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CLIENTELISTIC LINKAGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: DALP II EXPERT SURVEY EVIDENCE**

This paper examines the role of clientelism as a mobilization strategy in the Western Balkans, focusing on its interplay with other linkage strategies and its two primary sub-types: electoral and relational clientelism. Drawing on data from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project II (DALP II) expert survey, the study covers six party systems: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The findings reveal that clientelism is one of the most frequently employed strategies in the region, characterized by durable linkages between parties, brokers, and voters, the distribution of public resources, significant use of negative inducements, and targeting across income groups. Relational clientelism, or patronage, emerges as the dominant form, extending beyond electoral goals to function as an organizing principle within party structures. This paper contributes to the understanding of clientelism in the region and highlights its implications for democratic accountability and governance.

Key words: *Clientelism. – Patronage. – Political mobilization. – Western Balkans. – DALP.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political parties in the Western Balkans and beyond employ a diverse range of strategies to engage and mobilize supporters. These supporters are mobilized primarily to secure votes during elections and, additionally, to participate in party organizational infrastructures. The literature broadly recognizes two general types of linkages resulting from mobilization activities: programmatic and non-programmatic linkages (Kitschelt 2000; Kitschelt, Wilkinson 2007; Stokes *et al.* 2013; Nichter 2018). Programmatic mobilization (and the corresponding linkage) is rooted in ideology, issue distinction, and clearly articulated party programs (Luna, Rosenblatt, Toro 2014), resulting in publicly known criteria for resource distribution (Stokes *et al.* 2013, 7). In contrast, non-programmatic mobilization lacks clear ideological or policy goals, relying instead on public signals that do not address distributive issues, even though parties may covertly engage in resource allocation. While programmatic mobilization is generally viewed as preferable from a democratic governance perspective (Stokes 2005), non-programmatic strategies have become widespread across various political systems.

Among non-programmatic linkage strategies, one is particularly significant worldwide – especially in what is commonly referred to as the “developing world”. This strategy, which has far-reaching social, political, and economic implications (Hicken 2011), is political clientelism, defined as the contingent exchange of material benefits for political support. Clientelism stands out as a central non-programmatic linkage because of its emphasis on covert resource distribution and its capacity to shape the relationship between parties and supporters in profound ways.

The “Western Balkans” is a political designation referring to six polities on the Balkan Peninsula aspiring to join the European Union: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. These nations are often characterized by incomplete democratic institutions, pervasive corruption, and abuses of authority at the highest levels of government. Existing research on clientelistic linkages in the region spans various disciplines, often focusing on party–voter relations or interactions with other actors, such as private companies or civil associations (Cvejić 2016; Brković 2017; Stankov 2020; Bliznakovski 2020; *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans* 2021; Cvetičanin, Bliznakovski, Krstić 2023; Imami 2023). Common findings highlight the involvement of public funds in clientelist linkages, increased clientelistic activity by ruling parties, and the durable nature of these connections. However, little research explores how clientelism operates in conjunction with other linkage strategies.

Additionally, most existing studies are limited in scope, focusing on specific polities in the region, sectors or actors. This paper addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the political parties' efforts in political clientelism in the Western Balkans and its interplay with other mobilization strategies, both programmatic and non-programmatic. Additionally, the paper examines the efforts political parties devote to two distinct sub-strategies of clientelism: electoral (one-time interactions, such as vote buying; Nichter 2008) and relational (continuous, iterative interactions; Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, Nichter 2014; Nichter 2018; Yıldırım, Kitschelt 2020).

The study draws on data from the second wave of the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Survey (DALP), conducted globally between 2022 and 2024, with data collection in the Western Balkans occurring during 2023. DALP II, an expert survey, measured various party targeting efforts, with a particular focus on clientelism. This data enables an analysis of the interplay between different mobilization strategies and clientelist sub-strategies within party portfolios. Existing empirical studies in political science on clientelism in the region (e.g. Stankov 2020; Bliznakovski 2020) and elsewhere (e.g., Brusco, Nazareno, Stokes 2004; Çarkoğlu, Aytaç 2015; Kramon 2016; Mares, Young 2018) often rely on general population surveys or field experiments to approximate levels of clientelist mobilization. However, these approaches struggle to differentiate between the clientelist efforts of individual parties or assess the diversity of mobilization strategies within parties. By contrast, the party-level data derived from the DALP expert survey allow for a more nuanced understanding of these issues, offering insights into the role of clientelism relative to other strategies and the reliance on different clientelist sub-strategies. Although expert surveys have limitations for inference, they provide valuable tools for advancing our understanding of political clientelism in the region and beyond.

The findings presented in this paper – derived from descriptive statistical analysis – indicate that political clientelism is one of the most widely utilized political mobilization strategies in the Western Balkans. The evidence suggests that clientelism is generally pursued through the distribution of state-sponsored benefits, the use of negative inducements (threats and sanctions toward clients), and the establishment of long-term linkages. Moreover, it engages individuals from diverse income groups and brokers who are durably connected to political parties by specific traits. Collectively, these findings indicate that relational clientelism (or patronage) is the dominant form of clientelism in the region, rather than electoral clientelism. More broadly, the findings suggest that clientelism serves not only electoral purposes but also the long-term goal of building and sustaining political party organizations.

This paper is organized as follows: the next section addresses conceptual issues. First, I discuss variations in political mobilization strategies, emphasizing the degree of (non-)programmatisms in clientelism compared to other strategies such as charismatic politics, populism, issue-based politics, and descriptive representation. Second, I elaborate on the varieties of political clientelism, distinguishing between electoral and relational (patronage) clientelism as two major sub-types. The subsequent section outlines the study's methodological design, including the measures derived from the DALP expert survey. Section four presents the findings, divided into those relating to the role of clientelism in overall party mobilization portfolios and those examining political clientelism specifically. The paper concludes with reflections on future directions for studying clientelism in the Western Balkans.

2. VARIETIES OF PARTY MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES

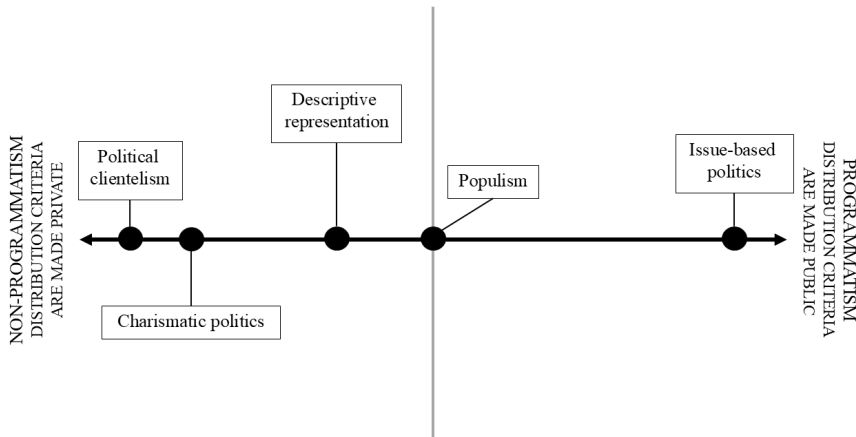
As outlined above, we may conceptually distinguish between strategies that rely on programmatic (publicly announced) distribution of resources and those that depend on non-programmatic (privately conceived) distribution. The former embodies the normative ideal of democratic politics in which political parties publicly announce their intentions pertinent to resource distribution (while arguing, for instance, for new legislation or a specific policy) and are expected to uphold their promises when in power. Moreover, if promises remain unfulfilled, this model would expect voters to “punish” the underperforming party in the elections. Therefore, the model of programmatic politics envisions politics as the competition of issue positions in which the parties attempt to capture voters with policy promises, and voters may “punish” parties if they fail to deliver, a game which gives control of the policy agenda to voters (for a broader conceptualization, see Luna, Rosenblatt, Toro 2014).

In contrast to programmatic politics, non-programmatic politics does not emphasize the public distribution of resources. Instead, parties either concentrate on instrumental ties, where resource distribution is privatized and directed toward loyal supporters or made conditional on previous or future political support (Stokes *et al.* 2013, 7). Alternatively, they focus on affective ties, which may be based on factors such as the charisma of leaders or certain descriptive characteristics of candidates or officials. Non-programmatic politics is a type of political mobilization strategy in which one of the central issues in politics – resource distribution – is eschewed

by political actors in the public arena, but resource distribution is often nevertheless performed (and in a way that directly affects political behavior) through private channels.

Although political parties can often be categorized as leaning toward either a non-programmatic or programmatic approach, they rarely rely exclusively on one strategy (Kitschelt *et al.* 2012). In practice, parties frequently combine elements of both approaches (Tzelgov, Wang 2016), using programmatic and non-programmatic signals to influence voters' electoral behavior. Rather than viewing political mobilization as a discrete category, it is more appropriate to consider it a matter of degree. This perspective emphasizes the extent to which parties rely on specific strategies rather than whether they employ them at all. Figure 1 illustrates this point, showcasing the primary mobilization strategies preliminarily observed in the Western Balkan region.

Figure 1. Strategies of party linkages with supporters



Source: author.

Figure 1 plots five strategies based on their levels of (non-)programmatism. These strategies include political clientelism, charismatic politics, and mobilization through descriptive representation, populism, and issue-based politics.

Political clientelism entails the reciprocal exchange of material benefits from politicians and candidates in exchange for political services provided by citizens (for a broader discussion on conceptualizing political clientelism see Bliznakovski 2021). Political parties and candidates, the patrons in the clientelist relationship, offer various material benefits such as cash handouts, consumable goods, employment opportunities, and access to

social benefits. In return, citizens and voters (the clients) engage in political acts ranging from simple electoral duties like voting and mobilization for grassroots organizing. Clientelist distribution is notably private, making it a prime example of non-programmatic political mobilization. Consequently, clientelism is positioned at the far left of the programmatic spectrum shown in Figure 1, underscoring its highly non-programmatic nature.

On the right-hand side of clientelism, moving toward increasing programmatism, we first encounter charismatic politics, followed by descriptive representation mobilization and populism. Charismatic politics relies on the personal charisma of leaders to build and sustain a political following (Kitschelt 2000). Although it does not directly address issues of resource distribution publicly (similar to clientelism), it differs from clientelism in that it does not engage in distribution at all, whereas clientelism operates covertly in this regard. Charismatic politicians may occasionally distribute resources to a small circle of associates, but this is not always the case, and its broader impact on political mobilization remains uncertain. Since charismatic politics lacks a distributive component, it is often combined with other strategies that directly address distributive concerns. Nonetheless, it is depicted in Figure 1 as incrementally more programmatic than clientelism due to its reduced emphasis on covert distribution.

The descriptive representation mobilization strategy targets voters by running candidates with specific demographic traits, such as ethnicity, language, race, and gender. While it does not directly address distributive issues, a party employing this strategy can, upon winning votes, secure positions within the state apparatus. This enables the distribution of both material and symbolic state resources to the particular demographic group it represents. Unlike clientelism and charismatic politics, descriptive representation indirectly publicizes distributive activities and implies distribution as part of its mobilization strategy, making it more programmatic than the former.

Populism is depicted at the middle of the non-programmatic vs. programmatic spectrum in Figure 1, due to its rhetorical emphasis on distribution. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, 6), populism is defined as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” When political parties or candidates employ populist rhetoric, they imply a direction of material and symbolic distribution toward “the people” at the expense of “the elite”. However, the specifics of this distribution often remain ambiguous, which positions populism at the middle of the spectrum in Figure 1.

In the spectrum of (non-)programmatic politics, issue-based policies are positioned on the far right, embodying the polar opposite of clientelism, which is located on the far left. Whereas clientelism involves private distribution, issue-based politics also entails distribution, but with the critical distinction of making it public. In issue-based politics, there is a concerted effort to articulate distributive stances, encompassing both material and symbolic aspects, and to actively promote party viewpoints publicly. This characteristic makes issue-based politics a prime example of a strategy for programmatic political mobilization.

The empirical inquiry in this paper is guided by the conceptualization of strategies illustrated in Figure 1. The conceptual framework presented in the graph should not be regarded as exhaustive; rather, it serves as an outline to guide the analysis conducted in this paper. Before moving to the empirical analysis, it is also essential to address the conceptual variations within clientelistic linkage-making.

2.1. Clientelist Political Mobilization

The notion that clientelist exchanges may vary in durability is not novel (e.g., Scott 1972; Eisenstadt, Roniger 1984). However, this idea has only recently been applied to contemporary political clientelism, distinguishing between electoral and relational forms (Nichter 2010; 2018; Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, Nichter 2014; Yıldırım, Kitschelt 2020). Electoral clientelism involves temporary exchanges aimed at influencing voter behavior during election campaigns. In contrast, relational clientelism entails long-term, iterative exchanges that establish enduring relationships between political patrons and clients. Empirically distinguishing between these two forms is important: the divergent dynamics of electoral and relational linkages require different strategic considerations by clientelist parties and their supporters, depending on the nature of the linkage. This distinction is relevant both for scientific analysis and for policy interventions.

One of the aims of this paper is to examine the nature of political clientelism in the Western Balkan region. The analysis seeks to provide insights into how the two forms of clientelism – electoral and relational – interact and overlap. While contemporary literature (with some exceptions discussed below) generally limits its focus to the durability of these sub-types, the fundamental difference in their durability invites further conceptual distinctions. In this subsection, I will outline additional dimensions of variation, incorporating both my own conceptual refinements and relevant contributions from the existing literature. The dimensions discussed are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of variation between electoral and relational clientelism

<i>Dimension</i>	Electoral clientelism	Relational clientelism
<i>Duration of the relationship</i>	Short-term (a one-time transaction valid for one election cycle)	Long-term (a series of transactions: benefits from the side of patrons, services from the side of clients)
<i>Objective from the point of view of political parties</i>	Obtaining electoral services from clients-voters (votes, turnout, abstention)	Obtaining broader political services from clients relevant for party functioning (mobilization activities during campaigns, other services beyond campaigns)
<i>Reliance on negative inducements</i>	Less	More
<i>Types of benefits distributed</i>	“Petty” benefits for clients (small amounts of cash, consumer goods, preferential access to less costly public resources)	“Grand” benefits for clients (employment positions, more costly public benefits, procurement contracts, subsidies, scholarships)
<i>Typical income groups targeted</i>	The poor	The middle class
<i>Typical types of brokers engaged</i>	Emphasis on groups that are not typically durably related to political parties (e.g. community leaders; violent groups)	Emphasis on groups that are typically durably involved with political parties (e.g. civil servants employed via patronage; party loyalists)

Source: author.

From the perspective of political parties, electoral exchanges (one-time transactions) are primarily effective in influencing short-term voting behavior. Relational exchanges, on the other hand, can affect not only voting behavior but also the broader political engagement among supporters.

Relational clients, for example, often provide sustained services to political parties, including grassroots mobilization during campaigns and beyond. In this sense, relational clients are arguably more critical to a party's long-term success than electoral clients, whose contributions are limited to isolated exchanges. Thus, clientelist exchanges may vary based on the specific objectives pursued by political parties, which may be purely electoral or extend to broader efforts by the party organization.

Recent literature acknowledges that political clientelism varies based on the types of inducements employed by political patrons, as examined by Mares and Young (2016; 2018). A distinction can be made between positive inducements (rewards) and negative inducements (threats and sanctions through cutting access to benefits). Both are used in electoral and relational forms of clientelism. However, building on Mares and Young's (2018) argument that negative inducements are more commonly directed at party loyalists (i.e., "core voters") during election campaigns, I posit that threats and sanctions are more characteristic of relational clientelism than electoral clientelism. This distinction arises from the assumption that relational clients engage in repeated exchanges, receiving benefits consistently outside of election campaigns and facing threats during campaigns when their involvement becomes critical for political parties. In contrast, electoral clients, whose relationships with parties are short-term and campaign-specific, face fewer consequences for breaking these clientelist links. As a result, they are less susceptible to negative inducements, which political parties use less frequently in such cases.

Political clientelism also varies by the types of benefits distributed (Albertus 2012; Bliznakovski 2020). The conceptualization outlined in Table 1 suggests that political parties adapt their clientelist strategies by using different types of benefits to target various income groups. Lower-income individuals are more likely to engage in transactions involving modest benefits, as these align with their material needs and require minimal effort, time, and resources. They are also considered suitable for providing less costly electoral services, due to their limited individual and networking capacities. In contrast, higher-income groups are less likely to be attracted by "petty" benefits and are better positioned to contribute to the party organization, leveraging their resources and networks for sustained political engagement. As a result, electoral clients are often associated with lower-value benefits, such as one-time cash payments or consumable goods, which are empirically more characteristic of one-time exchanges. Conversely, relational clients are linked to higher-value benefits, such as stable employment or significant public goods, reflecting the more sustained and demanding nature of their engagement.

Much of the literature on political clientelism presumes a direct correlation between poverty and clientelist targeting (e.g., Brusco, Nazareno, Stokes 2004; Stokes 2005; Jensen, Justesen 2014; Çarkoğlu, Aytaç 2015; Kamp Justesen, Manzetti 2023). However, recent research calls this assumption into question, suggesting that middle-income countries exhibit a systematic inclination toward relational clientelism (Yıldırım, Kitschelt 2020). This finding provides valuable insights into macro-level dynamics, but there is currently a lack of evidence to support the extension of this concept to the individual level. Furthermore, most established empirical linkages between poverty and clientelism derive from the examination of vote buying or other strategies of electoral, and *not relational* clientelism (e.g., Brusco, Nazareno, Stokes 2004; Stokes 2005; Nichter 2010; Jensen, Justesen, 2014; Justesen, Manzetti 2023). Therefore, investigating the notion that middle-income groups are also significantly engaged in clientelist behavior warrants attention.

Finally, Table 1 posits that clientelism also varies by the type of brokerage networks utilized. Depending on the specific context, various groups may theoretically possess varying degrees of importance for either of the two subtypes of clientelism. However, brokers who, by virtue of their inherent characteristics, possess a close affinity with political parties, such as loyalists and civil servants (assuming that many of the latter are indebted to political parties for their positions), are likely to be more characteristic of relational clientelism than, for instance, groups that may exhibit a greater propensity to shift their allegiance, such as local or community leaders and violent groups. Thus, one may also distinguish between electoral and relational/patronage clientelism by observing the groups of brokers employed.

The conceptual framework developed in this section will serve as the foundation for the upcoming analysis. The empirical exploration in the fourth section will examine indicators such as the longevity of the clientelist relationship, types of resources engaged, income groups targeted, level of reliance on negative inducements, and types of brokers involved. Although the assumptions proposed in Table 1 will not undergo a rigorous empirical test, an attempt will be made to demonstrate a pattern that is more characteristic of relational rather than electoral clientelism throughout the Western Balkans.

3. DATA AND METHODS

This research explores the extent of clientelist politics and its associated sub-strategies – electoral and relational – within the Western Balkans. Drawing on data from the second wave of the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP) expert survey (Kitschelt 2024), the study employs basic descriptive statistics to evaluate the efforts of political parties in various political and clientelist mobilization strategies. Within the survey, experts rated each political party based on various characteristics related to party traits and their linkage efforts. In this study, the individual expert responses are aggregated to produce mean values at both the party and party-system levels.

The survey received 105 responses from experts, with comparable participation rates across party systems. North Macedonia had the highest number of responses (23), while Montenegro had the lowest (12) (see Table 2 for the breakdown). The sample of experts who evaluated the parties was intentionally constructed, with relevant experts carefully selected and invited to participate in the survey. The resulting database is a valuable resource, offering systematic insights into party characteristics and linkage efforts in the Western Balkans. However, as with similar surveys, certain methodological considerations are warranted. Firstly, the non-probability selection process, involving both selection and self-selection biases, could potentially influence the results. Secondly, disparities in the number of responses across party systems create some imbalances, particularly when missing values are excluded during aggregation. While these limitations are inherent to such expert-based surveys, they do not detract from the overall utility of the dataset, which remains a crucial tool for understanding political clientelism and the related phenomena in the region.

Table 2. Breakdown of DALP II survey implementation
in the Western Balkans

	N obtained responses	N invited experts	response rate
Albania	19	61	31.1%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	16	61	26.2%
Kosovo	15	47	31.9%
Montenegro	12	38	31.6%
North Macedonia	23	62	37.1%
Serbia	20	64	31.3%
Total	105	333	31.5%

Source: DALP II dataset (unpublished); calculations by author.

The sample of parties was constructed while taking into account their recent electoral performance (encompassing electoral cycles between 2016 and 2023), including parties that had proven to be relevant for national politics, according to the number of votes or MP seats obtained. The list of all included political parties is provided in Appendix 1. The differing level of fragmentation among the Western Balkan party systems also creates imbalances in the number of observations used to construct the means at the level of the party system.

Yet, despite the above-mentioned limitations, and as we will see below, the findings are illuminating for unpacking political mobilization in the region. Expert surveys can be a useful tool complementing other more frequent methods deployed in the region to understand political mobilization, participation, and clientelist politics more specifically, such as general population or voter surveys.

3.1. DALP Items Used

The DALP II survey includes several items that enable us to analyze political clientelism within the Western Balkan context. Firstly, the survey features a set of questions designed to assess the extent to which political parties rely on specific linkage strategies, i.e., the effort exercised to

implement them. To measure the overall effort of party-voter clientelism, I rely on three survey items that assess the parties' efforts distribute consumable goods, preferential access to public social policy schemes and employment (each benefit corresponding to one item in Part B of the DALP II questionnaire). These three items are combined into an additive index, representing clientelism as an overall party-voter linkage strategy.

To account for the level of programmatic, issue-based politics, I use a measure developed by Kitschelt and Yıldırım (2024), which is a composite of various indicators of programmatism included in the DALP survey. For populism, I constructed an additive index comprising two items from Part D of the survey, measuring appeals based on (i) people-centrism and (ii) anti-elitism. Charismatic politics and descriptive representation are measured using single items from Part E of the survey. All survey items are detailed in Appendix 2, along with their coding information. To ensure comparability, the variables representing different linkage strategies are normalized between 0 and 1 and should be interpreted as reflecting a range from low to high effort.

The nuances of political clientelism are examined using another set of variables derived from Parts B and C of the DALP questionnaire. Most notably, the survey provides measures of the political parties' reliance on different positive clientelist inducements, including consumer goods, preferential access to public policy schemes, and employment opportunities. It also includes measures of the general use of negative inducements. Furthermore, the survey captures the longevity of clientelist linkages, the types of brokers employed, and the income levels of voters targeted using clientelist signals. The survey items related to clientelism are detailed in Appendix 2, along with coding information. These variables are not standardized and operate on different scales, which are specified in each analysis.

This paper adopts an exploratory approach, and all subsequent analyses rely on simple descriptive statistics to initially assess the data and draw preliminary conclusions on the relative use of clientelism compared to other strategies, as well as on the variation within different clientelist sub-strategies. In the following sections, I will present graphs showing mean values of party effort in different linkage strategies, including the reliance of political parties on negative inducements, the duration of linkages, the types of broker networks, and the profiles of voters targeted by clientelism. Alongside these graphical presentations, I will discuss emerging trends and dynamics in clientelistic and broader political linking throughout the Western Balkans.

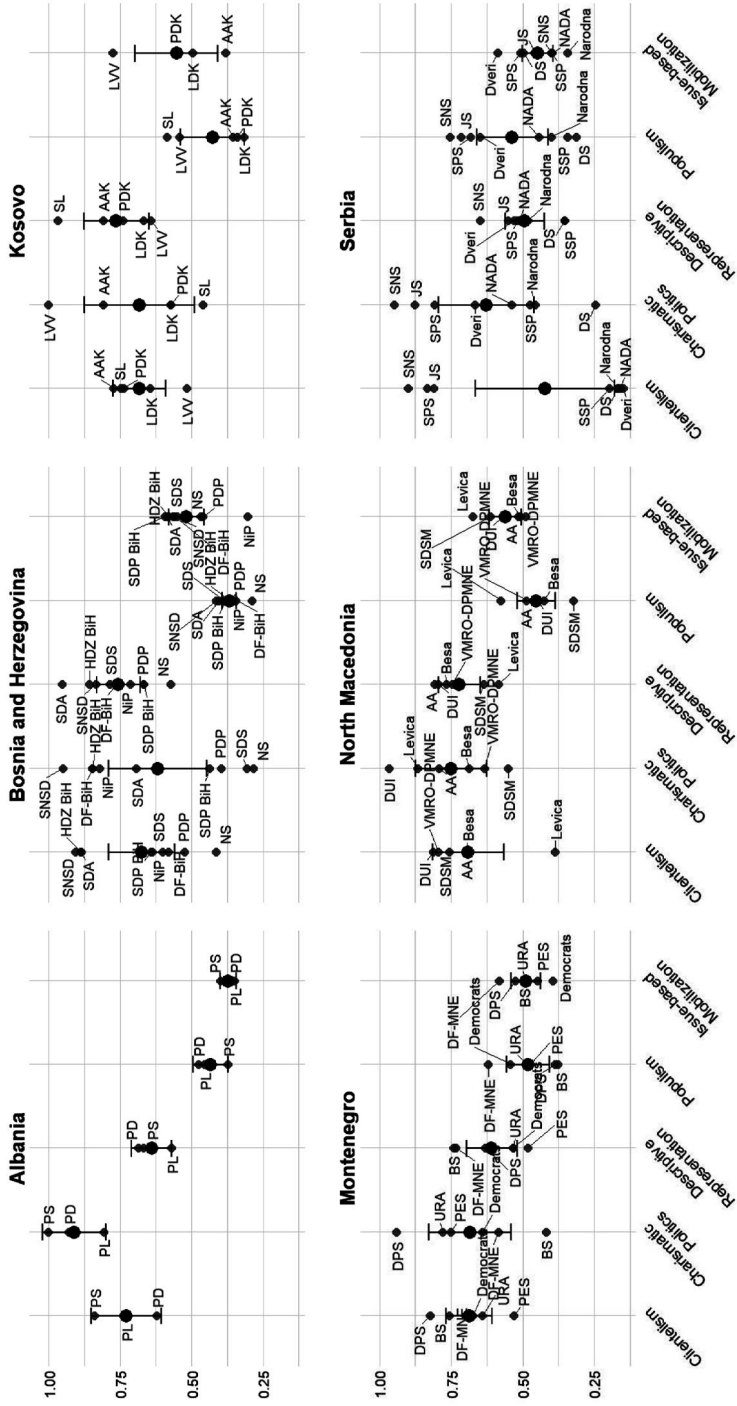
4. CLIENTELIST EFFORTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

This section examines the level of clientelist effort that Western Balkan political parties undertake in comparison with other strategies of political mobilization, such as charismatic politics, descriptive representation mobilization, populism, and issue-based politics. In addition, I also examined the reliance on the two strategies of clientelist mobilization through different measures that jointly give us a more reliable understanding of the nuances of political clientelism pursued in the region.

Examining the prevalence of clientelism in the mobilization strategies of political parties in the Western Balkans, a visual analysis of the data (see Figure 2) reveals a notable pattern that is fairly consistent across the region. Clientelism is among the strategies to which parties dedicate the most effort, alongside charismatic politics and descriptive representation, though the exact prominence of these strategies varies between party systems. Only in Serbia does clientelism appear, on average, as one of the least utilized strategies at the party system level. However, a closer look reveals that Serbia's party system includes three parties with exceptionally high scores on clientelism (relative to the region) and five others with exceptionally low scores, resulting in a downward bias in the aggregate party system measure. In all other party systems, clientelism is significantly present and is typically complemented by charismatic politics and descriptive representation, the latter being relatively more prominent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

An examination of the data for each party system yields even more insightful conclusions. Notably, the parties scoring highest on clientelism within their respective systems are typically those that have dominated their political scene in recent years. In Albania, this is the PS, which has ruled continuously since 2013. In Serbia, the three parties supporting or participating in the SNS-led government since 2012 (SNS, SPS, and JS) all scored exceptionally high. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the parties representing the three "constituent" peoples – Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats (SDA, SNSD, and HDZ-BiH, respectively) – all rank significantly high relative to the region. Similarly, in North Macedonia, the three major parties that have frequently formed governments in various coalitions since the early 2000s (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI) also score high, as does the decades-long ruling the DPS in Montenegro. Finally, in Kosovo, traditionally dominant parties, such as the AAK, the PDK, and the SL (a minority party that has participated in most governments over the past decade) all scored near the upper quartile of the scale and relatively high compared to the regional average.

Figure 2. Efforts in various linkage strategies in the Western Balkans



By the same token, the parties that are less frequent in government in the past decades have much lesser scores on clientelism across the board. This division is best present in Serbia, where all other political parties, apart from the biggest three, scored around the lowest decile of the scale. Other prominent examples of congruence between lower scores of clientelism and lower levels of participation in the executive power include the NS in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Levica in North Macedonia, and to some extent the LVV in Kosovo (taking into account that it only recently, in 2021, formed the government for the first time).

These preliminary findings suggest that clientelism is a strategy more widely pursued by parties in control of public resources, such as ruling political parties. Moreover, clientelism is extensively employed, comparable to charismatic politics and descriptive representation, and generally pursued with greater effort than issue-based mobilization or populism. Building on these takeaways, the analysis now turned to an examination of the sub-strategies of clientelism employed at both the party and party system levels, utilizing the various indicators available.

4.1. Clientelist Efforts Across Different Sub-Strategies

I estimated the prevalence of distinct sub-strategies of clientelist targeting in the region by utilizing a range of indicators. These indicators encompass the type of clientelist benefits distributed, the extent of negative inducements, the duration of relationships within the clientelist hierarchy, the types of intermediaries utilized, and the characteristics of the targeted voters. By synthesizing these insights, I aimed to ascertain the dominant form of political clientelism practiced in the region, not only at the regional level but also at the party system and party levels. In conducting this analysis, I was guided by the conceptual framework outlined in the first section.

When considering the types of directly distributed benefits to citizens (see Figure 3), the underlying conclusion at the regional level is that parties mostly rely on public resources as key benefits for distribution, primarily access to employment, and secondary, preferential access to public social benefits. Consumer goods seem less frequently utilized in clientelist targeting, especially in comparison with preferential access to employment, which scores high throughout the region. We find that employment scores a mean of over 3 (on a scale of 1 to 4) in five of the six Western Balkan party systems, with Serbia remaining the only exception due to the very low scores of the opposition political parties. However, the three biggest parties

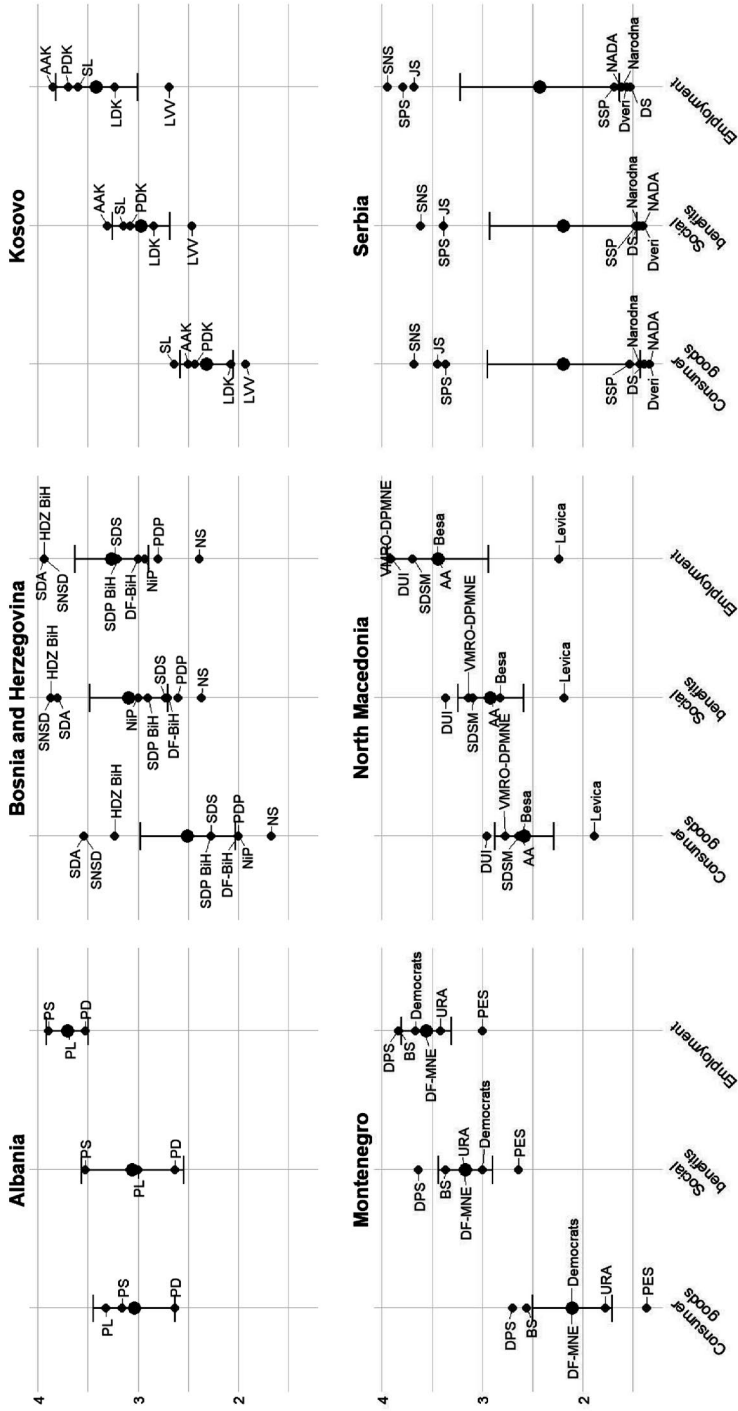
that endorsed the government in the past decade score an average of 3.81, a finding that leaves an impression of overreaching clientelist activity with employment positions as bargaining chips in Serbia too. The preferential access to public policy schemes averaged at least 3 in half of the six systems, with Kosovo and North Macedonia narrowly missing out on this criterion and Serbia's score being depressed due to the several opposition parties that practice clientelism to a much lesser extent than most of the other parties in the sample. The consumer goods indicator, however, surpasses the third level of the scale only in the case of Albania, and is visibly lower in four of the six party systems than the employment and preferential access to public policy schemes indicators, contributing to the evidence that clientelism in the region is mostly driven by the abuse of public resources, and less by the distribution of consumable goods.

It is noteworthy that long-standing client-based parties, such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDA, SNSD, and HDZ BiH) and Serbia (SNS, SPS, and JS), scored high and almost equally in all three indicators. This suggests a comprehensive targeting of the population with clientelist incentives, employing various sub-strategies to ensure favorable electoral outcomes. In Albania, two of the parties (PS and PL) exhibit a similar pattern.

Other systems display greater variability among political parties. In Kosovo, the AAK, the PDK, and the SL scored above 3 in all indicators except consumable goods, while the LDK achieved this value in only one indicator (employment). In Montenegro, several parties received ratings higher than 3 in both employment and social benefit provisions, but none exceeded this threshold in the consumable goods indicator. Finally, in North Macedonia, most political parties scored above 3 in the employment indicator, three in the social benefits provision, and none in the consumable goods indicators, with the DUI narrowly missing out.

Despite party system-specific variations, a consistent pattern that emerges is the prevailing reliance on public resources as benefits in the clientelist exchange. Conversely, consumable goods that cannot be directly classified as public resources are used less frequently, with some exceptions among the parties and systems. This observation suggests greater reliance on relational clientelism compared to electoral clientelism, a notion that will be further explored in the subsequent findings of this paper.

Figure 3. Benefits distributed via political clientelism in the Western Balkans



Source: DALP II dataset (unpublished); calculations by author.

Figure 4 presents the reliance on negative inducements throughout the region. Most of the biggest clientelist parties (per the analysis above) also show the greatest reliance on negative inducements, at least 3 on a scale of 1 to 4. These are the PS and the PL in Albania; the SNSD, the SDA and the HDZ BiH in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the SL in Kosovo; the DUI and the VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia; and the SNS, the JS, and the SPS in Serbia. The AAK, the PDK and the LDK in Kosovo all scored around 2.5, while the DPS in Montenegro scored 2.9 (with four other parties in Montenegro scoring around the 2.5 mark). These findings indicate significant reliance on negative inducements in the Western Balkans, and particularly by the biggest clientelist parties, indicating a characteristic of relational clientelism in comparison to the electoral. The extent of negative inducements, however, seems less pertinent than the extent of positive inducements, particularly when pinned against the measure of employment presented above.

The durability of clientelist ties is examined in Figure 5, which depicts the persistence of connections between parties, their clientelist brokers, and voters. Most of the parties previously labeled as devoting significant clientelist efforts tend to have the most enduring ties: the PS in Albania; the SDA, the SNSD, and the HDZ BiH in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the VMRO-DPMNE, the SDSM, and the DUI in North Macedonia; the DPS in Montenegro; and the SNS, the SPS, and the JS in Serbia. Notably, political parties generally maintain lengthier connections with brokers than with voters, except for the three parties in Albania and the LVV in Kosovo. Overall, experts rated the aforementioned parties at least 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 means “short-term” and 5 “long term”), and all of the party systems scored at least that level in one of the two indicators (brokers or voters). This suggests that clientelist ties are predominantly durable throughout the region, aligning with the idea of relational/patronage clientelism.

Figure 6 plots the types of brokers that are most frequently employed by the political parties. Across the region, parties rely the most on civil servants and party members (who are expected to be compensated for their mobilization work), in addition to local/community leaders, and occasionally (and depending on the specific party) on individual connections of the politicians and party members who do not expect compensation. Violent groups are very rarely utilized.

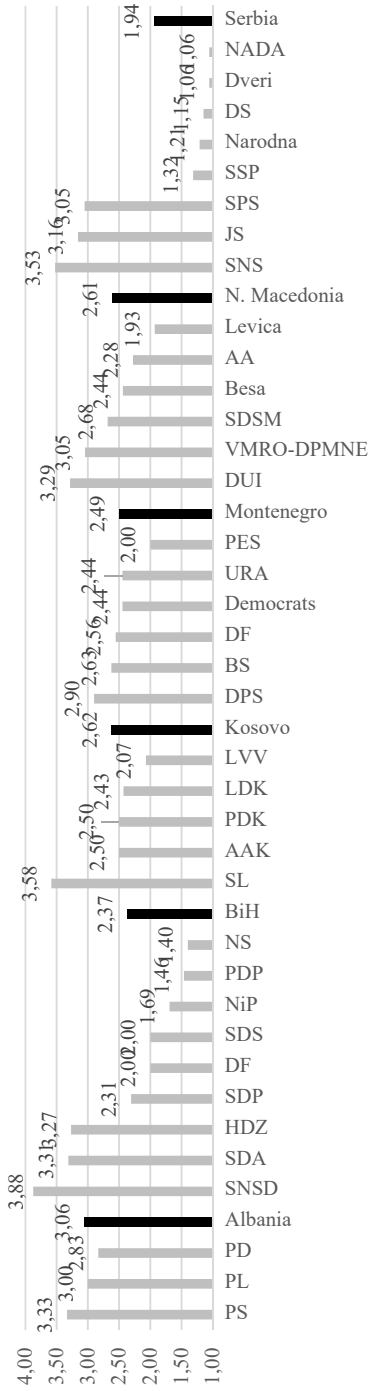
Civil servants are recognized as important with at least a mean of 4 (on a scale of 1 to 5) in all party systems, the same being the case for all (with the exception of Kosovo) when considering party loyalists who expect compensation, as well as all systems (with the exception of from Serbia and Montenegro) when considering local/community elites. The biggest

clientelist parties in the region generally rely on these three groups. Some of the major clientelist machines in the region also scored high (over 4) on the reliance on brokers who are individual connections of the politician: the PS in Albania; the HDZ BiH, the SNSD and the SDA in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and the DPS in Montenegro. A small number of parties (LVV in Kosovo and Levica in North Macedonia) scored high on intermediaries who do not expect compensation, while only the SNS in Serbia scored over 4 in the indicator “brokers as violent groups”.

While it is difficult to approximate on the basis of these finding alone, the combination of these and other findings given above once again suggest relational clientelism or patronage as the dominant clientelist linkage in the region. For instance, the civil servants who function as conduits of clientelist linkages are likely individuals who already receive clientelist benefits and perform clientelist mobilization as a part of a long-term linkage. The same goes for party members who expect compensation – they mobilize to be reciprocated as a part of an iterated exchange. The fact that these groups can be easily conceived as “relational” to political parties suggests a durable mode of operation.

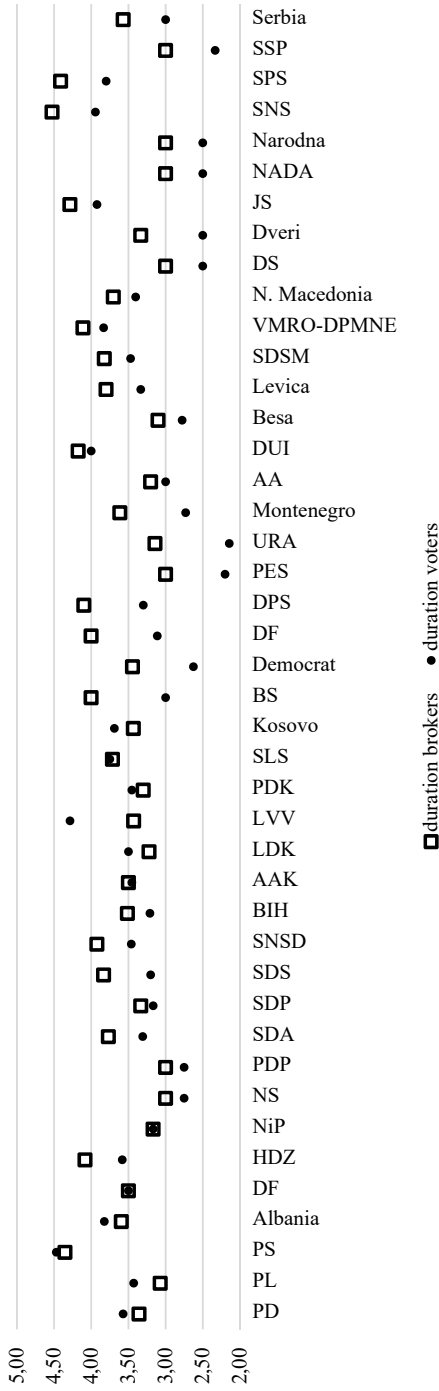
Finally, Figure 7 displays the primary targets of political parties, categorized according to income levels, utilizing small-scale positive inducements to convey the parties’ reliability when creating clientelist connections. Despite the common targeting of the poor with such incentives, many parties in the region also engage with higher-income groups, aligning with the expectations of a relational clientelism conceptualization. Examples include the SDP (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the AAK, the PDK, the LDK, and the SL (Kosovo), and the SDSM (North Macedonia), which target middle-income voters more than the poor. Several of the largest clientelist parties in the sample, such as the PS (Albania), the HDZ BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the DPS (Montenegro), the DUI and the VMRO-DPMNE (North Macedonia), and the SNS and the SPS (Serbia), engage with the middle-income group at values of around 0.6 and above (on a scale of 0 to 1). This implies increased reliance on income groups beyond the poor, corresponding to the concept of relational clientelism. While the measure carries an important limitation in focusing on signaling rather than the actual targeting, it still offers evidence in favor of the notion that middle-income groups are significant participants in political clientelism throughout the Western Balkan region.

Figure 4. Reliance on negative inducements in the Western Balkans



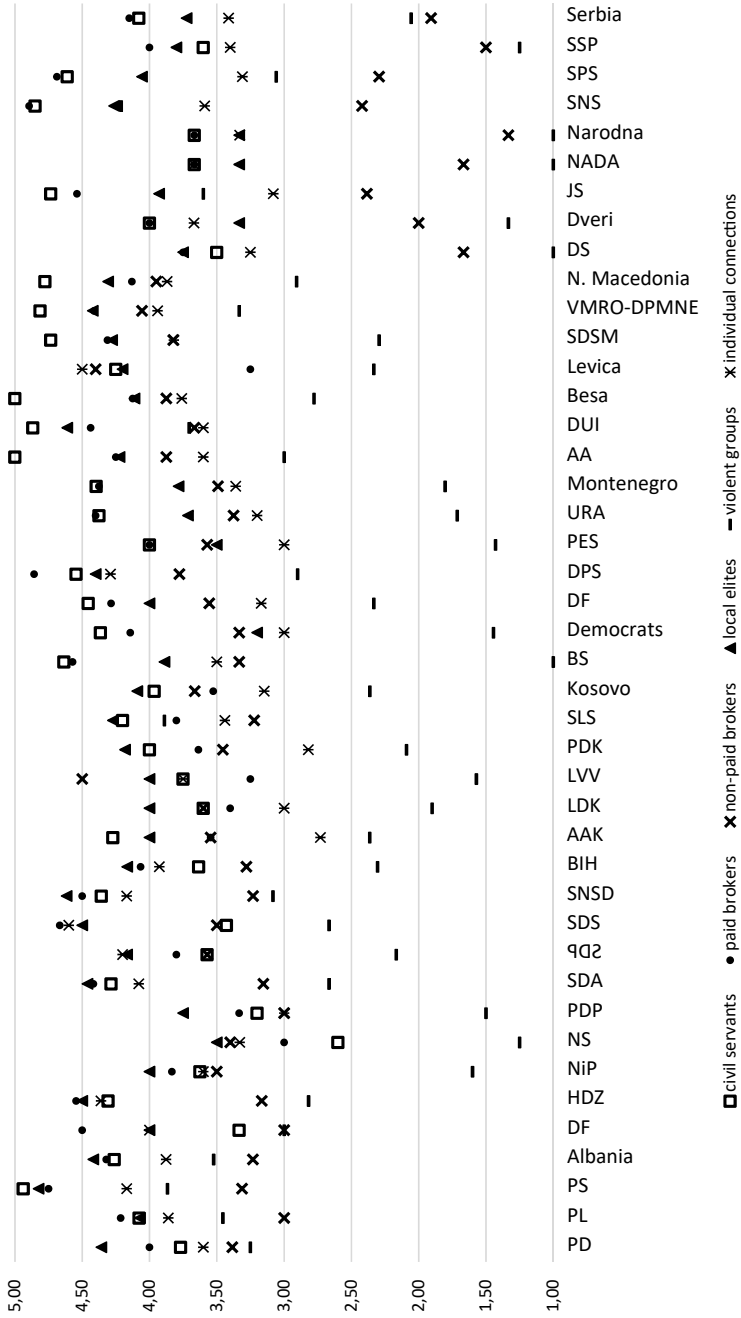
Source: DALP II dataset (unpublished); calculations by author.

Figure 5. Duration of linkages between parties and a) brokers and b) voters in the Western Balkans



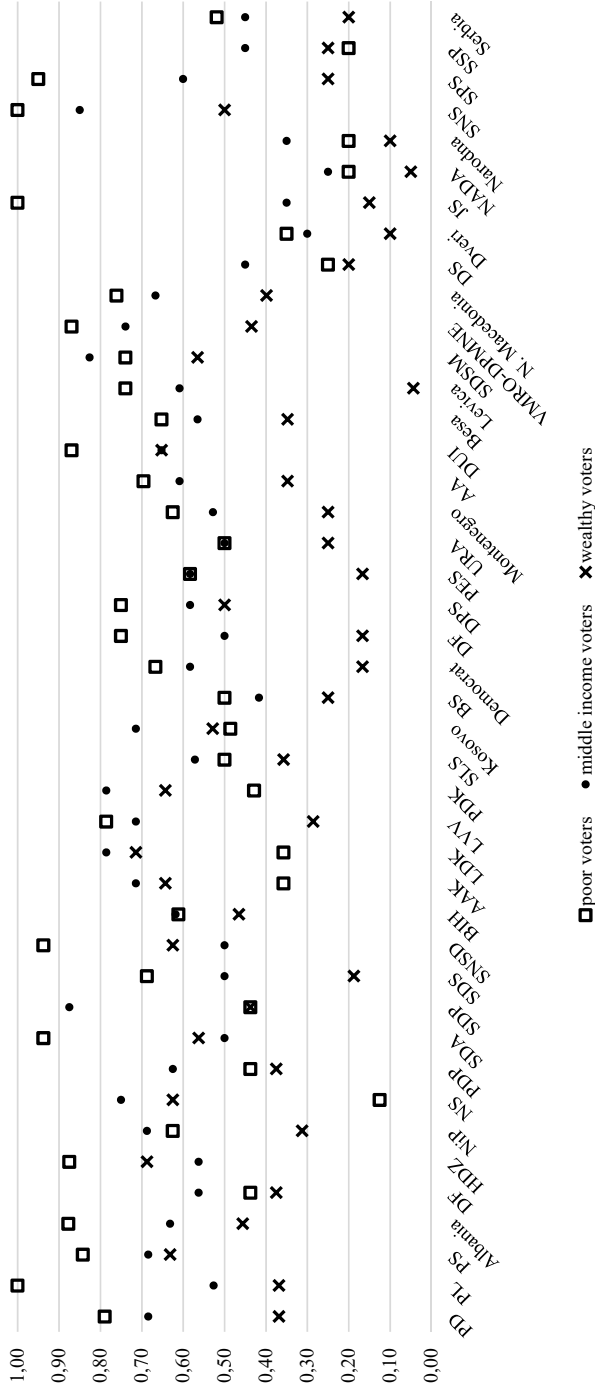
Source: DALP II dataset (unpublished); calculations by author.

Figure 6. Types of brokers engaged in political clientelism in the Western Balkans



Source: DALP II dataset (unpublished); calculations by author.

Figure 7. Voters “signaled” with clientelistic benefits in the Western Balkans, by income groups



Source: DALP II dataset (unpublished); calculations by author.

Overall, the findings in this subsection suggest that relational clientelism, or patronage, is more prevalent in the region's politics than electoral forms of clientelism. This does not imply that no political parties strongly practice both forms; however, the dominant pattern across the region is characterized by durable linkages with both voters and brokers, the distribution of public resources as key clientelist benefits, the application of negative inducements, engagement with specific broker groups long-affiliated with parties, and clientelist signaling directed toward diverse income groups, not exclusively the "poor". These findings indicate that political clientelism in the region serves not only to achieve electoral success but also to develop the organizational infrastructures of parties. Consequently, clientelist mobilization becomes deeply embedded in political life, extending beyond electoral cycles and influencing everyday politics.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to evaluate the prevalence of clientelist politics in the Western Balkans in comparison with other political mobilization strategies employed by parties. It also examined the extent to which parties relied on the two primary forms of clientelist mobilization: electoral and relational clientelism. To situate and guide the empirical analysis within the broader context of political science literature, the paper developed a conceptual framework that distinguished between different linkage strategies and the sub-strategies within clientelism. The empirical analysis drew on expert survey data on political parties in the region, collected during the second wave of the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP).

The study demonstrates that political clientelism is a prominent linkage strategy in the Western Balkans, frequently employed alongside other strategies at the party level. The extent of clientelist engagement varies across parties, with dominant parties (those in power or with access to public resources) exerting the greatest effort. At the party system level, despite the idiosyncrasy of Serbia – where a significant gap in clientelist effort between ruling and opposition parties depresses the overall party system score but does not diminish the broader pattern – clientelism consistently ranks among the most commonly employed strategies across the region.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that political clientelism in the region is predominantly of the relational or patronage type, although electoral forms of clientelism are also significantly present. The durability of party–voter and party–broker linkages, the reliance on public resources (particularly access to employment, where the highest party effort is identified), the

significant use of negative inducements, the frequent engagement of specific broker groups, and the inclusion of diverse income groups beyond just the “poor” – all point to heightened relational clientelist activity.

What do these findings suggest for the further study of political clientelism in the region? Firstly, clientelism is extensively present across the six party systems, as evidenced by its relative prominence among other distinct linkage strategies. It places a significant burden on public resources, as inferred from the available data, and perpetuates an unfair advantage for ruling parties. This dynamic creates a cascade effect, exacerbating challenges in combating corruption at the highest levels. Entrenched political elites, who subjugate the population via clientelism (see Cvetičanin, Bliznakovski, Krstić 2023), secure reelection and influence the judiciary from their positions of power, thereby directly entrenching corruption.

Studying clientelism, therefore, has significant real-world implications. Understanding how it operates and assessing its effects are essential steps toward mitigating its adverse consequences and fostering more equitable and accountable political practices. Clientelism in the Western Balkans is undoubtedly a topic worthy of further study, and the disciplines that have already explored it in the region (political science, sociology, anthropology, and economics) offer valuable insights. These fields provide complementary perspectives, examining the phenomenon from macro-level dynamics to micro-level interactions. Future research should continue, and fostering greater dialogue between these disciplines is essential to developing a more comprehensive understanding of clientelism and its implications.

Secondly, the study of clientelism in the region should advance with a deeper understanding of the nuances of clientelistic linking, particularly the distinction between electoral and relational clientelism. As emphasized throughout this paper, these two sub-types exhibit divergent dynamics for those involved. For political parties (which are the unit of analysis in this study) they may represent a strategic choice between directing efforts toward voters *or* supporters who contribute more extensively to party organizations – a decision that can vary depending on specific contexts and circumstances. Conflating these two sub-types in empirical research can lead to significant issues in scientific inference, just as such conflation would hinder effective policy interventions. For instance, research that conceptualizes clientelism solely as vote buying may underestimate its true prevalence, while policies targeting vote buying alone may address only a fraction of clientelist transactions. Given the evidence presented in this paper – that relational clientelism is more commonly practiced across the region than electoral clientelism – ensuring conceptual clarity in research focusing on mechanisms and effects of clientelism becomes increasingly important.

While this paper is limited in its focus to specific aspects of political linkage-making in the Western Balkans, it lays the groundwork for further research to explore these dynamics in greater depth. The insights presented here contribute to advancing the knowledge on political clientelism and mobilization strategies in the region, and hold potential to inform policy interventions aimed at fostering accountability and mitigating the negative impacts of clientelist practices. By identifying key patterns and distinctions, this study highlights the importance of continued exploration of political linkages in the Western Balkans and beyond.

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Appendix 1. List of political parties included in the study

Party system	Name (English)	Name (original)	Acronym
ALB	Socialist Party of Albania	Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë	PS
ALB	Democratic Party of Albania	Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë	PD
ALB	Freedom party (formerly: Socialist Movement for Integration)	Partia e Lirisë (formerly: Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim)	PL (formerly: LSI)
BIH	Party of Democratic Action	Stranka demokratske akcije	SDA
BIH	Alliance of Independent Social Democrats	Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata	SNSD
BIH	Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine	HDZ BiH
BIH	Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina	Socijaldemokratska partija Bosne i Hercegovine	SDP BiH
BIH	Serb Democratic Party	Srpska demokratska stranka	SDS
BIH	Democratic Front	Demokratska fronta	DF
BIH	People and Justice	Narod i Pravda	NiP

Party system	Name (English)	Name (original)	Acronym
BIH	Party of Democratic Progress	Partija demokratskog progresa	PDP
BIH	Our Party	Naša stranka	NS
KOS	Self-determination movement	Lëvizja Vetëvendosje	LVV
KOS	Democratic Party of Kosovo	Partia Demokratike e Kosovës	PDK
KOS	Democratic League of Kosovo	Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës	LDK
KOS	Alliance for the Future of Kosovo	Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës	AAK
KOS	Serb List	Srpska lista	SL
MNE	Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro	Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore	DPS
MNE	Europe Now Movement	Pokret Evropa sad	PES
MNE	Democratic Front	Demokratski front	DF
MNE	Democratic Montenegro	Demokratska Crna Gora	Demokrate
MNE	Civic Movement United Reform Action	Gradanski pokret Ujedinjena reformska akcija	URA
MNE	Bosniak Party	Bošnjačka stranka	BS
MKD	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	Vnatreshna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija – Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo	VMRO-DPMNE
MKD	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija	SDSM

Party system	Name (English)	Name (original)	Acronym
MKD	Democratic Union for Integration	Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim (Albanian) / Demokratska Unija za Integracija (Macedonian)	BDI (Albanian) / DUI (Macedonian)
MKD	Alliance for Albanians	Aleanca për Shqiptarët (Albanian) / Alijansa za Albanicite (Macedonian)	ASH (Albanian) / AA (Macedonian)
MKD	The Left	Levica	Levica
MKD	Besa Movement	Lëvizja Besa (Albanian) / Dvizhenje Besa (Macedonian)	Besa
SRB	Serbian Progressive Party	Srpska napredna stranka	SNS
SRB	Socialist Party of Serbia	Socijalistička partija Srbije	SPS
SRB	United Serbia	Jedinstvena Srbija	JS
SRB	Democratic Party	Demokratska stranka	DS
SRB	People's Party	Narodna stranka	NS
SRB	Party of Freedom and Justice	Stranka slobode i pravde	SSP
SRB	National Democratic Alternative	Nacionalno demokratska alternativa	NADA
SRB	Serbian Movement Dveri	Srpski pokret Dveri	Dveri

Source: author.

Appendix 2. Survey items from DALP II used in the study

Aspect of political clientelism measured	Survey item	Survey questions (without clarifications and introductions)	Response categories
Clientelism via consumer goods	B1	How much effort do candidates and parties expend to attract voters by providing consumer goods?	A negligible effort or none at all (1) A minor effort (2) A moderate effort (3) A major effort (4) Don't know (5)
Clientelism via preferential access to social policy schemes	B2	How much effort do candidates and parties expend to attract voters by providing preferential public benefits?	
Clientelism via preferential access to employment	B3	How much effort do candidates or parties expend to attract voters by providing preferential access to employment opportunities?	
Clientelism via negative inducements	B9	How much do candidates or parties rely on the threat of withdrawing social and occupational benefits, access to utilities and physical violence to voters unwilling to support them?	Not at all (1) To a small extent (2) To a moderate extent (3) To a great extent (4) Don't know (5) The party does not threaten voters with withdrawing benefits (6)
Durability of clientelist linkages: brokers	C2	Is the relationship between parties, politicians and their local promoters who organize the targeted, excludable voter benefits a short-term or a long-term relationship?	[1-5 scale] All promoters are short term (1) All promoters are long term (5) Don't know (6)

Durability of clientelist linkages: voters	C3	Is the relationship between voters and local promoters who organize the targeted, excludable benefits on behalf of parties and their candidates a short-term or a long-term relationship?	[1–5 scale] All interactions are short term, bounded by the campaign season (1) All interactions are long-term, continuously throughout the electoral term (5) Don't know (6)
Types of brokers employed	C1	How important and common are the roles listed below to characterize those local promoters?	[1–5 scale] Unimportant (1) Very important (5) Don't know (6)
Types of brokers employed: civil servants	C1_1	Municipal and other civil servants who work to promote a candidate or party through targeted benefits to prospective voters	
Types of brokers employed: client brokers	C1_2	Party members who expect financial compensation for their promotion of the party's electoral fortunes through distributing targeted benefits to electoral constituencies	
Types of brokers employed: programmatic brokers	C1_3	Party members who work for candidates as political activists without expectation of personal material benefit, but help to organize assistance for prospective electoral party supporters	
Types of brokers employed: local and community elites	C1_4	Local elites and notable individuals who endorse candidates that provide targeted exclusive benefit to electoral constituencies.	

Types of brokers employed: violent groups	C1_5	Social groups and individuals using violence and extortion to mobilize candidate support	[1–5 scale] Unimportant (1) Very important (5) Don't know (6)
Types of brokers employed: individual associates	C1_6	Individual associates who are not party members: These promoters are individual followers and associates of politicians running in elections.	
Types of voters signaled with clientelist inducements	B12	Do political parties make special efforts to attract members of one or several of the following groups with such inducements?	Poor voters (1) Middle income voters (2) Wealthy voters (3) Don't know (4)
Mobilization strategy measured	Survey item	Survey questions (without clarifications and introductions)	Response categories
Charismatic politics	E1	To what extent do parties seek to mobilize electoral support by featuring a party leader's charismatic personality?	Not at all (1) To a small extent (2) To a moderate extent (3) To a great extent (4) Don't know (5)
Mobilization based on descriptive representation	E9	Parties may sometimes choose national election candidates based on descriptive traits, such as their native language, region of residence, gender, religion, ethnicity or race.	

Populism	D6	Assess the extent to which parties and their candidates depict political competition in their partisan rhetoric as a struggle between two sharply contrasting camps: the honest citizen-politicians who are spokespeople of popular demands, represented by one's own party, and an unresponsive, unaccountable and deceptive elite, assembled around the opposing parties.	[1–10 scale] [1] Politics as struggle between right and wrong, honest citizen-politicians and deceptive elites [10] Politics as competition among politicians representing different trade-offs, about which reasonable people can disagree in good faith. [11] No clear position [12] Don't know
	D7	Assess the extent to which parties and their candidates focus on common people in their discourse.	[1–10 scale] [1] Identifies with the common people and celebrates their authenticity [10] Refers more generally to citizens and their unique interests [11] No clear position [12] Don't know

Source: author.

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