclusions. In their introduction to the special issue on active citizenship in South East Europe, Fagan and Sircar (2017) look at “non-institutionalized and non-formal modes of collective action, symbolic politics, cultural challenges, acts of citizenship that are crucial for civil society and democracy”; they claim that post-Socialist countries do not differ much from Western democracies. Mapping the presence of this kind of practices in Southeast European countries, the authors consider them not as “evidence of immature or immanent civil society, but as the life-blood of a civil society that cannot be reduced to the number of registered NGOs” (Fagan and Sircar 2017: 1338). Based on their case studies, they conclude that social movements in these countries are not simply a copy of the global movements that resulted from the 2008 financial crisis, but have local origin and idiosyncrasies and hence, are important for the development of democracy. In line with this view is the evidence coming from the protest activities that have taken place in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia and other counties.

The “polity approach” has much fewer contributions. This type of research examines the interaction between civil society and political institutions. Existing studies using the policy approach usually discuss the unsystematic relation between state and civil society. Most of them are case studies or single country studies. The volumes edited by Fink-Hafner (2015) and Fink-Hafner and Thomas (2019) provide new analyses on eight countries based on interview data regarding the above-mentioned topics. The studies of Cox and Vass (2000), Cox, Ilonovski and Vass (2007), and Perez- Solorzano (2006) are also exceptions; they include single country studies and a qualitative research design.

Using the polity approach, my research, which deals with three post-Communist countries, focuses on various types of interest groups and is based on survey data related to these groups. I present the main characteristics of the population of interest groups, general patterns of contacts with institutions, and the resources these groups provide to institutions. Prior to this, I briefly present the national contexts in which these actors mobilize and operate.

The national context of civil society development

The transition to liberal democracy and the on-going EU accession process serve as a framework for the national context of the system of interest representation in the countries examined here. As former republics of Socialist Yugoslavia, these countries display remarkable similarities in terms of political institutions and interest group predecessors. Also, they have all had similar recent experiences with wars and ethnic conflicts; thus, the role of the international community, especially of the USA and the EU, has been specially strong starting from the early 1990s. Currently, the EU accession process and EU conditionality are having a great impact on national politics, including the activities of civil society, in all three countries (Hristova and Cekikj 2015; Fagan and Wunsch 2018).

As regards the development of civil society, it should be noted that a large majority of NGOs were formed after the fall of Communism in the 1990s, although some important interest groups, such as trade unions, chambers of commerce and professional associations, already existed during the time of Socialism and afterwards underwent transformation. Sports, cultural, environmental and youth associations had also existed, but as subordinated to the Communist parties. Today, pluralism is provided for trade unions and business associations, whose interests are typically represented by several national-level umbrella associations. The number of business associations outside the system of chambers of commerce is still rather small. According to my mapping of interest group populations (see below), human rights groups, women's groups and environmental groups, and NGOs active in the areas of good governance and democratization, are among the most numerous NGOs. The largest concentration of interest groups in a few national associations of a particular type is found to exist in Montenegro.

As in most post-Communist countries, new tripartite institutions were created after the introduction of political pluralism and a capitalist economy. They are based on the long-established model of corporatism that is especially strong in Scandinavian countries, Austria and some other European countries. This however, did not happen right after the fall of the old regime. For example, for a considerable period of time, the chambers of commerce functioned as employers' associations, which are business associations usually involved in collective bargaining and focused mainly on issues related to labor law; they had not existed before. These new tripartite institutions still try to establish themselves as relevant actors in national politics in

most post-Communist democracies (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán and Smismans, 2012). Existing research on industrial relations in these countries shows this type of interest intermediation has a limited influence in national politics, where the role of the state is dominant (Stanojevic 2003; Hristova 2008; Orlovic 2015). Instead, strong informal ties between business and politics, weak and corrupted trade unions, and drafting of legislation behind closed doors have all been documented in previous research (Zakoshek 1995; Majhoshev 2012; Vukovic 2013; Komar 2015). It should be mentioned that the system of interest representation also has pluralist features, since a significant number of NGOs appear to be active and involved in national policy-making, though sometimes only formally and as a result of international pressure.

Mapping the interest group population: national populations and national samples

In this study, public and informal registers of associations were used to compile the national datasets of interest groups⁴. As of March 2014, there were 2,881 registered organizations in Montenegro, classified into 27 categories. This register also contains information on professional and business associations, while trade unions are registered in a separate register. One chamber of commerce, several employers' associations, and two umbrella trade unions (Eurofound 2012a) are also included in the dataset.

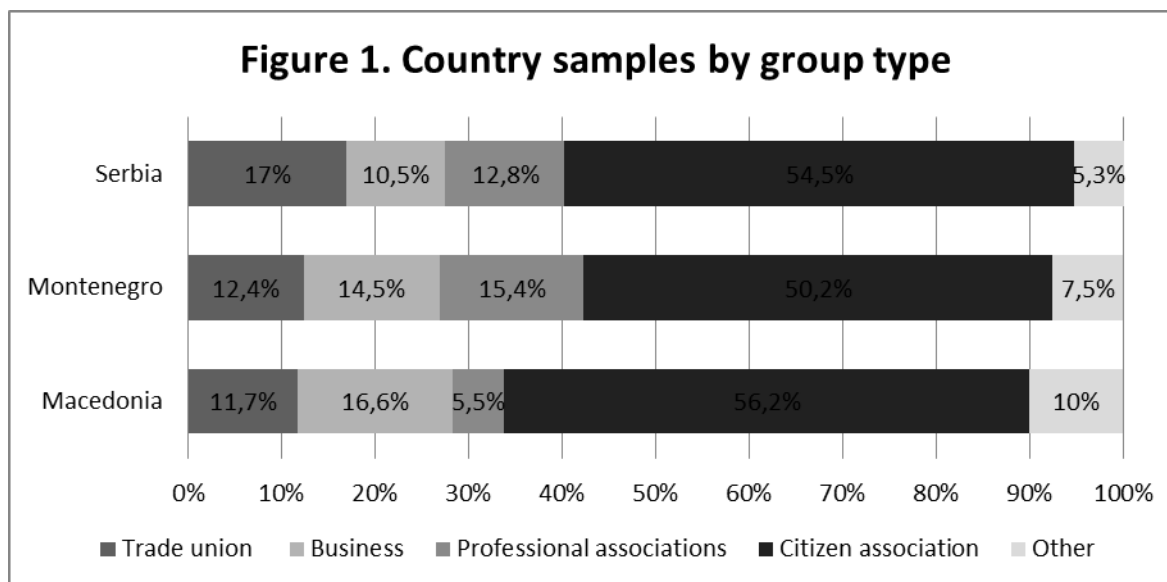
As of 31 March 2014, there were 22,600 citizen organizations registered in the Registry of Associations maintained by the Business Registries Agency of the Republic of Serbia. Additionally, there are 11,335 sports associations, 556 foundations and endowments, 19 foreign foundations and endowments, and 49 foreign associations registered in separate registers. Trade unions under four umbrella associations and three umbrella employers' associations mentioned in the Eurofound industrial relations report for Serbia (2012b) were also included in the population dataset. As of March 2014, there were 26 chambers of commerce registered in the Register of Chambers of Commerce run by the Business Registries Agency; these were also included in the research.

⁴ For more on this, see the research report Cekikj 2015: 6-8. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287995210_Lobbying_by_interest_groups_in_Macedonia_Montenegro_and_Serbia_findings_from_a_survey_of_associations

As of 2013, there were 13,021 officially registered citizen associations in Macedonia, 4,574 of which are registered in accordance with the 2010 Law on Associations and Foundations and are considered actually active (Nuredinovska and Oggenovska 2014). All trade unions registered in the Registry of Trade Unions of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (48 umbrella and branch trade unions in total) were contacted, as well as eight employers' organizations registered in the same ministry's Registry of Employers' Organizations for which I could find contact information. The same was done with the three national chambers of commerce and their sector branches. Other business associations and professional associations were mapped by searching the Internet using keywords, or other sources.

One of the main interesting findings that show these countries to be different from Western democracies is that the populations of interest groups in the three surveyed countries are dominated by citizen associations/NGOs. In the population datasets of the present research, which include interest groups with a minimum level of visibility (web presence), more than 50% of the interest groups are NGOs. This percentage is even higher if we look at official registers of associations. In contrast, business associations have predominated for decades in Western democracies and in the EU countries (Scholzman 1984; Coen and Richardson 2009; Dür and Mateo 2016).

The resulting country samples are quite similar to one another (Figure 1). Citizen associations (NGOs) comprise the majority of organizations: 56.2% of interest groups in Macedonia; 54.5% in Serbia; and 50.2% in Montenegro. Trade unions and business associations have more or less similar shares of the total number of interest groups: 16.5% of the groups in Macedonia, 14.5% in Montenegro and 10.5% in Serbia are business groups; 11.7% of associations in Macedonia, 12.4% of associations in Montenegro and 17% of associations in Serbia are trade unions. 5.5% of interest groups in Macedonia, 15.4% of groups in Montenegro and 12.8% of associations in Serbia are professional associations. The category "other" consists of think tanks and foundations active in the areas of promoting democracy and human rights.



The survey in question, conducted between April and November 2014, covered associations in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia with a minimum level of visibility (i.e., web presence)⁵. A total of 984 associations in the three countries were contacted, of which 305 responded to the survey – a response rate of 31%. The survey was checked for its representative quality; the check included a comparison of the structure of population with the resulting samples of respondents, as well as a comparison by age of respondents and non-respondents. The results of the check are encouraging and allow drawing preliminary conclusions as to interest groups' activity in the new democracies in ex-Yugoslavia.⁶

⁵ The primary criterion for the inclusion of each association in the survey was its web presence. This criterion takes into account the minimum visibility of interest groups based also on the assumption that they possess minimum resources (not only material resources) to engage in lobbying activities. Also included were associations with blogs or social media pages that are commonly used today (most frequently by NGOs), as well as sectoral branches of umbrella trade unions and business associations that do not necessarily have their own websites. Sports, cultural/art, religious associations and learned societies, which are predominantly leisure associations and engage in lobbying only occasionally and to a far lesser extent, are not part of this research.

⁶ For further details see the research report Cekikj 2015: 9-10. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287995210_Lobbying_by_interest_groups_in_Macedonia_Montenegro_and_Serbia_findings_from_a_survey_of_associations

Survey results

Organizational characteristics of interest groups

First, I briefly present the main characteristics of the surveyed associations. Interest groups in these countries are young associations with an average age of only 11.5 years in Montenegro, 14.5 years in Macedonia and 19.5 years in Serbia. Their membership base, especially that of NGOs, is modest, which is one more significant difference to Western associations, although the trend of decreasing membership and non-active membership is present there as well (Grant and Maloney 2007). No more than 66.1% of the associations employ staff, with an average number of 4 employees in Macedonia and 5 employees in Serbia and Montenegro. Of the associations, 74% rely on volunteers to conduct their work. While business associations experience far fewer problems related to employment of staff, NGOs most frequently rely on the work of volunteers. Interest groups are small in terms of financial resources as well: around 40% of the respondents in Montenegro, 30% of respondents in Serbia and 25% of respondents in Macedonia have annual budgets of less than 10,000 Euros. Unlike their counterparts in the developed democracies, the large majority of NGOs depend on foreign funding; this is an especially marked feature in Macedonia.

Access to institutions

The access of interest groups to institutions is one of the most important topics in interest groups research. Although access does not necessarily imply influence, it is an important step with regard to the opportunity of interest groups to present their demands and arguments to decision-makers. According to the exchange theory of access (Salzbury 1969; and others), interest groups provide technical and political information to policy-makers, help in the implementation of policies, and provide other resources needed by institutions. In exchange, they have better chances to steer policies in a preferable direction as they get in touch with decision-makers. The operationalization of access for research purposes usually includes examination of interest groups' contacts with institutions, their membership in advisory bodies within institutions, membership/participation in parliamentary committee hearings, etc.

Previous studies conclude that there is a strong business bias because business groups enjoy greater access, especially to executive institutions where most of the legislation is drafted

(Beyers 2002, 2004; Beyers and Brown 2014; Bowen 2002, 2004; Eising 2007; Dür and Mateo 2012, 2016; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Fraussen and Beyer 2015; Binderkrantz 2005; Chalmers 2013, and others). This is so because business associations have less problems with collective action, and have larger resources and greater ability to provide technical information to institutions. On the other hand, NGOs provide political information and legitimacy; lately, they have also been increasingly supplying expertise. Trade unions and professional associations are situated in between. Specific/economic interest groups tend to be more in contact with executive institutions that require technical information and expertise, while citizen associations are more in contact with legislative institutions that need information on the preferences of their membership (also, the election of MP's depends on the votes of citizens). There are likewise differences in institutional settings between corporatist and pluralist countries. In corporatist countries, economic interest groups enjoy privileged and legally regulated access. However, these differences are not relevant for the present discussion, as all three countries under study share similar institutional contexts in this respect (as explained above).

The research results show that, across countries, Macedonian interest groups have the lowest frequency of contacts with all the institutions listed above, while Montenegrin interest groups have comparatively better access to institutions. In all three countries, interest groups are most often in contact with **local self-government institutions**. In Serbia, 42% of associations have frequent (monthly or weekly) contacts with local institutions. In Macedonia and Montenegro, this is the case for approximately 24% of respondents. In addition, 32.8% of groups in Montenegro, 24.3% of groups in Macedonia, and 23.7% of groups in Serbia have between 6 and 9 contacts per year with local institutions.

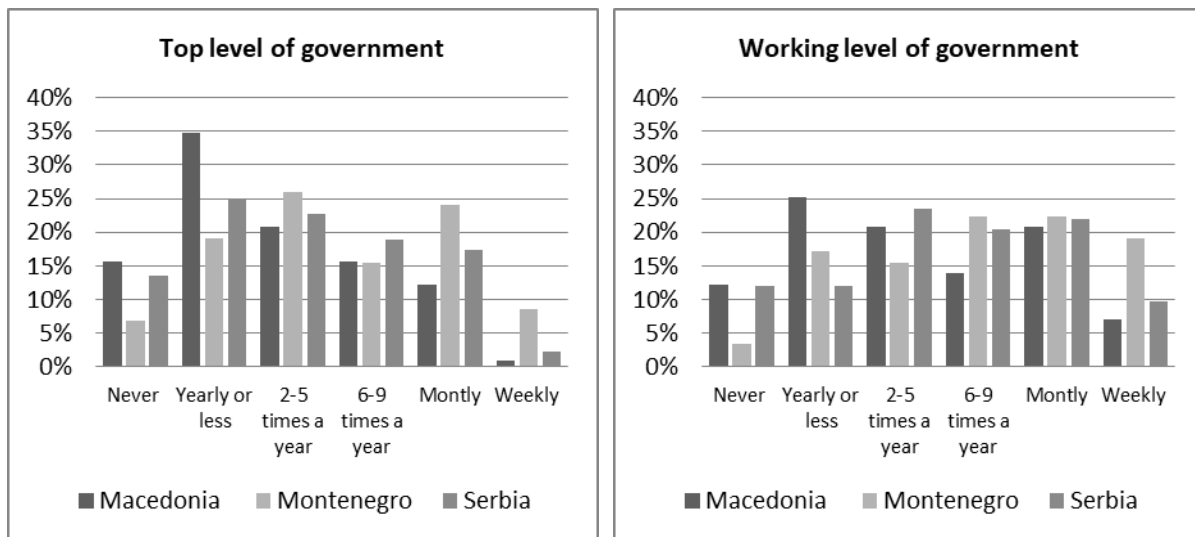
As for central institutions, the frequency of contacts is highest with executive institutions, more precisely, with the working level of government, where most of the legislation is usually prepared. 41.4% of associations in Montenegro, 31.8% of respondents in Serbia, and 27.9% of respondents in Macedonia have frequent contacts (weekly or monthly) with the **working level of government**. Additionally, 22.4% of groups in Montenegro, 20.5% of groups in Serbia, and 13.9% of groups in Macedonia, reported having 6–9 contacts per year with the working level of government. 32.7% of groups in Montenegro, 19.7% in Serbia, and 13.1% in Macedonia have frequent contacts with the **top level of government**, and around 15% of groups in Macedonia

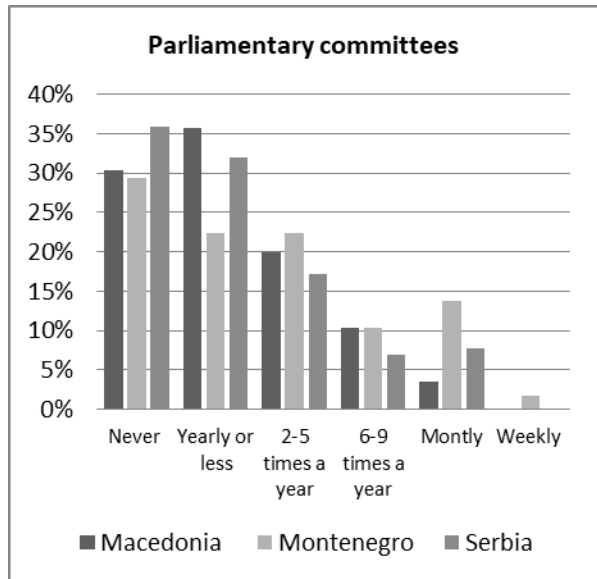
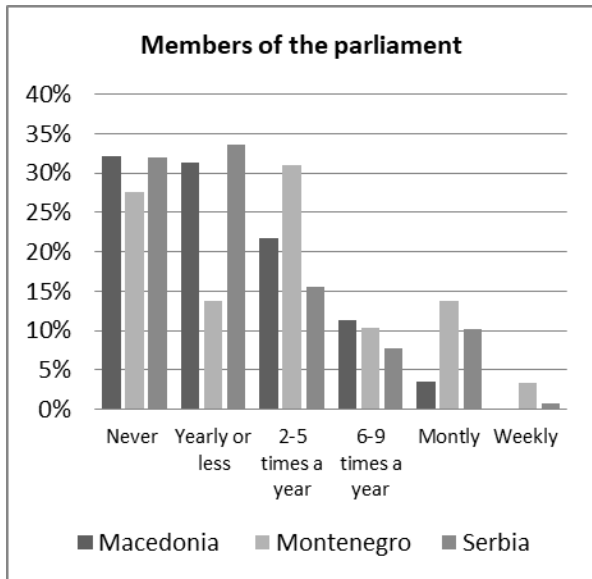
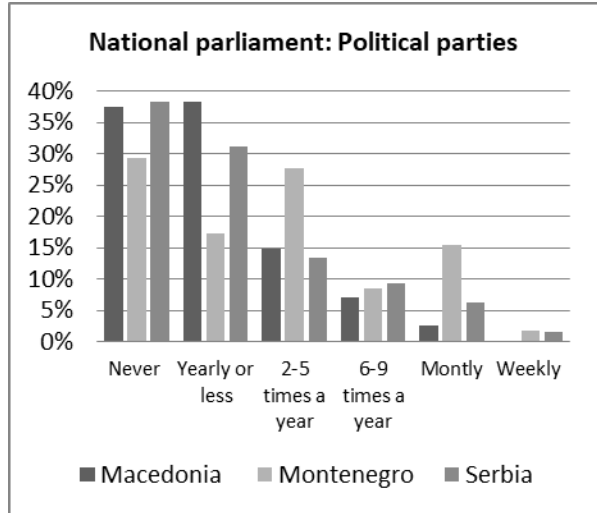
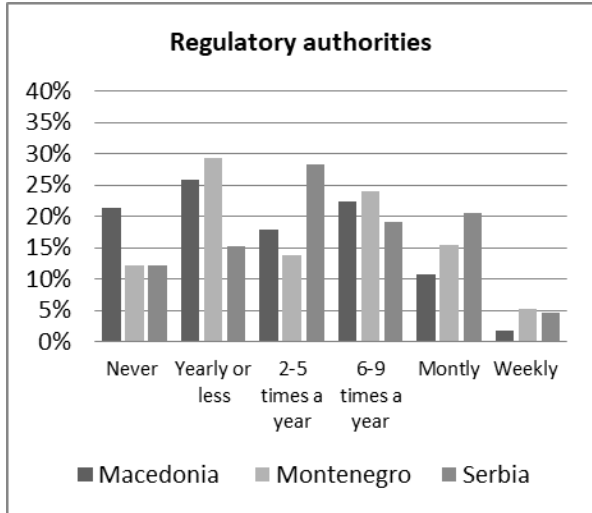
and Montenegro, and 19% of groups in Serbia are in contact with the top level of government between 6 and 9 times per year.

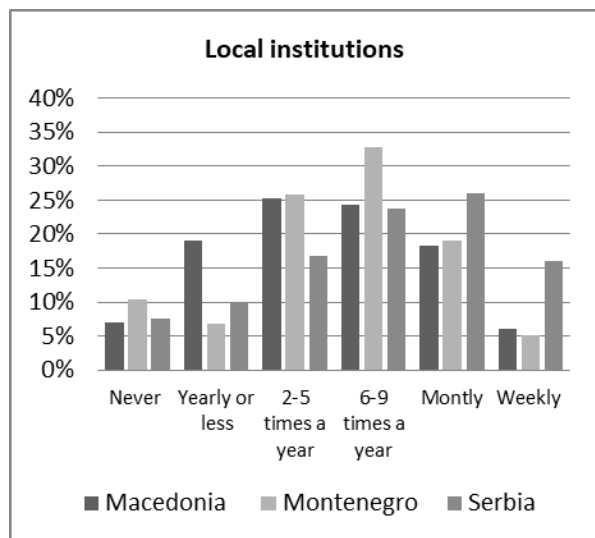
In **Serbia**, 25.2% of associations have frequent contacts with **national regulatory authorities**, compared to 17.7% of associations in Montenegro and 12.5% in Macedonia.

In contrast with the situation in Western democracies, interest groups are least frequently in contact with **national parliaments**, without important differences as to whether these contacts are with political parties, individual MPs or parliamentary committees. Groups in Montenegro have somewhat more frequent contacts with members of parliament, with 27.9% of the groups having at least 6–9 contacts per year. This is the case with only 14.8% of groups in Macedonia and 18.8% of groups in Serbia. Similar is the case regarding contacts with political parties in parliament: 25.8% of groups in Montenegro, 17.2% of groups in Serbia and 9.6% of groups in Macedonia have 6 to 9 contacts or more per year.

Figure 2. Contacts with national institutions







In accordance with the results of previous research (Beyers 2002; Dür and Mateo 2012; Fraussen and Beyers 2015), this survey found variations across types of groups with regard to frequency of contacts with institutions. Business groups have the most frequent contacts with almost all political institutions, while NGOs have the lowest frequency of contacts, except with local institutions. Trade unions and think tanks also tend to have good access to most institutions, while professional associations are sometimes closer to business and at other times closer to NGOs. The differences, however, are smaller (and not statistically significant) in Montenegro. In addition, NGOs do not have more contacts with parliaments than other types of groups; in fact, business groups have better access to national parliaments than all other types of groups (though the differences are not statistically significant). This finding is in clear contrast with the findings of similar studies on Western democracies.

Participation in the work of national institutions

While consultation with interest groups in the course of the policy-making process is not a normative demand, and is sometimes even considered detrimental to democracy (Grant and Maloney 2007), in the unconsolidated/new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe national governments are actually being pressured to consult various interest groups when preparing public policies. These demands mainly come from the international organizations that these

countries aspire to join (the EU, most noticeably), and, to a lesser extent, from international organizations from which the countries in question receive some kind of developmental aid. Such demands are openly welcomed, and often taken advantage of, by interest groups in the respective countries. This feature is changing in the West as well with regard to contemporary neo-corporatist policy-making (Binderkrantz and Christiansen 2015). In this sense, another indicator of the good access of interest groups is that they take part in the work of national institutions. Thus, respondents were asked if they participated in any kind of advisory or permanent working body within domestic institutions, and how often they took part in the work of parliamentary committees.

No less than 53.4% of associations in Montenegro are members of these types of bodies. This is the case with 38.4% of associations in Serbia and 33.3% of associations in Macedonia. Business associations tend to have more seats in advisory or permanent bodies within domestic institutions than do other types of associations, while professional associations hold fewer seats.

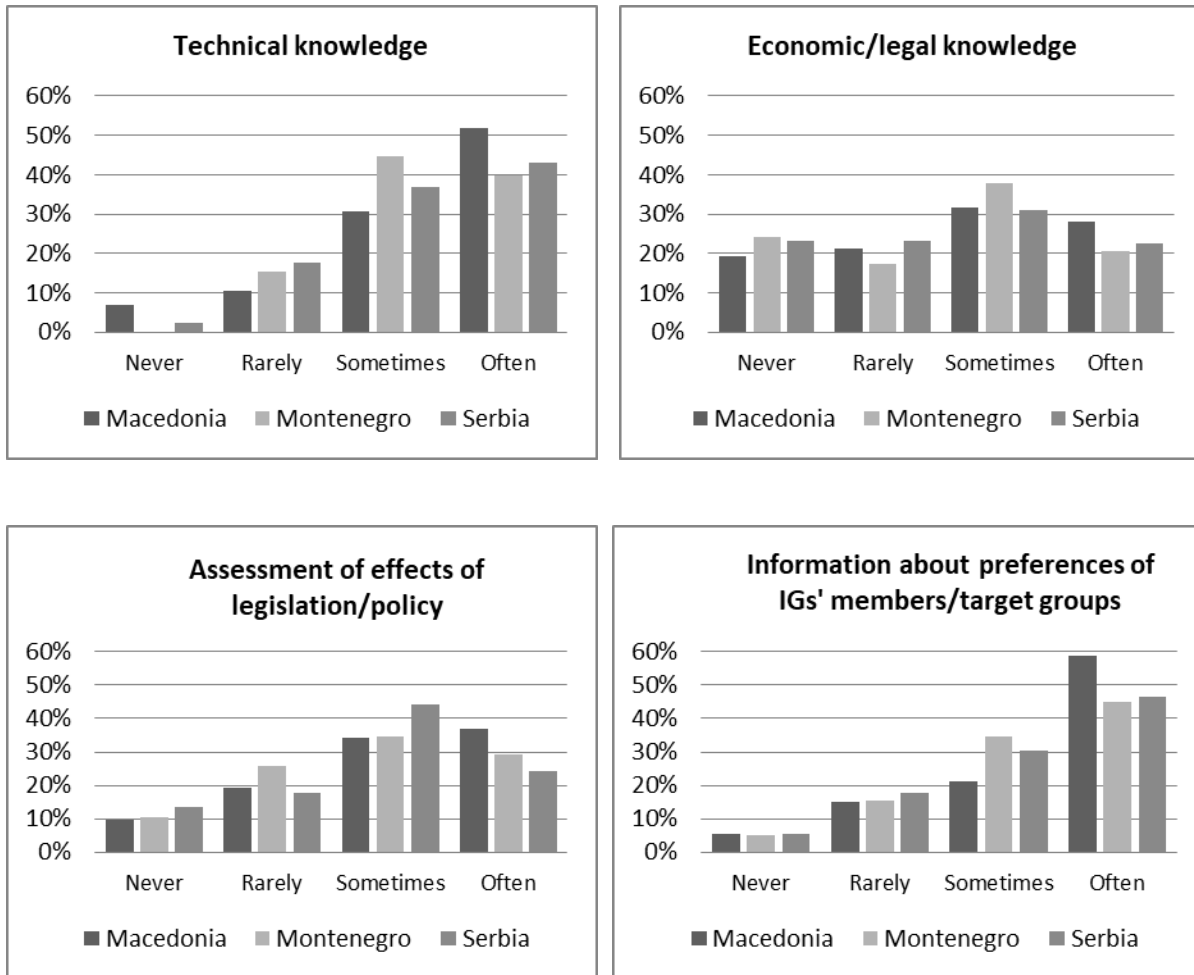
Although the constitutional designs in these countries allow for the participation of interest groups in the work of the parliamentary committees of national parliaments, once again in contrast with the developed democracies, where this venue is very important to interest groups, this practice is not well developed in the countries under study. 58% of associations in Macedonia and Montenegro and 65.1% of associations in Serbia have never taken part in the work of the parliamentary committees of their national parliaments. The large majority of the groups that reported having taken part in such committees had done so only a few times over the previous three years: 39.5% in Macedonia, 35.1% in Montenegro and 33.3% of groups in Serbia.

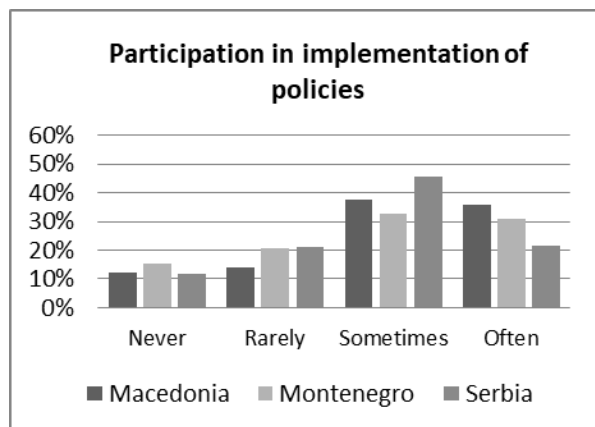
Types of resources that interest groups provide to institutions

As mentioned, interest groups provide a number of resources to political institutions, including technical information from their fields of expertise and political information (on the preferences of their memberships); they also provide help in the implementation of policies. The research results show that groups in all three countries most frequently provide both technical information and political information to political institutions. This suggests that even in these unconsolidated democracies, interest groups fulfil some of their basic democratic functions: to

provide resources and information about the needs of various segments of society to political institutions. Interest groups in Macedonia also provide assessments of the effects of legislation/policy and participate in the implementation of policies, somewhat more often than interest groups in Serbia and Montenegro.

Figure 3. Resources provided to institutions





In accordance with existing literature, technical information and expertise is more often provided by economic interest groups with stable membership and adequate financial and other resources. In **Macedonia**, around 80% of trade unions, business and professional associations provide economic or legal expertise at least part of the time, compared to 48% of NGOs and 60% of think tanks. Help in implementing policies is also less frequently provided by NGOs (67.2%) and think tanks (60%) than by the other types of groups, although the percentages of the first two are high as well. NGOs least frequently provide assessments of the effects of policies/legislation, while think tanks least frequently provide information on the preferences of their membership/target groups.

In **Montenegro**, technical/professional knowledge is less frequently provided by trade unions, although the percentage is rather high, with 66.7% of them at least occasionally providing this type of resource to political institutions. Economic/legal knowledge is least frequently provided by NGOs (36.6%).

In **Serbia**, trade unions (91.7%), business groups (77.7%) and think tanks (83.3%) provide economic/legal expert knowledge more often than NGOs (42.2%) and professional associations (40%). Information about the preferences of membership/target groups is somewhat less often provided by NGOs and think tanks (around 70%) than by other groups. Assessments of the effects of legislation/policy are least frequently offered by NGOs (58.3%), while professional associations least frequently take part in the implementation of policies (50%).

Conclusion

Based on the review of literature and the findings of the empirical study, we may address the question as to what is old and what is new in the relationship between the state and civil society in these new democracies. Sharing a similar context of democratization and Europeanization, and a common past within the past federal state, interest groups in Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia show remarkable similarities. Most of the research findings are in line with the conclusions of literature on interest groups. However, there are a number of interesting differences between interest groups in these new democracies compared with the older democracies. Among others, differences are evident in the functioning of neo-corporatist institutions, the population structure of interest groups, the age of interest groups (i.e., the date of their founding), their funding sources and their access routes to national institutions.

As previous studies on industrial relations have shown, the important neo-corporatist intermediary institutions in the new democracies are still undeveloped. They do not fulfil their main function – to negotiate important economic and social policies in order to provide stable economy and social welfare. Even though socio-economic councils are part of the constitutional arrangements in all countries, and although the EU's pressure for improving them is persistent, their development is still not a political priority for the political leadership. While certain steps are being taken, under pressure from the EU, progress is rather slow and these interest groups are far from their Western counterparts.

Another obvious difference is the predominance of NGOs in the population of interest groups. In contrast to Western democracies and the EU, where business associations have predominated in the populations for decades, in this phase of democratic consolidation, the number of NGOs and citizen associations in the interest groups population is more than 50%. Business interests are very concentrated and predominated by one large chamber of commerce, usually established during the time of Socialism. The pluralism of associations in this sphere became possible in 2005 in Macedonia and in 2013 in Serbia. As a result, several competing umbrella associations have appeared, trying to establish themselves as relevant national actors, but it will take more time for this situation to change substantially.

One of the most striking findings of the research is related to the relationships between interest groups and political institutions. As expected, aside from contacts with local government institutions, interest groups are most frequently in contact with executive institutions, where most of the legislation is actually prepared. The executive institutions are particularly powerful in these countries. On the other hand, in this phase of democratic development, interest groups rarely approach the national parliaments, even though these hold significant constitutional powers, not to mention that all three countries are parliamentary democracies. In addition, the practice of parliamentary committee hearings and participation of interest groups in the work of the parliament is still not developed. This weak relation of parliaments with interest group activities has been noted in previous research (Fink-Hafner, 2011).

Similar to corresponding studies on Western democracies, this study has found that business associations seem to have privileged access in the new democracies. Specifically, business associations have the most frequent contacts with all national institutions, except for the local government institutions. They even have better access to national parliaments, which, in Western democracies, are considered typical allies of citizen associations. Not only do NGOs have limited access to the parliament, but it is publicly visible that some of them have a confrontational, rather than cooperative, interaction with political institutions, and have complained of limited access to them. Similar is the situation regarding provision of information to political institutions. It seems the interest groups that are able to provide expertise and political information to institutions do enjoy access even in these new democracies, but this is most often the case with established interest groups, business associations, and trade unions, than with NGOs.

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