



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# The impact of the proportional electoral system on government stability: cases of Kosovo and North Macedonia

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### Abstract:

Government instability, or the duration of a government cabinet, is considered an important feature of democracy, and various authors have studied various alleged causes that affect government instability. This paper examines the impact that the electoral system - the way in which votes casted in national elections are translated into seats in the parliament - has on the instability of government in a democracy. Particularly, it examines the impact of the proportional electoral system on the instability of governments since governments formed in countries with this electoral system, in vast majority of cases, are coalition governments, with different parties, governance and legislative inefficiency due to internal conflicts and the continuing need for consensus. To examine the relationship between the proportional electoral system and government instability, the research for this paper employs different research methods. Following a literature review on the topic, it then focuses on comparative method where the cases of the impact of the electoral system on government stability in Kosovo and in North Macedonia, two neighbors in Southeast Europe with similar electoral system, size of population and number of registered voters, are examined and compared. The electoral system in both Kosovo and North Macedonia is a proportional system (List-PR). Kosovo had 7 different governments in 15 years, and North Macedonia had 10 different governments (including here 2 interim governments) in 20 years. These two cases confirm a correlation between the proportional electoral system that has always produced coalition governments in both countries, and the short duration of the two countries' governments.

**Keywords:** *Democracy, proportional electoral system, government instability, Kosovo, North Macedonia.*

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### **Introduction**

Government instability, defined as the duration in time of a government cabinet, is considered an important feature of democracy (Daniel et al, 2019), and various authors have studied different possible causes of government instability or factors that affect government instability. This paper examines the impact that the electoral system has on government instability in a democratic country. The government stability however, as other authors underline, is not the same as regime stability, example here being Italy, which, in the period after World War II has had a new government elected on average every six months but its political system has remained stable (Ball, A.R, and Peters, B.G., 2005: 295).

Although the electoral system is not the only factor that determines the stability of the government, the electoral system affects the stability of the government because the results of proportional electoral systems, in most cases according to the literature, create coalition governments with different parties. Coalition governments, compared to one party governments, tend to be more inefficient in governing and passing laws due to greater internal conflict and the constant need for consensus, which eventually leads to their breakup. As a scholar has explained, “the conventional wisdom” is that plurality systems are more effective than proportional systems because they are supposed to be less fragmented and therefore more decisive, while the proportional systems are supposed to encourage the multiplication of parties and be “more prone to give rise to coalition governments and to be less effective” (Menocal, A.R., 2011: 5). Another author has pointed out that “because of the distribution of seats in parliament, some parties are a necessary partner in more minimal winning coalitions” and that governing coalitions are more likely to contain “high power index” parties without which it is impossible to form a majority coalition (Andeweg, R.B. 2003: 43).

### **Literature on the relation between electoral system and government instability**

As early as 1896 a professor of government, Lowell, wrote that it is “an axiom in politics that, except under very peculiar circumstances, coalition ministries are short-lived compared with homogeneous ones, whose members are in cordial sympathy with each other” (Lowell, A.L., 2002: 214). To test this claim that coalition governments are short-lived, that is if there is relation between durability of government cabinets and the level of fragmentation of the party system in the parliament, researchers Taylor and Herman (1971) studied the data on 196 governments of countries that organized elections in the period of 15 years after World War II. They concluded that “a fairly strong relation exists between government stability and fractionalization of the parliamentary party system” and that “one-party governments were very significantly more stable than coalition governments” (Taylor and Herman, 1971: 37). The level of fractionalization of the parliamentary party system and the need for coalition government are largely the result of the electoral system.

Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis (2005:5) highlight the impact the choice of the electoral system has on the composition of the government in a country by claiming that “even with each voter casting exactly the same vote and with exactly the same number of votes for each party, one electoral system may lead to a coalition government or a minority government while another may allow a single party to assume majority

control”. They acknowledge that the “prospects for a stable and efficient government are not determined by the electoral system alone”. However, they also note that “the results a [electoral] system produces can contribute to stability”. Specifically, they claim that “as a general rule of thumb, plurality/majority electoral systems are more likely to produce legislatures where one party can outvote the combined opposition, while PR [proportional representation] systems are more likely to give rise to coalition governments” (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis, 2005:11).

The renowned scholar of electoral systems, Lijphart, has found that countries that are consensus democracies typically use the proportional electoral system (Lijphart, 1998:143) and that the proportional electoral system encourages multi-partism (Lijphart, 1998: 165). He too has noted that “electoral systems are also a crucial determinant, though by no means the sole determinant, of party systems” (Lijphart, 1998:144). Similarly, Sartori claims that electoral systems are important because they “shape the party system and affect the spectrum of representation” (1994: ix), although he is aware that a “large majority of scholars have argued that they [electoral systems] are not an independent variable, and/or that their effects are, at best, uncertain” (Sartori: 1994: 27). He points to authors who consider that the electoral system in a country is not a cause for the party system in that country but to the contrary a consequence, a result, of the already existing party system (Sartori: 1994: 27). Other researchers have focused on the relevance of ideological differences among coalition partners as a variable for government stability and other researchers have considered that stability of government does not depend on specific variables but on random events that bring down governments (Warwick, Easton, 1992: 122, 123). There is also research that has focused on the duration of ministers and prime ministers as an indicator of cabinet stability (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2005).

Often when electoral systems are selected or designed, the need to create representative space for different political voices or the need for greater government unity is taken into consideration. As explained by the Institute for Assistance in Democracy and Elections (IDEA), the selection of the electoral system is one of the most important decisions in a democratic country because the selection of the system affects the future of political life in that country, and once the electoral system is elected it lives long without undergoing major changes (Reynolds, Reilly, Ellis, 2005: 1), because political interests organize around a particular electoral system to maintain their benefits from that system. However, even when designing electoral systems, it is not always possible to predict how they will work in practice over time.

The electoral system is most often defined as the way in which votes cast in elections are translated into seats (Norris, 1997). Electoral systems can differ in many of their features, but their categorization is mainly done from the aspect of the electoral formula. According to this aspect in the literature most often these systems are divided into majority, proportional, semi-proportional and mixed systems. The categorization by the Institute for Democracy and Election Assistance, IDEA, divides electoral systems into three families, which are then divided into subfamilies. These three main families are: pluralistic/majoritarian systems, proportional systems, and mixed systems. (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis, 2005: 3, 28). In pluralistic /majority systems, the winner is the candidate who received the most votes even if he/she did not win an absolute majority. In proportional systems, the percentage of votes a party has won in an election

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translates to approximately the same percentage of seats in parliament. This also applies to the party that has won for example only 10 percent of the vote.

Lijphart writes that “the basic aim of proportional representation is to represent both majorities and minorities, and instead of overrepresenting or underrepresenting any parties, to translate votes into seats proportionally” (Lijphart, 1998:143). Sartori (1995:3) explains that “in proportional systems winning is shared” and that “while all proportional systems are required to translate votes into seats in 'some proportion', this proportion ranges from a quasi-perfect correspondence to a highly imperfect, i.e., highly disproportional one”.

Due to this need to share the electoral victory, or more precisely to divide the parliamentary seats proportionally to the vote won, we assume that it is the proportional electoral system that affects the instability of governments. In a report to Council of Europe on the impact of electoral systems on the political process in the Council of Europe member countries, Lekberg suggests that “the common conclusion” is that the proportional electoral system produces unstable governments. The governments in countries with proportional electoral system tend to be unstable because they are weak coalition governments of several parties, created by deals between the parties. Lekberg notes that government instability in a country with proportional electoral system can also be a result of the possibility that small, extremist, parties may hold the balance of power in parliament. (Lekberg, 2000). Other authors have concluded similarly that “the most important feature of the party-list proportional representation electoral systems is the stimulation for establishing multi-party systems that often results in establishing coalitions and coalition governments” and that this “could be considered a shortcoming of the electoral system having in mind that most of the parties and the broader coalition governments often cause destabilization on the political scene, as well as establishment of unstable governments that have a problem with effective decision-making” (Atanasov, Z. et al. 2022: 15).

### **Two case studies of similar countries with proportional electoral systems**

To examine the relationship between the proportional system and government instability, research for this paper has used a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Following the literature review on the topic, it focuses particularly on the comparative method. It examines and compares the cases of the proportional electoral systems and government stability in the Republic of Kosovo and in the Republic of North Macedonia. These two neighboring countries are part of the region of Southeast Europe. They have an approximate population: around 1.8 million live in Kosovo and around 2.1 million people live in North Macedonia. Moreover, they have an approximate number of registered voters in their last parliamentary elections: about 1.85 million in Kosovo and about 1.82 million in North Macedonia. Also, the parliament in both countries has 120 seats.

There may be other variables affecting the government stability, but this research focuses on the impact of the electoral system. More specifically, the study focuses on the electoral systems at the national level, not at the local level. Electoral systems have been compared to better understand their impact on the country's political stability, or more precisely on government stability. The research focuses only on the variable of the electoral formula, that is the type of electoral system (pluralistic /majority, proportional, mixed, or other), and not on the variable of the type of ballot, whether only one name or several names are rounded when casting the ballot, nor on the

size of the constituency. The variable that is intended to be understood is the duration of government. On the other hand, in addition to the impact on government stability, the studies on the consequences of electoral systems can also focus on the impact of electoral system on the representation of women and minorities, on the representation of certain communities, on the level of turnout or the participation of diaspora. However, this paper deals only with the impact that the electoral system has on the stability of the government of a country.

Electoral systems for parliamentary elections in both Kosovo and Northern Macedonia belong to the same type or family, that of Proportional Systems. In addition, both these systems belong to the same subtype, they are List-PR Systems. This subtype of electoral systems is most prevalent in the world as it is implemented in 35 percent or 70 of the 199 states and territories studied by IDEA, 28 of which are in Europe.

### **The case of the Republic of Kosovo**

The electoral system in Kosovo is a proportional system with open lists of candidates. The Parliament of Kosovo has 120 seats, including 20 seats guaranteed for representatives of ethnic minority political parties. The country is just one constituency. There is also a representation threshold of 5% of the vote.

Although parliamentary elections using the proportional electoral system have been held in Kosovo since 2001, this paper focuses on the stability of the governments of Kosovo after the declaration of independence of Kosovo, in February 2008. This because the electoral system has remained unchanged (Kosovo Democratic Institute, 2013). Even before Kosovo declared itself independent, in the period when Kosovo was governed by the UN Interim Administration in Kosovo (BTI 2022 Country Report - Kosovo: 4), electoral results in terms of government stability tended to be similar. KIPRED Institute has noted in an evaluation of the electoral system of Kosovo in 2005 that “due to the necessity to mediate and to obtain consensus from many political entities, the government is vulnerable to collapse”, and that the government in Kosovo can be strong only if the biggest parties “can agree on dividing the spoils, and if they can overcome fundamental differences” (Malazogu, L. and Dugolli, I. 2005: 10).

Since the declaration of independence in 2008, in a period of 15 years, the Republic of Kosovo has had seven (7) different governments, none of which has completed its full mandate, as they resigned or were dismissed with a motion of no confidence. During this period Kosovo also had to organize five (5) early elections (Central Election Commission, 2022).

- After the 2007 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: PDK (34 seats), LDK (28 seats), and minority parties.
- After the 2010 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: PDK (32), AKR-PD (8) and Lista Rugova (1).
- After the 2014 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: PDK (36), LDK (33), and minority parties.
- After the 2017 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: PDK-AAK-NISMA (39), AKR (2) and minority parties.
- After the 2019 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: LVV (30), LDK (28), and minority parties (This government was voted out in parliament in record time, after only 51 days).
- In 2020, a new coalition government was formed: LDK, AAK, NISMA, and minority parties.

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- After the 2021 early elections, a new coalition government was formed: LVV (58) and minority parties (20).

Kosovo's multi-party system, encouraged by the proportional electoral system, implies the need for government coalitions and "elections are usually followed by an 'interim' period of government formation, often triggering political crises" (Matias, B. 2021: 8). Once established, the governing coalitions tend to be unstable due to differences between coalition partners (Isufi, P. 2019). A study by the GLPS think-tank on the duration of governments in Kosovo notes that the fractionalization and polarization of Kosovo's party system has led to the formation of minimal-winning coalitions, which often fail to govern efficiently.

### **The case of the Republic of North Macedonia**

The electoral system in Northern Macedonia is a system that belongs to the family of proportional systems and is based on candidate lists. The voter votes only once and there is only one list of candidates to be voted for. The country is divided regionally into six electoral units which each elect 20 MPs. There is no electoral threshold and the candidate lists are closed. The national parliament consists of 120 members, all directly elected at the same level but in six different constituencies, and up to 3 additional members elected by the diaspora (Council of Europe, 2012).

The full proportional system was used for the first time in the parliamentary elections in 2002. This was preceded by a mixed electoral system used in the parliamentary elections of 1998, which again resulted in coalition government. Since 2002, in 20 years, in North Macedonia, five (5) early elections were held (State Election Commission), and ten (10) government cabinets, including here two (2) interim technical governments, were elected.

The following coalition governments were created:

- In 2002, a coalition government was formed by: SDSM-LDP (60 seats), and BDI, (16 seats). (Meta.mk, 2017).
- In 2006, a coalition government was formed by: VMRO-DPMNE (45), DPA (11), NSDP (7), VMRO-People's Party (6), DOM (1) and PEI (1).
- After 2008 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: VMRO-DPMNE (63) and BDI (18).
- After 2011 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: VMRO-DPMNE (56) and BDI (15).
- After 2014 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: VMRO-DPMNE (61) and BDI (19).
- After 2016 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: SDSM 49, BDI (10) and the Alliance for Albanians (3).
- After 2020 early elections, a coalition government was formed by: SDSM (46) and BDI (15).
- In 2022, a new coalition government was elected comprised of SDSM-LDP, BDI, and Alternativa.
- In addition, in 2016 and 2020, two more technical coalition governments had been elected, tasked to facilitate the upcoming elections of the time.

A recent study on North Macedonia's electoral system by National Democratic Institute (NDI), although it does not directly discuss the impact of the electoral system on the stability of the government, has found that if North Macedonia would have used the majority/plurality electoral system its parliament would have been less

fractionalized. The study which compares the results of a simulation of the 2020 parliamentary elections with a majority/plurality system with the real results of the elections with the existing proportional system concludes that “this electoral model almost fully eliminates small parties and independent candidates, considering that none of the small parties would be even close to winning a seat at the 2020 elections” (Atanasov, Z. et al., 2022: 27).

### **Conclusion**

The case of the Republic of Kosovo and that of the Republic of Northern Macedonia confirm a correlation between the proportional electoral system and the short duration of the governments of the two countries. The findings can't claim that the electoral system has caused the instability of governments in these two study cases, but they can conclude that there is an important correlation given that the electoral system in both countries has always produced coalition governments which did not survive until the end of their mandate. In Kosovo, electoral system reform efforts have been ongoing since 2011. (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2018). Similarly, in North Macedonia there have continuously been discussions but about minor changes to improve some aspects of the electoral system (Marusic, 2019). Government instability, insofar as it is influenced by the proportional electoral system, will continue to be a characteristic of the political system of these two countries. This may have negative impact on the public policies and the economy of the two countries.

However, despite the findings, this paper does not recommend changing the electoral system in Kosovo and in North Macedonia to a majority/plural system in the hope of ensuring greater government stability. Smaller changes such as the number of electoral units or the vote threshold may be considered. Since societies in both Kosovo and North Macedonia continue to have strong political and other divisions, and continue to display post-conflict characteristics, the proportional system may still ensure better representation of different voices in the two societies. Both Kosovo and North Macedonia are relatively young democracies in Europe and with time the efficiency of coalition-formation and decision-making in coalition governments may improve. There could be other causes for government instability, which could be addressed, and which should certainly be studied to better understand the causes of government instability. These may include the political system, external challenges, the capacity of public administration and civil service, level of resources, corruption, politicization or the political culture.

### **Authors' Contributions**

The authors contributed 60:40 to this work: Lundrim Aliu 60% and Jonuz Abdullai 40%.

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