Regions and Regionalism in "New" European Union Member States: The Cases of Istria and Pirin Macedonia

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I, Andreana Kirilova Baeva-Motusic confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The research studies regionalism in two sub-national border regions, Istria in Croatia and Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria, by testing empirically existing theories on regions and regionalism. Identifying two regions where regionalism is likely to be strong, the research seeks to answer the question why comparable initial conditions have led to different levels of regionalism. While Istria has developed strong and stable regionalism with self-governance on political, cultural and economic matters, Pirin Macedonia's regionalism has been largely limited to expressions of its cultural specificity.

Theories on regionalism have been predominantly based on quantitative research of a large number of regions, which has often spanned across continents and time. Few contextual case studies have been carried out, in particular in "new" EU Member States where regionalism is altogether not widespread or at least not well articulated politically. This research provides such a contextual study and empirical backing of theories focusing on the factors leading to regionalism. Its findings indicate that economic and political uncertainly is more conducive for the emergence of regionalism than economic prosperity and political routine, but also that regionalism is more likely to be stable in the long run if it is built on such premises as affluence, cooperation and peaceful tackling of regional issues. Furthermore, at least in the case of "new" EU Member States, regionalism appears to be more about the vested-in interests of regional players than about processes of democratization and improved efficiency. An increased independence on the regional level appears to lead to stronger regionalism only if there is an overlap between political and administrative functions, i.e. if regionalist political actors are successful in establishing control over public institutions.

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Chapter 1

Research question and theoretical framework

1. Research question

Academic research on regions in Europe has been abundant since the end of World War II, and has experienced periods of intensified interest, typically inspired by attempts to carry out reforms in the inter- and intra-organization of states. More recently, it has focused on the political and economic rationale behind regionalism, and what is the significance of the emancipation of certain sub-national regions for economic development and democratic accountability. Within such kind of framework, regions and regionalism are viewed on the one hand, as an expression of an indigenous urge for self-identification and self-governance, and on the other hand, as an opportunity to address local needs in a more efficient and/or democratic manner, within the context of larger political and economic reform. According to Zimmerbauer and Paasi,[1] for example, the global geo-economic landscape is undergoing a process of transformation, which is revealing the inability of states to manage efficiently national economies and is leading to the strengthening of the regional level which is turning into a "highly important category in academic research and in planning practice."[2] Michael Keating identifies the emergence of regions in Europe, together with EU integration, as processes which are "challenging the idea of the nation-state as the framework for representation, policy making and identity." [3] Going a step further, a number of academics are talking about the spread of (new) regionalism,[4] the undermining of state borders[5] and state importance, and the rise of the local and regional levels as independent players on the global geo-political and economic scene. While such observations do indeed reflect some overall European trends, and in particular, the political and administrative restructuring of a number of the core European Union states, they seem

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[1] Zimmerbauer, Kaj and Anssi Paasi. "When Old and New Regionalism Collide: Deinstitutionalization of Regions and Resistance Identity in Municipality Amalgamations." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2013, 30, pp 31-40.

[2] *ibid*, p. 31.

[3] Keating, Michael. "Territorial Restructuring and European Integration," in Keating, Michael and James Hughes (eds.). *The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe: Territorial Restructuring and European Integration.* Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 9-20.

[4] See Schulz, Michael, Söderbaum, Fredrik and Joakim Öjendal (eds.). *Regionalization in a Globalizing World: A Comparative Perspective on Forms, Actors and Processes.* London: Zed Books, 2001/ Applegate, Celia. "A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-national Places in Modern Times." *The American Historical Review*, 1999, 104 (4), pp. 1157-1182./ Loughlin, John. "'Europe of the Regions' and the Federalization of Europe." *Publius*, 1996, 26(4), pp. 141-162.

[5] See Batt, Judy. "'Fuzzy Statehood' versus Hard Borders," in Keating, Michael and James Hughes (eds.). *The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe: Territorial Restructuring and European Integration.* Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 161-181.

highly exaggerated in the context of "new" Member States.[6] In their case, central authority, which was legally, politically and administratively reinforced during the half a century of communist rule, although being subjected to a larger number of checks and balances from the civil sector, international institutions (in particular, EU ones) and the media, remains largely uncontested. Examples of regionalism are sporadic and are likely to remain such in the future, i.e. they are more likely the result of the occurrence of a specific constellation of factors rather than harbingers of a more widespread trend triggered by national reform. Furthermore, even the exceptions, the regions where regionalism is emerging or even prospering, do not seem to demonstrate a positive co-relation between this process and increased democratization or economic efficiency.

The emergence of regionalism in "new" EU Member States can be traced to the 1990s. In this post-communist period, three parallel processes were initiated as a result of the efforts of societies and political elites to bring about profound political, economic and administrative restructuring. Firstly, a process of centrally-planned limited regionalization took place, devolving functions and responsibilities to local and/or regional authorities; secondly, in certain regions (Croatian Istria, Bulgarian Pirin Macedonia, Polish Upper Silesia, Czech Moravia, Latvian Latgale), regional movements searched for unique models for indigenous development outside of the framework provided by administrative structures; and thirdly, central governments began acquiescing certain of their powers to supranational EU institutions. These processes were not carried out outside of the control of central states, and were even frequently initiated by them. They were also not necessarily interconnected, as decentralization was not a formal requirement for EU accession,[7] and the strengthening of the subnational level did not lead to its significant involvement in EU affairs.[8] As a matter of fact, regionalization which was designed so that to preserve the control of central states over the regional and local levels was in many ways opposed to bottom-up regionalism as a process for indigenous economic modernization and political and cultural empowerment. In all three developments, however, there were

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[6] By "new" Member States the author means the Central and East European countries from the ex-communist block which joined the European Union in the last three enlargement processes (2004, 2007 and 2013). Malta and Cyprus are excluded from the analysis.

[7] Regional policy remains largely in the jurisdiction of EU Member States, and after an initial period of placing emphasis on the importance of decentralization during the negotiation process, EU conditionality never really extended to this policy area. As a result, reforms were limited to the establishment of NUTS regions and the introduction of regional (as opposed to sectoral) planning through the preparation of regional operational programmes.

[8] Keating, Michael. "Europeanism and Reginalism," in Keating, Michael and Barry Jones (eds.). *The European Union and the Regions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 1.

also elements of consistency and mutual reinforcement,[9] increasing the importance of both sub- and supranational regions as levels for political dialogue and action where national and European forces meet local/regional demands and social systems, and forcing "mutual adaptations and concessions."[10]

Although both regionalization and regionalism have emerged as products of the transition from communism to democracy[11] and later on, of EU integration, they have been triggered by different rationale and objectives. Regionalization has been initiated by concerns for bad economic management, growing indebtedness, and lack of directly attributed responsibility on the regional and local level, which have led to the need for the elaboration of regional policies and the involvement of regional actors in their implementation. While differing widely on a country-to-country basis, it has evolved relatively evenly[12] on national level. The powers and responsibilities granted through it to regional and/or local authorities have been legally prescribed and guaranteed. Although comparatively speaking, some countries have devolved more political and economic powers to their regions/counties, which have in certain cases (Croatia) even become directly-elected forms of self-government, administrative and economic decentralization has been a (state) controlled process and has not undermined the power of the central state.

In contrast, regionalism, although not necessarily grass-roots, has been initiated from the bottom, and has involved the political and economic mobilization of "historical" regional identities. Although, like the processes of European integration and regionalization, it has in general advanced only as far and as fast as national governments have allowed it to, they have not had complete control over events.[13] Reformist pressures have forced governments to make more concessions than they might have wished, and the processes of European integration and decentralization have brought into being new local actors and networks which have become elements of the political system.[14] In particular, the emergence and occupation of central governments with more pressing issues in the 1990s

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[9] *ibid*

[10] *ibid*, p. 3

[11] As Luiza Bialasiewicz observes, "Decentralization holds high symbolic value in the post-communist political imagination and, since 1989, has been touted ... as a key indicator of the transition to participatory democracy." She is talking about Poland but the same is true for all post-communist states in Eastern Europe. See Bialasiewicz, Luiza. "Upper Silesia: Rebirth of a Regional Identity in Poland." *Regional & Federal Studies*, 2010, 12 (2), pp. 111-132.

[12] Despite the huge discrepancies in material and human capacity existing between regions.

[13] Keating, Michael (1995), p. 11.

[14] *ibid*

provided certain regionalist movements with a window of opportunity to grow.[15] External actors, such as foreign governments and transnational organizations, have also had direct, albeit limited, influence over regionalism encouraging the involvement of regional and local stakeholders in the drafting of regional development strategies, and strengthening them through the provision of funding for regional projects. Their indirect impact has been even more significant with regional actors frequently finding democratic justification for regional agendas and policies in best practices from "old" Member States.[16] The dominant model guiding the association of regions with "democratic progress" is furnished by the European Union, and regional leaders have used EU accession, at least in the realm of rhetoric, as a means to build their reputation and generate higher political support. EU benchmarks in the area of regional development, although far from mainstream developments, have thus been used as a rationale for regional action.

On grass roots level, a collective identity is politicized only when it affects people's judgement on political issues.[17] To gain popular support regionalists frame political issues around regional identity, deeming the regional population to have certain common interests which they should advance as a group. Such interests usually fall into two main categories: economic (the promotion of economic development) and cultural (the preservation of a specific cultural identity which has become threatened by cultural standardization).[18] Regionalism thus typically emerges in opposition to economic centrism and/or standardized national culture, and grows on real or perceived juxtapositions with central governments. The process has not followed a universal path in "new" Member States, nor has it taken common forms and expressions. In some cases, regionalist movements have been an expression of solidarity, of the desire for association of a major regionally-based ethnic minority group with a neighbouring (mother) country sharing the minority's nationality (Latgale, Latvia); in others, a grass-roots movement for cultural realization (Upper Silesia, the Czech Republic); yet in others, a movement for economic development of a lagging-behind cultural region (Moravia, Poland). The major

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[15] In Croatia and the Czech Republic, for example, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia respectively served as a major "distraction" for central governments.

[16] The developed democracies of "old" Member States, and the political models associated with them, have been viewed by both the public and politicians in CEE as "legitimate repositories of knowledge about the democratic state," Bialasiewicz, p. 112.

[17] Dahl Fitjar, Rune. *The Rise of Regionalism: Causes of Regional Mobilization in Western Europe*. Routledge Research in Comparative Politics. London and New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 5.

[18] Rokkan, S. and D.W. Urwin. "Introduction: Centres and Peripheries in Western Europe," in Rokkan, S. and D.W. Urwin (eds.). *The Politics of Territorial Identity: Studies in European Regionalism*. London: Sage, 1982, as cited in Dahl Fitjar (2010), p. 5.

differentiating elements of the regional cultures have also been different – varying from religion and distinctive history to economic differentiation and social liberalism/ conservatism. The widely publicized model of regionalism as a democratic and liberal movement for increased self-governance and political accountability does not thus depict a "typical" region in a "new" EU Member State. It represents but one type of many different entities and processes. In Polish Moravia, for example, the regional movement is characterized by pro-Christian conservatism, while regional political parties in Latgale are pro-Russian and leftist. In Croatian Istria, regionalism is undoubtedly liberal as far as human rights are concerned, but is based on economic and political clientalism, while Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria is marked by a tradition of repressive conservatism dating back to the inter-war period. The level of success of regionalist movements has also been pronouncedly varying and impermanent, with regionalist parties experiencing rapid growth and just as rapid disintegration.

In the variety of regionalist projects, movements and rationale which have emerged in the post-communist period, the case of Croatian Istria stands out as the most successful and durable example of regionalism in "new" EU Member States, where the regionalist political party Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS) has secured for over two decades control over both formal regional institutions and the interpretation and institutionalization of regional culture. In order to identify the factors behind Istrian exceptionalism, a cross-national approach will be applied comparing Istria with Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria, a historical sub-national region which is of roughly the same size, shares similar cultural, geographic, economic and historical characteristics, however does not exhibit pronounced political regionalism. The comparison will be based on analysis of the legal, political, economic and social milieu in the two regions, establishing which pre-conditions have been favourable for the emergence and strengthening of regionalism in Istria. It will be positioned within the framework of quantitative and qualitative research carried out in Western Europe on the causes of regionalism, testing whether its findings are also valid in "new" EU Member States, and in particular in Istria and Pirin Macedonia.
Specifically, the research will attempt to answer the following question:

- What factors have enabled the emergence of regionalism in Istria and why has the same process not taken place in Pirin Macedonia, a region with similar characteristics and operating in similar national and international settings?

According to Paasi, [19] in academic research it is common to take the idea of a region as a given unit and then analyse social, economic and cultural practices/ discourses taking place in these "ready-made" contexts, rather than to theorize and scrutinize the emergence of these contexts as part of broader political, economic and administrative processes. This research attempts to do both – to analyse already existing regions, focusing on the developments within the regions themselves and the behaviour of their elites and masses, but also to place regionalism in the context of state restructuring and EU integration. For that reason, in the two selected regions, the cultural frontiers of the regional identity coincide with the borders of the meso-level sub-state administrative units, i.e. Istria and Pirin Macedonia as cultural regions coincide with the administrative counties of Istria and Blagoevgrad. Such a comparison between states and regions within states will provide insight into why some regions deviate from the national norm, and why there is variation across different regions within the EU. Ultimately, while developments outside the regions are considered as explanatory variables, the focus remains on the extent to which the regions have been affected by this external influence, and on the response that they have triggered within the regions.

2. Theoretical framework

    2.1. What is a region?

The formal EU definition of a region refers to a specific kind of region - a territorial and administrative unit within a country, on a level directly below the nation-state. The EU institutions consciously prefer to deal with geographical and administrative entities, whose size and shape are easy to pin down and are clearly recognized on national level. Given Europe's ethnic and cultural diversity and its turbulent past, dealing with established, tangible entities is the least politically controversial way to establish a link with Member States.[20] Nevertheless, geography can be also imprecise, as regions do not always exist within fixed boundaries, or coincide with the administrative boundaries which contain them. Furthermore, in many EU Member States different ethnic or cultural groups can claim possession of and belonging to the same territory which allows for two or more parallel regional identities (as is the case with Latvian Latgale and Serbian Vojvodina). For that reason, other criteria, such as cultural affinity or history, should be also employed in order to establish the boundaries of a region and the parameters of the term. For example,

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[19] Paasi, Anssi. "The Region, Identity and Power." *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2011, 14, pp. 9–16, at p. 11.
[20] Regional policy falls largely in the jurisdication of Member States.

Koter (1995) finds that traditional definitions of a region, emphasizing geographical-historical aspects and focusing on "distinctive geographical frames and properties," fail to capture the complexity of the existing entities.[21] According to him, the "active force, the agents of the rise, development and persistence of … a region, are its inhabitants who feel different from neighbouring peoples, identify themselves with the land which they recognize as their homeland, feel proud of belonging to it and support its culture and traditions."[22] A geographical-historical region thus, according to Koter, exists in an objective way - its separateness is perceived both in material categories and in mental ones accepted by the whole of the country's citizens - and in a subjective way - through the community's identification with it. Koter quotes the work of French sociologist R. Dulong (1978) as the most accurate definition of such a region as "nothing else than the internally felt and noticed from the outside right to separateness."[23] This way of reasoning is in line with the work of other social geographers, such as Blotevogel,[24] Weichart[25] and Giddens,[26] who also refer to the dual character of the regional concept: on the one hand, a region is a cognitive, constructed product, and on the other hand, a region is "real" (i.e. neutral and measurable).[27]

The constructed character of a region is not accepted by all academics, and discussions typically revolve around the nature of identity in general, running along the lines of positivist versus constructivist theories. According to positivists, identity is "primordial and unchanging," while according to constructivists, it is socially constructed, frequently in opposition to a dangerous "other" against which central or regional authorities claim to offer protection, and thus open to change.[28] The former see it as a matter of ethnicity and

[21] Koter, Marek (ed.). *Region and Regionalism: Social and Political Aspects*. Opole-Łódź: Governmental Research Institute, Silesian Institute in Opole, University of Łódź, 1995, p. 9.
[22] *ibid*
[23] Dulong R. *Les Régions, L'Etat et La Société Locale*. Paris: Presses Univérsitaires de France, 1978 as cited in Koter, p. 10.
[24] Blotevogel, H. "Auf dem Weg zu einer Theorie der Regionalitat," in Brunn, G. (ed.), *Region und Regionsbildung in Europa.* Baden–Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1996, as cited in Schmitt-Egner, Peter. "The Concept of 'Region': Theoretical and Methodological Notes on its Reconstruction." *Journal of European Integration*, 2002, 24 (3), p. 181.
[25] Weichart P. "Die Region- Chimere, Artefakt oder Strukturprinzip sozialer Systeme?," in Brunn, G. (ed.), 1996, as cited in Schmitt-Egner, *ibid*.
[26] Giddens, A. *The Constitution of Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, as cited in Schmitt-Egner, *ibid*.
[27] Schmitt-Egner, Peter. "The Concept of 'Region': Theoretical and Methodological Notes on its Reconstruction." *Journal of European Integration*, 2002, 24 (3), p. 181.
[28] Lapid Y. and F. Kratochwil (eds.). *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory (Critical Perspectives on World Politics).* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 1996, pp. 7-8, as quoted in Drulák, Petr (ed.). "Introduction: The Return of Identity to European Politics," in *National and European Identities*

thus nature; the latter tend to treat it as self-identifying, as a convention[29] where common values and interests are learned through interaction and are generally accepted.[30] In analyses of the nature of the relations between central and regional actors, positivist views define identity by what "the state makes of it," while constructivist - by what each person or community makes of it. A middle course which recognizes the significant power of formal institutions in the shaping of national/regional consciousness, points to the fleeting character of political and administrative constructs. Frusetta explains this third way of looking at identity by giving an example with Pirin Macedonia:

> *"incorporation (of the regional identity) into a national identity would ultimately require the incorporation of key symbols, events and experiences that had been generated within the province."[31]*

In other words, in order for state-constructed national identities to be widely accepted but also to persist, they need to incorporate local/regional ones. Similarly, on regional level, in order for regional identities to be successfully politicized they need to be at least partially genuine, i.e. to incorporate values and cultural characteristics the regional population identifies with.

Within such line of reasoning, regional identity formation as underpinned against an "outside other" is insufficient to describe a region in Europe. Many subnational regions in Europe exist on the border lines between two, three, sometimes even four, countries and cultures, where identities historically communicate and mix with each other. With the elimination of internal EU borders, the latter are more fluid than ever, allowing and promoting a deeper mix of cultures and identities. The concept of "fuzzy statehood," developed by Judy Batt captures well the essence of this process.[32] The traditional model of the unitary nation state with "hard" borders clearly separating the inside from the outside is opposed to a "fuzzier" model of statehood which is decentralized, institutionally

in EU Enlargement: Views from Central and Eastern Europe. Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2001, p. 12.

[29] *ibid*

[30] Campbell, David. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity.* Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1992, as referred to in Drulák, p. 12

[31] Frusetta, J. W. "Divided Heroes, Common Claims: IMRO between Macedonia and Bulgaria," in Lampe, J. and M. Mazower (eds). Ideologies and National Identities. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004, *author's addition in parenthesis*.

[32] Batt, Judy. "'Fuzzy Statehood' versus Hard Borders," in Keating, Michael and James Hughes (eds.). *The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe: Territorial Restructuring and European Integration. Brussels*, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 161-181.

pluralistic, with open borders, and strong internal regional and ethnic minority identities.[33] In the framework of constructivist theories, the concept of the "outside other" thus evolves from a neighbouring state to a construct with, or an authority supporting "hard" borders. The discerning trait is how open or rigid borders and the identities they enclose are. Batt cites her model as particularly useful in the case of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans as it detaches ethnic identity from claims over territory, and promotes "softening of territorial borders by promoting decentralisation and pluralisation of state structures *alongside* support for cross-border regional co-operation as a key motor of accelerated integration into a pan-European framework."[34] Nevertheless, her concept is more prescriptive than descriptive since the states of Central and Eastern Europe remain highly centralized and encircled by "hard" borders.[35]

Another critic of positivist theories of regional identity, Schmitt-Egner (2003) calls for a time-specific transdisciplinary approach to the study of regions, built on the premises of philosophy, sociology, culture, history and geography.[36] Combining elements of all of the above disciplines, Schmitt-Egner provides a definition of human identity as "constructed unity in and by difference," whereby the "constitution of an inside and outside, as well as the interaction process between the latter **within time and space**" determine each concept and instance of identity.[37] In this line of thinking, regional identity is portrayed as a specific type of territorial identity, with the latter being a product of a territorial unity, whose process is aimed at constituting and securing territorial borders for including and excluding personal-social-collective and/or cultural identities.[38] Using this definition as a foundation, Schmitt-Egner provides what is probably the most comprehensive description of a region. He builds a whole new system for the study of regions, placing them both in local and international context, and providing methodology for empirical work. Within this system, a region is defined as a "spatial partial unit of intermediary and medium-sized character whose material substratum is based on the territory." Here territory is viewed as a function of the social nature of regions and a historic product of social and political interactions. A (regional and national) territory thus must be distinguished from other spatial units (area

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[33] *ibid*, p. 162.
[34] *ibid*, p. 180, author's italics.
[35] Neither Bulgaria nor Croatia is a member of the Schengen Area, which means border controls have not been eliminated.
[36] Schmitt-Egner, Peter. "Regional and European Identity: Reflections on a Relationship," scientific contribution for the thematic network RIAC, May 2003, http://www.riac.net/
[37] *ibid*
[38] *ibid*, pp. 5-6.

and landscape) because it is "based on the cognitive (e.g., the territorial principle of international law) and real (e.g., the territorial state with its borders drawn by – and recognizable by – human beings) establishment of political and social borders."[39] Methodologically, Schmitt-Egner describes the regional system through the interactions of environments, actors, structures and programs. Environmental factors comprise horizontal (cross-border and domestic) and vertical interactions (on national and supranational level), while actors can be individual, social and collective. Programs capture the aims, means and rules of the regional system, including its purpose (formal or symbolic preservation and governance of regional identity) and legitimacy. Special attention is played to structure, which according to Schmitt-Egner should be studied as a function of unit and space. While unit refers to the relative autonomy of a region (usually from the control of central governments), space deals with the physical and symbolic borders of a region, i.e., "formal (legal and political), material (socio-economic) and symbolic (cultural) potentials and capacities."[40]

Schmitt-Egner's definition and approach to the study of regions, due to its comprehensiveness and inclusion of both the cognitive and real, is well suited for empirical research. It is neither too limited nor too general and provides a concrete system for the study of regions. In my research I focus on two administrative-territorial units, Istria County[41] and Blagoevgrad County,[42] which are part of the formal state hierarchy but are also historical regions with deep symbolic regional identity. In other words, Istria County and Blagoevgrad County as cognitive entities coincide (roughly)[43] with the real regions of Istria and Pirin Macedonia, which are historic products of social and political interactions.[44] The inclusion in Schmitt-Egner's definition of both the formal and symbolic is a perfect match for the study of this duality. As a result, regions can be analysed as a function of both

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[39] *ibid*, p. 5.
[40] *ibid*, p. 6.
[41] *Istarska županija* in Croatian. Croatia is divided into 21 counties (*županije*). Istria County officials frequently formally refer to the county as a region both in Croatian and in foreign translations.
[42] *Blagoevgradska oblast* in Bulgarian. Bulgaria is divided into 28 counties, also translated in English as provinces, districts or regions.
[43] A small part of Croatian Istria is included in Primorije-Gorski Kotar County and a small part of Pirin Macedonia is divided between neighboring counties, yet that division does not disturb the cultural, political or economic wholeness of the two regions studied by this research.
[44] For a similar identification of Dutch provinces, see Hendriks, F., Raadschelders, J. and Theo A. J. Toonen. "The Dutch Province as a European Region: National Impediments Versus European Opportunities," in Keating, Michael and Barry Jones (eds.). *The European Union and the Regions*, 1995, p. 215.

the processes of regionalization and regionalism, i.e. as physical and dependent vs cultural and autonomous units.

Schmitt-Egner's definition of a region builds on constructivist theories, in particular his interpretation of a region as a function of time and programme. The different political programmes of ruling elites change over time the predominant characteristics of regional identities, leading to the construction of new ones. Regionalism should thus be studied within a pre-defined time period as historical comparisons, although useful in establishing causality, might be ambiguous and even misleading. The processes of constructing a regional identity and community are thus not about the past but about the promoting of a desirable interpretation of the past, and are in this way similar to those of nation-building. Just as modern nationalism is, above all, "a discourse about space and time," a "mode of constructing and interpreting a determinate social space – and its historical past,"[45] so too is the constitution of regional "imagined communities" [46]. In constructivist theories, modern nationalism has been inescapably tied to what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have termed "the invention of tradition": a declaration of the national community's emergence from a set of (usually glorious) origins; origins which are discursively bound to particular geographical locations. It is such a framing of a national past that helps to represent the national unit as a taken-for-granted, "natural" continuity in time and space; as the only possible form of social organization to "evolve" within that territory. As Paasi (1986, 1996)[47] notes in his theorization of regional institutionalization, narratives of the past also form a vital facet of region building. To understand the "true region" one must look to the past which appears more orderly than the present, and fits better with the idealized picture of the region as painted by its proponents. Historical narrative is used to specify the distinctive traits that make the region "what it is", while also marking its difference from the remainder of the state. Since political leaders and regionalists turn to the past to justify decisions and construct identities, I turn to the present to understand the contemporary regions of Pirin Macedonia and Istria, studying elites' and masses' behaviour and "identity-talk"[48] and their reflection on social practices and power relations.

[45] Williams, Colin and Anthony D. Smith. "The National Construction of Social Space," *Progress in Human Geography*, 1983, 7 (4), pp 503–18, at p. 502.
[46] Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1983.
[47] Paasi, Anssi. "The Institutionalisation of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions and the Constitution of Regional Identity", *Fennia*, 1986, 164 (1), pp 106–46.
[48] Brubaker, R. and F. Cooper. "Beyond 'identity.'" *Theory and Society*, 2000, 29, pp. 1–47.

2.2. Perspectives on regionalism and regionalization

The processes of regionalism and regionalization define a region in their own right, and have, similar to the term "region," multiple, even opposing definitions.

A first set of definitions of regions within the framework of regionalism and regionalization is championed by Hughes, Sasse and Gordon.[49] According to them, the characteristics of a region shift according to the context in which it exists or is being formed.[50] Within the framework of the process of regionalism, a region would be defined as "a territorial body of public law established at level immediately below that of state and endowed with political self-government.[51]" It would have a distinct political identity, be legally empowered to make regional decisions on funding, allocation of resources and provision of services, and would have an ability to decide on political organization, to have a representative assembly, and to be elected by universal suffrage. This elected, general purpose regional government would answer to a regional constituency, sustain a broad policy agenda, and reconcile diverging interests.[52] In contrast, within the context of the process of regionalization, a region would function as an administrative branch of the central government, with little political power and mostly distributive financial functions. Regional administrations could also take different forms; they could serve as a decentralized arm of the central state, an appointed development agency, or even a corporatist body representing social partners.[53] According to Hughes, Sasse and Gordon, regionalization is neither a simpler nor a less desirable process than regionalism.[54]

Nick Devas and Simon Delay (2006)[55] outline similar processes and relationship between them. They, however, use different terms to describe them, namely "devolution" and "deconcentration."[56] The former refers to the transfer of real authority and responsibility

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[49] Hughes, Sasse and Gordon (2003, 2004).
[50] Therefore, the applicability of Schmitt-Egner's comprehensive definition.
[51] "Regions – The Crucial Role of Sub-national Governance in the Success of Europe," pp. 6-7. Assembly of European Regions (www.a-e-r.org), 2003.
[52] Keating, Michael and James Hughes (eds.). *The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe: Territorial Restructuring and European Integration*. Brussels: P. I. E. Peter Lang, 2003, p. 12.
[53] Hughes, James, Sasse, Gwendolyn and Claire Gordon. "EU Enlargement, Europeanisation and the Dynamics of Regionalisation in the CEECs," in Keating, Michael and James Hughes (2003), pp. 69-88.
[54] *ibid*
[55] Devas, Nick and Simon Delay. "Local Democracy and the Challenges of Decentralising the State: An International Perspective." *Local Government Studies*, Nov. 2006, 32 (5), pp. 677 – 695.
[56] Slightly varying versions of those terms are traditionally used by researchers of decentralization – Rondinelli 1984, Blair (2000), Devas and Delay (2006), and by donor organizations – UNDP, OECD, USAID etc.

(political and economic) to a locally elected body that is accountable to citizens and has independent sources of revenue,[57] while the latter is expressed in the administrative decentralisation to local branches of the central government.[58] Devas and Delay contrast to a certain extent the two processes referring to the tension arising when both exist parallelly in a country. Furthermore, however, in line with Hughes, Sasse and Gordon's thinking, they emphasize that the distinction between the two is not always clear-cut, but rather with "varying levels of local decision-making and central control, varying degrees of upward and downward accountability, and varying ranges of functions and resource transfers under either system,"[59]opening the possibility for complementarity.

Another set of definitions provided by Michael Keating (1997) defines regionalization and regionalism[60] in terms of the sources and rationale of their emergence. Regionalization is seen as a state-led, top-down phenomenon concerned with the resolving of regional disparities in development. According to Keating, it was launched by nation states (UK, France and Italy) in post-war Europe and became increasingly politicized and institutionalized on both national and European level, gradually involving regional political, social and business actors in policy design and implementation.[61] In an EU-context, two distinct types of regionalization are identified: political and administrative. The former refers to the granting of decision-making powers to regional governments, and has been implemented in Spain, France, Italy, Poland, Croatia and the Netherlands, while the latter has been largely initiated as a result of pressures from the European Commission in relation to the implementation of the Structural Action Plans, and is identifiable in Greece, Ireland and most "new" Member States.[62]

The second term, regionalism, relates to regional demands and efforts associated with cultural issues, questions of autonomy, social priorities and economic development. It is triggered by actors in the region itself and is often in the form of a movement for what is

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[57] Blair (2000), Devas and Delay (2006).

[58] Devas, Nick and Simon Delay. "Local Democracy and the Challenges of Decentralising the State: An International Perspective." *Local Government Studies*, 2006, 32 (5), pp. 677-695, at p. 677.

[59] *ibid*

[60] In line with Keating's definitions, regionalism as described by Hughes, Sasse and Gordon would be referred to as political regionalization (see Loughlin and Peters. "State Traditions, Administrative Reform and Regionalization," in Keating, Michael and John Loughlin (eds). *The Political Economy of Regionalism*. London: Frank Cass, 1997, pp. 41-62, at p. 41).

[61] Keating, Michael. "The Political Economy of Regionalism," in Keating, Michael and John Loughlin (eds). *The Political Economy of Regionalism*. London: Frank Cass, 1997, p. 18.

[62] Loughlin and Peters, p. 41.

seen as realization of a historical right to self-determination, pressures for democratization of and increased participation in policymaking, or ambitions for the setting up of a region's economic agenda. As Keating explains, the political character of territories themselves is a key element.[63] In some territories, regional assertion is confined to culture or a strong sense of identity, rooted in historical experience, language, culture, or political traditions (Pirin Macedonia); in others, it is associated with a distinctive civil society, with a locally-based business class, associative life, and sense of spatial solidarity (Upper Silesia); in others again there is a demand for regional autonomy[64]. Frequently, all those elements are combined, not without tensions: for example, between the demand for more autonomy and that for more aid from the State (Istria),[65] the exhibition of a strong regional identity and no political independence (Pirin Macedonia), or the support for human rights and the reliance on dominant political parties and client systems (Istria). Unlike Hughes, Sasse and Gordon's definition of regionalism, which is limited exclusively to formal political processes and institutions (elected through universal suffrage and having a representative assembly), Keating's definition includes any indigenous processes for cultural, political or economic realization.

This research is founded on concepts aligned with the definitions developed by Keating. Bulgarian regional authorities[66] are not elected directly but are appointed by the Council of Ministers or the Prime Minister, and their main executive power is to supervise the implementation of state policy on regional level. This is a clear example of state-led administrative regionalization, as defined by Keating. In Croatia, regional authorities[67] were elected on direct local elections for the first time in 2009, a process of political decentralization which, since it was initiated and implemented by the central state, fits also well in Keating's definition of regionalization. Furthermore, any differences in the level of political decentralization in both countries can be accounted for by the fact that the beginning of Istrian regionalism (and the largest support for IDS in the Istria) can be traced to the early 1990s, when regional authorities in Croatia were nothing more but branches of the central government. The granting of political power to the regional level, as already said, has taken place much later and has been associated with a reduction in the political

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[63] Keating, Michael (1995), p. 3.
[64] After decades of peaceful and not so-peaceful state decomposition and formation, demands for regional autonomy are currently not on the agenda of regionalist movements in "new" EU Member States.
[65] Keating, Michael (2004).
[66] Regional governors (*oblastni upraviteli* in Bulgarian)
[67] Regional governors (*župani* in Croatian)

support for IDS rather than an increase in it. There is thus no evidence in the case of Croatia about a positive co-relation between political regionalization and regionalism. As for regionalism in Istria and Pirin Macedonia, it is a combination of the elements listed in Keating's definition. It is rooted in historical existence and a sense of (collective) regional identity; it has been associated with "spatial solidarity" and the protection of local economic and political interests, and has, on some occasions, been associated with demands for increased autonomy from the central state. The discernible trait between Pirin Macedonian and Istrian regionalism is the predominance of a regional political party in the governance and the construction of the regional identity of the latter, which almost equates Istrian regionalism with IDS's political agenda.

2.4. Political economy of regionalism

The economic rationale for, and correspondently, most analyses of regionalization and regionalism are typically vested in neoliberal ideas of competitiveness.[68] Sub-national regions are seen as potential engines for economic growth, and their empowerment addresses the inability of states to manage national economies through redistributive policies which have led to their over-indebtedness. The processes of administrative and economic decentralization initiated by central states thus seek to improve their competitiveness vis-à-vis other states by restructuring and rescaling national space. In certain cases, the drive for economic development can also come from down, with historical regions seeking to achieve higher political autonomy by stimulating the regional economy and gaining more control over it. According to Michael Keating, such neoliberal theories are "economically determinist"[69] in that they view the rise of regional economies as entailing political and institutional change, and increased competition for economic (and political) power between both vertical and parallel tiers of government.

A second school of thought studying decentralization[70] emphasizes the role of institutions and social co-operation, and sees regionalism as "potentially more socially inclusive as well as economically more efficient, a kind of third way between the unregulated market and

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[68] See Zimmerbauer, Kaj and Anssi Paasi. "When Old and New Regionalism Collide: Deinstitutionalization of Regions and Resistance Identity in Municipality Amalgamations." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2013, 30, pp 31-40.
[69] Keating, Michael, "Territorial Restructuring and European Integration," editorial introduction to Keating, Michael and James Hughes (2003), p. 11.
[70] Cooke and Morgan (1998) as referred to *ibid*.

state planning."[71] This line of academic thinking is represented by fiscal federalism whose main concern is with the optimal allocation of economic policy-making functions to jurisdictional tiers. [72] According to fiscal federalism, central governments do not compete with local and regional ones, but rather provide the balance and stability needed to overcome disruptive issues like the uneven distribution of wealth or the lack of widely available resources on local/regional level. It is concerned with issues of income (re)distribution, resource allocation and growth, however, in contrast to liberal theories, the optimal way for the division of power and responsibilities is not determined by the free market but rather by a legal arrangement between national jurisdictions.[73] In the foundation of fiscal federalism lie the arguments that central governments should have responsibility for macroeconomic stabilization and income redistribution (such as welfare payments), while local governments should be responsible for the provision of goods and services consumed locally.[74] This is explained by the openness of national economies and the inability of local governments to influence monetary policy instruments, which makes them incapable of dealing with structural problems. Conversely, central governments have imperfect information about local preferences and costs, which leads to inefficiencies and the suboptimal allocation of public goods. They are easily subjected to political pressures or constitutional issues which constrain them from treating regions and localities equally.[75] The division between competences should be carried out by taking into consideration such issues as optimal size (efficiency from an economic point of view), social justice (resource distribution), national interest, and the nature of the goods being allocated.[76]

While neoliberal theories agree that political decentralization leads to improved economic performance, proponents of fiscal federalism are not certain about the connection between the two. On the one hand, Perraton and Wells refer to the work of Weingast[77] who claims that a decentralized political system improves the operation of markets under three conditions, namely if decentralized governments have the primary regulatory

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[71] Keating, p. 11.
[72] Perraton, Jonathan and Peter Wells. "Multi-Level Governance and Economic Policy," in Bache, Ian and Matthew Flinders (eds.), *Multi-Level Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.179.
[73] Perraton and Wells (2004), p. 183.
[74] Oates (1972, 1999) as referred to in Perraton and Wells, p. 181.
[75] Perraton and Wells, p. 182.
[76] Cassela and Frey, p. 644.
[77] Weingast, Barry. "The Economic Role of Political Institutions: Market Preserving Federalism and Economic Development.*" Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization,* 1995, 11 (1), pp. 1-31/ Qian, Yingyi and Barry Weingast. "Federalism as a Commitment to Preserving Market Incentives." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 1997, 11(4), pp. 83-92.

responsibility over the economy, the economic system constitutes a common market with no barriers to trade, and decentralized governments face hard budget constraints.[78] On the other hand, they note that Weingast's approach might just as likely lead to market distortion and thus possibly suboptimal provision of public goods.[79]

Similarly to the theories explained above, but limited to an EU context, Bache talks about an ideological struggle of political models in the late 1980s.[80] In line with Liesbet Hooghe's work,[81] he distinguishes between neoliberalism and regulated capitalism, with the former emphasizing ideas of minimal state and free markets, and the latter – the choice of the European Commission in the last three decades - seeking to place social concerns alongside market efficiency.[82] The latter line of reasoning comes from the neoclassical school of thought in economics where the government is not treated as a bureaucratic apparatus but rather a "generic institution for collective decision-making that provides the antithesis to the market,"[83] and operates like a market itself. Its role lies in the distribution of "collective" goods which cannot be allocated through the functioning of open markets. The allocation of public goods can be carried out on the principle of majority-rule where the ones in power exclude all other groups from participating in their allocation, or on a competitive basis, where consumers, i.e. citizens, choose according to their preferences and where jurisdictions need to compete for their "membership."[84] Overall, according to regulated capitalism, although certain decisions are best taken at national or international level, many are decentralized to local or regional governments because of their proximity to citizens.[85]

It appears that neoliberal and neoclassical theories do not offer sharply contrasting visions of regionalism but rather hold water in different situations and describe different regions.[86]

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[78] Perraton and Wells, pp.182-183.

[79] *ibid*, p. 183.

[80] Bache, Ian. "Multi-Level Governance and European Union Regional Policy," in Bache, Ian and Matthew Flinders (eds.), *Multi-level Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.166.

[81] Hooghe, Liesbet. "EU Cohesion Policy and Competing Models of Capitalism." *Journal of Common Market Studies,* 1998, 36 (4), pp. 457-77.

[82] Bache, p. 166.

[83] Casella, Alessandra & Bruno Frey. "Federalism and Clubs: Towards an Economic Theory of Overlapping Political Jurisdictions." *European Economic Review*, Elsevier, 1992, 36(2-3), pp. 639-646, at p. 642.

[84] Tiebout, Charles M. "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures." *The Journal of Political Economy*, 1956, 64 (5), pp. 416-424 as referred to *ibid.*

[85] This line of reasoning also fits in the premises of fiscal federalism, as outlined in Casella and Frey, p. 643. It provides the rationale for the EU principle of subsidiarity.

[86] Keating, Michael, "Territorial Restructuring and European Integration," editorial introduction to Keating, Michael and James Hughes (2003), p. 11.

As Michael Keating explains, there is no universal economic model for a (sub-national) region:

> *In some cases, the region may be merely a space for capital, without any countervailing influence from organized labor, social movements, civil society or democratic government. In others, it may be a significant space for the mediation of social conflicts and for co-operation.*[87]

Empirical research confirms the fact that there is no such thing as a typical region, and that the different regional entities necessitate the use of different theoretical explanations. Similarly, there is inconclusive and limited empirical evidence about the positive correlation and the causality between decentralization and economic performance.[88] Furthermore, theories on the political economy of regionalism and regionalization suggest that there is a trade-off between democratic concerns, such as accountability and participation, and more economic objectives, such as efficiency and control.[89] Theoretically, this trade-off can be addressed by the "introduction of participatory mechanisms in the design stage and scrutiny mechanisms at the implementation stage"[90] which might produce a positive-sum gain where democratic and economic concepts become complementary and mutually reinforcing.

In the case of Croatia and Bulgaria, central governments are responsible for macroeconomic stabilization and income redistribution (such as welfare payments). Furthermore, they are responsible for the setting up of the legal framework and budget allocations for regional administrations and self-governments. Although in certain cases, the regional (local) and national levels compete for authority and control, their roles are predominantly complementary and there is a mostly clear hierarchical organization of administrative and political jurisdictions. Furthermore, the economic growth of certain historic regions (for example, Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria and Istria in Croatia) has not been accompanied by a growing fiscal and political autonomy, and more importantly, by any significant administrative reform and decentralization. Neoclassical economic theories are thus better suited for the study of regionalism in those two countries. Decentralization has

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[87] *ibid*
[88] *ibid*
[89] Perraton and Wells, p. 182.
[90] *ibid*.

been carried out by central governments which have retained full control over monetary and fiscal policy, and over the distribution of welfare benefits, while regional and local authorities have been granted the responsibility for the provision of certain goods and services. Allocation of public funds and goods has been split between the two tiers (the national and the local/regional) and has been carried out mostly on the principle of majority-rule, where the ones in power have excluded all other groups from participating in their allocation. Even when ruling groups on national and local level have differed, this has not led to any significant modernization or liberalization of the political and economic systems, as each group has maintained firm control over its areas of jurisdiction, and has not had an interest in disturbing the balance of things as such a disturbance could have jeopardized its own position in the system. Any economic leverage gained by regions in the form of net contributions to central budgets has been used to advance the interests of a limited number of regional actors, and not the regions as a whole.

2.5. Regionalization and regionalism through the prism of EU integration

Traditional EU integration theories place nation states exclusively as the forerunners of integration, thus either treating the EU as an international organization of the type of the UN, NATO or the OECD, or envisioning it as a developing federation and placing it in the realm of domestic politics. In my research, I will adopt a mid-way theory which is not based on the traditional academic separation between domestic and international politics. Although confirming the role of nation states as the dominant players in international relations, the EU resembles neither states nor international organizations, and thus defies explanations from approaches centring on one or the other. Intergovernmental theories fail to provide for the role of regions and supranational institutions, which they view as entirely subjected to central governments. Federalists, on the other hand, treat regions as partners with rights and role equal to those of central governments, which is certainly not the case in most EU countries, and in particular Bulgaria and Croatia. Instead of analysing ideal processes, I will focus on researching existing political forms, studying them as they are, rather than as they should be. Furthermore, unlike realist and neorealist theories, the research does not downplay market and societal forces, which appear to have played a significant role in the emergence of regionalism in Istria. That is not to say that the struggle for power is not an important factor for the emergence of regionalism but that it has not

been the sole and most significant one, as realist theories stipulate.[91] This said, in the cases of Istria and Pirin Macedonia, economic factors cannot be studied separately from political ones and from regional identities. That interdependence is exemplified best by the inability of NUTS 2 regions to replace historical ones, and by the lack of regionalist projects in counties/regions which lack strong regional identity. Last but not least, functionalist and institutionalist theories are not well suited for studies on decision-making processes in Croatia and Bulgaria either, as they assume a level of automation of political, economic and social processes which is not existent in those countries. The "unintended consequences" of decentralization, to the extent to which they have occurred, have been accidental and fragmented rather than nationwide and universal. Regional actors and movements have on very few occasions circumvented the control of the (central) state. In the EU accession process, regions have mostly played a planning, coordinating and mediating role, which places them as partners to central governments, rather than their opponents. Any secession of power to supranational and sub-national institutions has been more of a conscious process rather than a spill over from state-led regionalization to unbridled regionalism. In both countries, central authorities still control the setting up of the legal and administrative agenda and framework, and the granting of certain autonomy to regional and local actors has been done with the deliberate purpose of securing coalitions or controlling the local vote.

The EU approach towards regions, since the Second World War, has been to treat them as an agency for the reduction of discrepancies, or the correction of market imperfections in the allocation of resources.[92] These imperfections had resulted from the aggregation of capital in central places close to markets, and were expressed as inflationary pressures (in developed regions), and higher unemployment and lower regional incomes (in depressed ones).[93] To address the impoverishment and depopulation of whole areas, many national governments in Europe, pursuing national and partisan goals and acting in a rather centralized fashion, launched policies for regional development (as opposed to the previous sector-oriented approach to development). Socio-economic in character, those policies led to limited administrative regionalization in most "old" EU states, which was conductive for

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[91] Schulz, Michael, Fredrik Söderbaum and Joakim Öjendal (eds). Introduction to *Regionalization in a Globalizing World: A Comparative Perspective on Forms, Actors and Processes.* New York: Zed Books, 2001, p. 8.
[92] Keating, Michael. "The Political Economy of Regionalism," in Keating, Michael and John Loughlin (eds.). *The Political Economy of Regionalism*. London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd., 1997, p. 18.
[93] *ibid*

economic development.[94] In the 1960s, regional policy became institutionalized on both European and national levels, and the very regions in the form of political, social and economic elites gradually started getting involved in the design and implementation of national policy. Yet, the primary objective of EU formal policy towards the regions was and continues to be the amelioration of regional discrepancies by ensuring proper and efficient distribution of resources, and the building up of regional capacities for indigenous development. Although the EU budget makes only about 1% of national GDPs,[95] and is insufficient to serve as a counter effect to market forces and national spending, theoretically, it could provide the backing for regionalist movements. Regions like Pirin Macedonia and Istria which are more developed than the national average are still eligible for EU Structural Funding due to the national economies' overall underdevelopment, so the EU instruments are available to them as an independent and alternative source for financing of regionally-based economic and cultural projects.

In the political realm, the European Commission has been very cautious in interfering with the political arrangement of its Member States, focusing instead on the state of democracy and on administrative efficiency as a framework for economic development.[96] Corruption and judicial inefficiency have also been addressed as an impediment to the functioning of the single market. Because of their growing involvement in setting up the legislative agenda, however, EU institutions have increasingly been perceived by regions as partners. Following the lead of German, Austrian and Belgian regions, regional authorities in certain "old" Member States have thus succeeded to push for legislation which has increased their autonomy from central governments. Furthermore, EU integration has brought opportunities for horizontal networking between regions, exchanges of best practices, and building up of regional capacities, all of which have improved social learning and have also frequently led to better ability to protect regional interests. That process has not spread equally in Europe, and the actual power of regions within states also continues to vary widely. The internal balance of power depends more on economic performance, political negotiation and intra-governmental co-operation than on constitutional amendments or supranational arrangements. Despite the individual approaches to decentralization implemented by countries, however, the EU has succeeded to initiate processes of

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[94] *ibid*

[95] Data for 2013. "Financing public expenditure: some key figures at EU and national levels." European Parliament briefing, p. 9, available online at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/490701/IPOL_BRI(2015)490701_EN.pdf

[96] *ibid*, p. 12

regionalization in all of its members, and regions have also had to introduce changes in their political-administrative structures in order to implement European policies and manage European funds.[97] European integration has given regions opportunities for repositioning, and although the role that they can play on the European stage is still very much influenced by their position in the national administrative system, they are the only level of governance where EU policy-making and regulation can be translated to specific regional needs from an intersectoral point of view.[98]

More recently, the three Cohesion Policy principles introduced in 1989 have gained direct relevance for research on regionalism.[99] These are the principles of regionalization, partnership and programming, the first of which refers to the vertical reorganization of the levels of government, whereas the latter two have both vertical and horizontal implications. Regionalization relates to the allocation of EU funding and stipulates that funds should be administered on regional level. This has led both to the adoption of the NUTS classification of territorial units below the national level in each Member State, and to the involvement of sub-national actors in policy-making through regional programming undertaken by regional partnerships. Partnership requires funds to be administered and absorbed by actors from different organizations working together. Initially, this principle has focused on promoting interaction between governmental actors from different levels, but has increasingly placed greater emphasis on engaging non-state actors.[100] Programming effectively commits actors to work together in partnership for a sustained period of time (between three and seven years) in developing and implementing regional strategies. Although those principles have in reality brought limited change to national political structures, they have created opportunities for regionalist movements and actors to get formally involved in decision-making. The highest benefit has been associated with the opening up of decision-making processes on national level to involve non-government and non-state actors, but also with social learning through engagement with EU institutions and policy,[101] and the establishment of direct channels for communication with supranational institutions and other subnational actors. Overall, unlike regionalization, regionalism in Europe has not been initiated or associated with EU legislation. It has, however, recognized

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[97] Morata, Francesc. "Spanish Regions in the European Community," in Keating, Michael and Barry Jones (eds.). *The European Union and the Regions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 120.
[98] *ibid*
[99] Bache (2010).
[100] *ibid*
[101] Bache (2008).

the latter as a channel for the promotion of regionalist ambitions in a peaceful and gradual manner, and although being less universal and following a different developmental pattern in each case, it has grown parallelly with the integration of EU states.

In "new" EU Member States regionalism is a marginal occurrence,[102] partly because of the inability of regionalist movements to formulate their agenda in a non-aggressive way and thus attract wider support, and partly because regionalization itself has followed a somewhat different logic, often depriving regionalist movements of the cultural and ideological rationale for their existence. On the one hand, regionalization coincided with the complete reform of "new" Member States' administrative, political and economic structures, leaving a lot of open space for experimentation by both the European Commission and central governments. On the other hand, those countries exited communism highly centralized and any federal traditions from the past had been completely eradicated. Regional administrations, where those existed, were very weak and dependent on central governments. Regionalization was thus seen in "new" EU Member States as a reform process of the state administration and an introduction of governance, involving not only economic but also political considerations. It coincided with the negotiations for EU accession and was shaped significantly by them. That process was in contrast with the gradual, non-aggressive, economic and functional integration which had taken place in "old" Europe in the second half of the 20th century. Furthermore, accession conditionality was unprecedentedly high, allowing EU institutions to have higher impact on domestic political arrangements than was the case with "old" Member States. In particular in the beginning of the accession negotiations (early 1990s), there was a general tendency for the European Commission to promote broad political restructuring in the form of a democratically legitimized decentralized regional government and decentralized management of EU funding.[103]

Soon however, conditionality "downgraded" to a more limited form of regionalization with the Commission opting for a narrow reading of the *acquis* requirements. The conditions

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[102] With the possible exception of Poland which favors political regionalization, even regionalism.
[103] That tendency was reversed later on as a reflection of the disagreements between the different directorates of the European Commission and the recognition that in Central and Eastern Europe only central governments had the capacity to carry through major reforms. Yet, some CEE states did go through with processes of political regionalization, granting political powers to regions and introducing elections through direct suffrage.

which had to be met by candidate states to comply with Chapter 21[104] under the *acquis communautaire* referred mostly to their capacity for the absorption of Structural Funds, namely to have in place an "appropriate legal framework," to agree to a NUTS territorial classification, to demonstrate programming and administrative capacity, to show sound financial and budgetary management, and to demonstrate co-financing arrangements.[105] No specifications were made as to the organization and separation of responsibilities on national level, which were left to Member States to deal with.[106]

All "new" EU Member States passed regional development acts and reoriented themselves towards regional rather than sectoral development, created at least administrative regions as an intermediate level between state and local units, began building regional capacities for the acquisition of EU funding, implemented EU programming rationale, and increased the co-operation between key actors. Rationalist explanations for domestic change are prominent in explaining those processes: actors (central governments) have revised domestic practices to comply with EU regulations (membership conditionality in the case of candidate countries), or to receive funding. Furthermore, specifically for "new" EU Member States, while formally no incentives were offered to stimulate the forming of a regional level of government, let alone to support the process of regionalism, there was a widespread perception in accession countries that this was indeed, if not required, then recommended.[107] This (mis)perception has been used by actors who have sought to use Europe to further their own ends (regional actors looking for enlarged political power, central governments looking for a new political agenda, and minority groups looking for more social and political rights and an ability to shape domestic politics through outside pressures),[108] and has in a way curbed regionalism by making it almost redundant by regionalization.

In Croatia and Bulgaria, central governments have accepted that the price of EU membership is the carrying out of reforms in domestic policy and processes, and the

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[104] Chapter 22 "Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments" under the Croatian negotiations.
[105] Hughes, Sasse, Gordon (2004), pp.111-112.
[106] European Commission, Enlargement Archives:
http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/enlargement_process/future_prospects/negotiations/eu10_bulgaria_romania/chapters/chap_21_en.htm or
http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement_process/accession_process/how_does_a_country_join_the_eu/negotiations_croatia_turkey/index_en.htm#5
[107] Hughes, Sasse and Gordon (2003, 2004); Keating and Hughes (2003).
[108] *ibid*

transfer of some decisional competences to the EU.[109] Both Croatian and Bulgarian governments have been in an unequal position relative to EU institutions. Nine years since its membership in the EU, Bulgaria is still monitored by the European Commission which has the power to cut off its Structural Funding, and has already done so on a number of occasions, should the country fail to comply with its *acquis* obligations. Croatia has recently concluded one of the most meticulous and difficult negotiation processes in the history of the EU and has carried out reforms not demanded in most other "new" Member States. In both countries, in addition to formal powers EU actors have also had strong informal power, and have used "carrots and sticks" to ensure central governments' compliance. Additionally, in order to satisfy EU requirements for the allocation of funding, central governments have (reluctantly) consulted, created partnerships, and developed networks with a number of regional, local and sectoral actors. They have remained the controlling factor of all those processes and have steered them according to their wishes, yet, the door for cooperation with sub-national and non-government actors has been opened. The latter development has been linked directly to the negotiations for EU membership and would probably not have taken place independently. And lastly, as a result of policies and initiatives emanating from the EU, central governments and sub-national actors, the sub-national level has emerged as a separate actor using both horizontal (i.e. cooperating with regional and local authorities from other EU Member States) and vertical (establishing representative offices in Brussels and lobbying EU institutions) EU channels to do so. Overall, the sub-national level has perceived supranational institutions as an ally rather than a threat.[110] Interviews with sub-national actors in Croatia, for example, reveal widespread support for EU pre-accession policies and processes and for the European Commission.[111] That perception has been founded on the fact that EU pre-accession assistance has provided sub-national actors with important resources: financial, as end recipients of assistance, and political, by giving them a formal role in the policy process through the requirements of partnership and programming.[112]

This said, the role of both supranational and regional institutions should not be exaggerated. While it is true that regional authorities were responsible for the preparation and implementation of Regional Operational Programmes, due to the lack of internal

[109] *ibid*, p. 80.
[110] *ibid*, p. 81.
[111] *ibid*
[112] *ibid*

resources, those were frequently written by consultants, who failed to grasp the particular needs of each region and frequently copied national strategies, and used universal blueprints across countries and regions. In addition, the role of regional authorities in the distribution of funding has remained mostly advisory, with centrally located institutions serving as contracting bodies.

In reference to the economic benefits of EU integration, those are associated with the possibility for social learning through engagement with EU institutions and policy.[113] Bulgaria and Croatia have benefited from at least limited social learning, and regional institutions and development plans have been conceived after similar ones in "old" Member States which, as already said, has not produced the most effective strategies . Furthermore, although the main concern of EU regional policy is the amelioration of regional disparities and the economic development of lagging-behind regions, research on EU regions reveals that the most innovative regions, such as Bavaria, Catalonia and Lombardy, are also amongst the most wealthy European regions for which the importance of the European Union lies not in its regional structural funds but in the opportunities for interregional co-operation which transcends national boundaries and which is legitimized and encouraged by the institutions and ethos of the Union.[114] In Croatia and Bulgaria, although regional economic disparities are large and growing, because of the countries' overall underdevelopment, even the richest regions are eligible for Structural Funding,[115] which is leading to a further increase in regional disparities, as rich areas like Istria and Pirin Macedonia have the capacity to attract more funding than poorer ones. More developed regions thus have a double economic benefit from EU membership: opportunities for the absorption of significant EU funding targeted at the reduction of disparities with "old" Member States, and for the attracting of foreign investment and the intensifying of the economic exchange with other EU regions.

Related to this latter observation, most analysts agree that in majority of EU states the success and shape of decentralization efforts have largely depended on the inherent situation. In countries where regionalization and regionalism have fitted well with domestic

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[113] Bache (2008). On the other hand, Paraskevopoulos (2006) highlights a less profound policy learning process, in which actors draw lessons from EU practices without altering their core goals or preferences.
[114] Jones, Barry. "Conclusion," in Keating, Michael and Barry Jones (eds.). *The European Union and the Regions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 291.
[115] EU's main funding instrument for regional development.

institutions and preferences (e.g. states like Germany, Belgium, but also Poland, which have a tradition of federalism and decentralization), they have flourished. Conversely, states with strong traditions of centralization (e.g. the UK, France and most "new" Member States) have merely transferred some of their administrative burden to regional and local branches of the central government.[116] Similarly, from an economic point of view, those regions which have been the most open to EU integration and most competitive in European context, have reaped the most benefits from EU membership, and have realized higher levels of economic development and autonomy on regional level. [117] Lagging-behind regions have preserved their dependence on central authorities relying heavily on centrally-led (re)distribution of resources.

3. Summary

Research on regionalism in "new" EU Member States is limited, with empirical work focusing mostly on state-led reform packages leading to political and economic regionalization. National structures are researched as universal, i.e. the relations between the different regions and the central government, on the one hand, and supranational EU institutions, on the other, are put under the same common denominator. This kind of thinking goes in opposition with the (traditional and current) diversity of regions in CEE. Despite the centralized nature of all "new" EU Member States, centralization and uniformity are not historically and culturally inherent to their societies. Different administrative and political regions have different capacities, and that ultimately affects whether and what type of regionalism they might pursue. To capture the specificity of individual regions, this research studies in detail two of them, analysing them in their contemporary form, and making conclusions as to why strong regionalism developed in one of them (Istria) in the 1990s, while failed to do so in the other (Pirin Macedonia), despite the latter's stronger traditions of political activism and self-governance. Although applying a bottom-up approach, i.e. studying administrative, cultural, political and economic processes taking place within the regions themselves, national and European developments have also been analysed as those have affected the subnational level. On national level, the large-scale reforms, the restructuring in all spheres of life, and the overall liberalization of public

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[116] Bache (2008), p. 168.
[117] In "new" EU Member States, for example, Polish Upper Silesia has been very successful in absorbing EU funding and developing grass-roots regionalism without building strong regional political institutions.

life have provided regions with a window of opportunity for political action. Despite the wide-spread belief in the opposite, the effect of EU accession has been almost exclusively "soft," in the form of social learning and the replicating of best practices. Since EU regional policy does not regulate the political arrangement between the different levels of government, there has not been significant "hard" membership conditionality applied in the area of regional development. That has meant that most regions have been affected on a very superficial (administrative) level, while the opportunity for those which have chosen to benefit from EU integration and national restructuring has also existed. Regional leaders have used rhetoric tying regionalism to EU best practices, have copied and cooperated with more successful regions in "old" Member States, and have relied at least to some extent on available EU funding. This variation between regions on national level justifies again the implementation of a bottom-up approach in seeking to explain why regionalism occurs in some cases and fails to do so in other.

The research is thus based on detailed contextual analysis of Istria and Pirin Macedonia studying the diverging outcomes in the levels of their regionalism through the prism of four factors found by researchers to be positively related to regionalism: legal and administrative framework, regional identity, political parties and economy. Chapter 2 introduces the two case studies, establishing the similarities and basis of comparison between them. It also places Istrian and Pirin Macedonian regionalism in the context of previous research on the factors supportive of the emergence and strengthening of regionalism. Consequently, the effects of each of those factors on regionalism are elaborated in a separate chapter. Chapter 4 studies the connection between regionalization, as a state-led reform of the administrative and legal framework, and regionalism, as a bottom-up process for the realization of regional needs and aspirations. It tests the hypothesis that stronger regionalization, in particular the devolving of decision-making powers on political and economic matters to the regional level, is directly supportive of stronger regionalism. The essence and relevance for regionalism of regional identities existing on the border between different nation-states is analysed in Chapter 5. The author seeks to understand the rationale behind the politicization of collective identities, studying the connection between culture and economic and political processes. Political parties are among the most significant actors in the politicization of regional identities, and Chapter 6 focuses on studying the political developments which have served as a catalyst for regionalism and the behaviour of regionalist political parties active in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. Since the current level of politicization of the regional identity in Pirin

Macedonia is very limited, a comparison is made both with the contemporary state of regionalism there (by contrast) as well as with regionalism in the interwar period (by similarity) when the regionalist political party VMRO had full control of the region. Furthermore, the author seeks to establish the rationale behind regionalist projects in those two regions, testing the hypothesis that regionalism is directly related to calls for democratization and improved efficiency. The last factor generally found to be positively related to regionalism is the state of the regional economy, and Chapter 7 focuses on studying the origins of regionalism in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. The author tests theories related to the relationship between economic development, respectively underdevelopment, and regionalism, and carries out detailed empirical research on the effects of globalization, European integration and economic development on regionalism in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. Chapter 8 concludes the findings of the empirical work in the two regions, singling out two factors as particularly related to the emergence and strengthening of regionalism: the occurrence of a ground-breaking event, be it political or economic, which opens opportunities for alternative political projects to surface and grow rapidly, and the overlap between political and administrative functions which facilitates political control over economic resources.

Because of the highly centralized nature of both studied countries where national governments maintain tight control over political and economic decision-making, the research is placed within the framework of realist and neo-conservative academic theories. The approach applied to the study of regional identities is based on social constructivism and its vision of reality as construed. The research is not trying to envision higher political and economic dynamism than actually exists on the regional level, nor to suggest that centralism in Croatia and Bulgaria is being eroded by decentralization processes, but rather to draw attention and study two similar regions which have over the past two and a half decades taken diverging paths while operating within relatively similar national frameworks (centralized states) and external environment (EU integration).

Chapter 2

Pre-conditions for the emergence of regionalism and rationale for the selection of case studies

As established in Chapter 1, regions differ significantly in form, objectives and capacities. Regionalism as a process can also be driven by different motivations, from aspirations related to cultural assertiveness to ambitions for increased political autonomy or even secession. Furthermore, culture and history define regions in their own right shaping regions around specific common cultural or ethnic characteristics. For all those reasons, it is not possible to locate two fully identical regions or to identify processes of regionalism which have taken identical pathways. Quantitative research on larger number of European regions is useful in summarizing which factors are positively related to regionalism, which is in its turn helpful in identifying which regions are more prone to develop regionalist tendencies. It is not, however, contributing much to understanding the extreme cases, i.e. the regions with strongest or weakest regionalism, or the exceptions, i.e. the regions in which the listed pre-conditions have failed to lead to regionalism. Such understanding requires detailed study of few selected cases, in particular in "new" EU Member States where quantitative research is lacking and where it is not unusual to apply findings of research carried out in Western Europe without context-based testing and modifications. The definitions provided in the previous chapter have narrowed case study research down to a particular type of a region: one operating between the local and national level, and having both formal administrative identity and cultural specificity. In this chapter, I will provide further narrowing criteria for case selection, starting with the pre- conditions found to be generally enabling for regionalism, and comparing those with the fundamental characteristics of Istria which is among the regions with strongest political regionalism in "new" Member States. The selection of Pirin Macedonia as the case for comparison is justified by its comparable (to Istria) initial characteristics, and its subsequently divergent path of regionalism leading to the failed (re)politicization of the regional identity.

1. Explanations and causes of regionalism in EU Member States

The following section will provide an overview of quantitative and qualitative research on the causes of regionalism in Europe, assisting the understanding of processes taking place in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. The theoretical framework on regionalism in Europe comes almost exclusively from research carried out in "old" EU Member States, and empirical case study research in Central and Eastern Europe is also useful in establishing the validity of this framework outside of a Western European context.

Research on the processes of regionalization and regionalism in Europe is typically placed in a European Union context, as those processes developed parallelly with European integration. In particular in the case of "new" EU Member States, they were a consequence of reformist pressures applied by European Union institutions in the form of EU conditionality, or coming from within a country but inspired or justified by EU best practices. EU conditionality is typically studied through the prism of rationalist political theories. For that reason, on EU level, the European Commission is by far the most studied actor, and its role is analysed through its power to reward and punish countries' behaviour. On national level, preference is given to formal actors, mostly central and regional governments, because of the formal nature of their powers and responsibilities, and the practice in "new" EU Member States to exclude the non-government sector from decision-making. In the event that the behaviour of individual groups is analysed, those are usually again formal actors, such as civil servants, members of central government, political parties, regional administrations, or regional development agencies.

Although there is thus relative consensus on which are the main actors driving regionalism in "new" EU Member States, there is no agreement among them on what are the reasons and preconditions for its emergence. As a matter of fact, there is no theoretical framework which has been developed specifically for Central and Eastern European states but rather existing theories on Western Europe have been tested or even applied directly to them. Pitschel and Bauer summarize well the existing literature on regionalism in "old" EU Member States. According to them, there are broadly speaking four different explanatory

frameworks for why regionalism emerges and flourishes.[1] The first one is based on cultural distinctiveness. According to its proponents, regions with specific regional language or culture, and with a high share of the population belonging to an ethnic or religious minority, are more prone to develop regionalism (Connor (1994)[2]; Alesina and Spolaore (2003)[3]). Scholars working within the second framework focus on the institutional provisions and constitutional rights of subnational entities. They argue that regions with a strong executive and constitutionally guaranteed competences in major policy fields—such as regional economic development, policing, communications or transport—have higher levels of regionalism (Kohler-Koch (1995)[4]; Hooghe and Marks (2001)[5]). The third explanatory framework sees socio-economic differences among subnational entities as the crucial cause for rising regionalism (Dahl Fitjar (2010)[6]; Lafont (1967)[7]; McAllister and Studlar (1992)[8]). Its proponents argue that both regional underdevelopment and economic prosperity might serve as the trigger for regionalist movements. The last framework focuses on regional party competition and argues that mobilization efforts are stronger in regions in which regionalist parties compete for voters (Van Houten (2003)[9]; Jolly (2007)[10]; Hopkin (2003)[11]).

Those four explanations have been subsequently applied to research of differential subnational environments in "new" EU Member States (Bauer and Pitschel (2007)[12];

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[1] Pitschel, Diana and Michael W. Bauer. "Subnational Governance Approaches on the Rise—Reviewing a Decade of Eastern European Regionalization Research." *Regional & Federal Studies*, 2009, 19 (3).

[2] Connor, W. *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

[3] Alesina, A. and E. Spolaore. *The Size of Nations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

[4] Kohler-Koch, B. "Regions as Political Actors in the Process of European Integration." 1995, Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung (MZES), Arbeitspapier Nr. 9, Mannheim.

[5] Hooghe, L. and Gary Marks. *Multi-level Governance and European Integration.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.

[6] Dahl Fitjar, Rune. *The Rise of Regionalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

[7] Lafont, R. *La Révolution Régionaliste*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967.

[8] McAllister, I. and D. T. Studlar. "Region and Voting in Britain, 1979-87: Territorial Polarisation or Artefact?" *American Journal of Political Science*, 1992, 36 (1), pp. 168-199.

[9] Van Houten, P. "Globalization and Demands for Regional Autonomy in Europe," in Kahler, M. and D. A. Lake (eds). *Governance in a Global Economy. Political Authority in Transition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

[10] Jolly, S. K. 2007. "The Europhile Fringe?: Regionalist Party Support for European Integration." *European Union Politics*, 2007, 8(1), pp. 109–130

[11] Hopkin, J. "Political Decentralization, Electoral Change and Party Organizational Adaptation: A Framework for Analysis." *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 2003, 10 (3), pp. 227-237.

[12] Bauer, M. W., Knill, C. and D. Pitschel. "Differential Europeanization in Eastern Europe: The Impact of Diverse EU Regulatory Governance Patterns." *Journal of European Integration*, 2007, 29(4), pp. 405–424.

Scherpereel (2007)[13]), despite the differences between them and "old" members and the context in which regionalism emerged. In Western Europe ("old" EU Member States), the primary rationale for inter-country integration was to weaken the nationalism of nation-states which had led to two World Wars. That led to the questioning of the concept of nation-building through centralized power and standardization of culture, and left more room for the decentralization of state power (both in terms of regionalization and political regionalism) and the expression of cultural traits other than the "standard national" ones (cultural regionalism). Additionally, in particular since the 1970s when economic hardship brought on the agenda reforms in governance and public administration, economic efficiency and accountability served as further motivations for the decentralization of competences to sub-national levels, which in its turn gave rise to bottom-up regionalism. [14]

In "new" EU Member States, the fall of communism also brought about major political and socio-economic reforms. The first manifestation of those reforms was the restructuring, sometimes violent, of political and administrative units and processes, which led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Out of the eleven "new" Member States, seven were parts ("regions") of former larger ones – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (former USSR), the Czech Republic and Slovakia (former Czechoslovakia), and Slovenia and Croatia (former Yugoslavia). That meant that any subsequent decentralization devolved power and functions to subnational units which were not sufficiently large in terms of population, territory or economy, and thus unlikely to prosper independently from their states. From the four countries which did not undergo a process of disintegration, only Poland and Romania are sufficiently large to have plausible autonomist movements, but even in them the relative economic underdevelopment compared with Western European states makes autonomy economically unsound. In other words, it is not possible to compare regions like the Basque Country which have population of over 2 million, GDP per capita of over 30 000 euros[15], and separate language and ethnicity, with regions like Istria with population of 200 thousand people, GDP per capita of 13 000 euros[16], and regional cultural specificity which is not ethnic in nature. Furthermore, in order to avoid

[13] Scherpereel, J. A. "Sub-National Authorities in the EU's Post-Socialist States." *European Integration*, 2007, 29(1), pp. 23–46.
[14] Applegate, Celia. "A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times." *The American Historical Review*, 1999, 104 (4), pp. 1157-1182.
[15] GDP per capita by province in the Basque Autonomous Community, 1980-2009, statistics published by Eustat (Basque Statistics Office).
[16] "Gross Domestic Product for Republic of Croatia, NUTS 2 Level and Counties, 2011." Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 14 February, 2014.

future clashes with both regionalist movements and minority nationalisms, central governments in "new" EU Member States have been careful in carrying out administrative and decentralizing reforms which have left few cohesive ethno-cultural regions as territorial-political units with significant decision-making powers. [17] Most of those states maintain purposefully a higher number of counties than is necessary or economically sound, fragmenting and polarizing historical regions. All of those factors have left regions in "new" EU Member States dependent on central governments, and have curbed serious autonomy aspirations on regional level from the political agenda. Any kind of regionalism in these countries is not likely to have secession as its final objective, despite political talk to the contrary, but would rather focus on the acquisition of additional decision-making and spending jurisdictions within existing state structures.

The importance of central authorities in the process of regionalization was reinforced by the European Commission's approach to regionalization during the accession negotiations. Although up until the end of the 1990s, it promoted actively regionalization, inspired by ideals of multi-level governance, decentralization and even political regionalism, later on focus shifted to ensuring that negotiation chapters were closed and pre-accession funds absorbed on time, even if that meant they were managed centrally through national ministries.[18] In the negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania, and in particular with Croatia, decentralization for the purposes of the satisfying of the *acquis communnautaire* was reduced to the introduction of the NUTS regions for statistical purposes, and the drafting of regional development and operational programmes. It was left entirely to states to decide whether and what kind of administrative and decision-making powers to devolve to the regional and local levels. In regards to the economic aspects of EU integration, because even the most developed regions in "new" Member States are underdeveloped in comparison with regions in the West, and because the latest rounds of enlargement have included 13 countries, competition for funding and resources on both national and European level is high, and the impact of the obtained EU funding lower than had been in countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal or Ireland. Furthermore, unlike more developed regions in Western Europe, regions in "new" Member States also benefit less from the single market and the increased economic exchange in the EU. This means that funding (in the form of EU funds, foreign investments or trade revenues) is increasingly scarce and that

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[17] Szul, Roman. "Sub-National Regionalism and the European Union." *Studia Regionalne*, 2015, 17, pp. 41-52.
[18] Bache and Andreou (2011), Hughes et al. (2004).

regions are having fewer opportunities to circumvent their national governments and secure funding for their projects directly from EU institutions or investors. The situation is aggravated in Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia where the European Commission has completely dropped any demands for the contracting and distribution of funding on regional level, meaning that in order to secure financial support subnational institutions and entities need to satisfy criteria and follow procedures set up by the central state. In short, unlike in Western Europe, in CEE formal political-administrative structures on central and regional level have been the dominating factors in both the processes of regionalization and regionalism.

To go back to the four explanations for the growth of regionalism in Western Europe, although undoubtedly backed by substantive research, each of these explanations holds ground when applied to specific regions, and fails to prove causality in others. That is particularly the case when attempting to apply the same frameworks to "new" Member States which, as already explained, differ in their latest development from their Western counterparts. It appears more useful to study instead the relationship between the main factors behind all four explanations - culture, legislative and institutional reform, political parties, and economy – and how those relate to regionalism. To this end, Dahl Fitjar's quantitative research on regions and regionalism in Western Europe provides a workable framework.[19]

To begin with, on a grass-roots level, the existence of a specific culture is the minimum necessary for the building of a collective regional identity. That culture does not need to be "authentic" or "historic" in that it can be a relatively modern construct, but it needs to reflect contemporary public needs and way of living. The public needs typically revolve around two major objectives: the promotion of economic development, i.e. better standard of living, and/or the preservation of an ethnic or cultural identity. Most analysts agree that regionalism is strongly and positively related to a distinctive cultural identity. Nevertheless, research is typically carried out in regions where the local population sees itself as a member of a separate national identity, as determined by its ethnicity, language, culture or religion. This leads to demands for political self-determination, even secession, as the legitimacy of the central state and its dominance by a (rival) ethnic group in this particular region is questioned. For example, in regions in Spain, like the Basque country and Catalogna, regionalism has taken the form of peripheral nationalism, and the regional

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[19] Dahl Fitjar (2010).

identity has ethnic undertones ("historical nationalities" "autonomous regionalisms"). Such a way of looking at regionalism as a form of minority nationalism is very widely spread, and majority of the research on CEE has also adopted such an approach (the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia). As a matter of fact, outside of an EU context, most research on regions in CEE in the 1990s has been carried out in the context of the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia, analysing regions as an arena for traditional and modern conflicts between ethnic groups identifying with and competing over the same territory. It has identified trans-border regions and cooperation as a means to ameliorating the consequences of the conflict, and has studied the regional dimension as an element of those states' democratization process, providing simultaneously for national unity and minority rights. The focus of the herein carried out research is in contrast with studies of ethnic conflicts and violent realization of regional identities. It analyses regionalization and regionalism as more modern phenomena, aspiring to improve economic efficiency and democratic accountability by moving governance closer to the public, and providing regional authorities and elites with larger decision-making autonomy. Furthermore, it focuses on two regions which are distinct from the rest of their states and exhibit a local pattern of multiculturalism at odds with the prevailing nationalist discourse. In short, this is not a study of "problematic" regions characterized by nationalistic conflicts over territory, or by the struggle for independence of ethnic groups. It is a study of peaceful and prosperous multicultural areas in which national, regional and European identities and roles are interconnected and complement each other. Within such a context, it appears that culture "constitute(s) only a potential" for territorial mobilization and is not by itself sufficient to trigger the politicization of previously dormant identities.[20] According to Dahl Fitjar, regionalism is overall a "more calculated political development, [21]"with political elites politicizing the identity of a region when the region, or they themselves, stand to gain from it. From this point of view, the politicization of regional identities is set in motion as a rational response to a change in the circumstances of a region or in the overall political situation in a country. This last remark is significant as Dahl Fitjar's research has not found any significant correlation between regionalist political parties and regionalism; the important cause for regionalism within this framework appears to be vote and party

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[20] Dahl Fitjar (2009) and Urwin. D. "Conclusion: Perspectives on Conditions of Regional Protest and Accommodation," in Rokkan, S. and D. Urwin (eds.). *The Politics of Territorial Identity: Studies in European Regionalism*. London: Sage, 1982.
[21] Dahl Fitjar (2009), p. 17.

distinctiveness on regional and national level.[22] Conflicts between the regional and national governments and diverging political preferences can serve as a basis for regional mobilization. In particular, national opposition parties which are in office at the regional level might have strong incentives to support the transfer of jurisdictions to the regional level in order to increase their own power. These incentives grow with the security of the party's position in the region and decrease with the strength of its position at the national level.[23] Furthermore, opposition towards a political party that is dominant at the central level might also create incentives to regionalize political power. From a rational voter perspective, one might say that the most compelling argument for wanting to devolve powers to a regional government is if the regional government would pursue a policy programme that was closer to the voter's preferences than that of the national government. If there was no difference between the policies of the regional and national governments, devolution of power would be pointless from a rationalist perspective, as the output would remain the same.[24]

Although political parties can call for regional mobilization and transfer of power to the regional level, the very reform process needs to be agreed on and initiated by central governments. The institutional and legal arrangements in a country are thus also appearing to have an impact on regionalism. The rationale for reforms might be twofold. Firstly, from a functional perspective, the strengthening of sub-national regions is seen as a response to an overload in central governments' responsibilities, and the need to decentralise the delivery of public goods. In "new" EU Member States it is also necessitated on the one hand, by the lack of direct responsibility for public spending on local and regional level which facilitates the running of budget deficits and overspending, and on the other hand, by the distribution of resources from richer to poorer regions which accumulates dissatisfaction in the former. Secondly, it might be the result of pressures for democratization coming from both internal (the public) and external (mostly EU) sources. From the perspective of democracy theory, it is argued that by reducing the distance between citizens and decision-making institutions, the conditions for participatory democracy are enhanced.[25] Within the context of CEE, the importance of pre-existing patterns of territorial relations within states has proved to be crucial for the models of

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[22] *ibid, p. 66*

[23] *ibid*, p. 24

[24] *ibid*

[25] Cameron, David M. (ed.). *Regionalism and Supranationalism: Challenges and Alternatives to the Nation-State in Canada and Europe*. The Institute for Research on Public Policy and Policies Study Institute. Quebec, London: 1981.

regionalization adopted in the last two and a half decades. The strong legacy of centralism has meant that central governments have played predominant role in all reform processes, including decentralization, and that they have more importantly served as a model for self-governance structures on local and regional level. It is not an accident that full-blown regionalism cannot be identified in any of the "new" EU Member States – no regional structures possess the resources, jurisdiction and independence of regions like the Basque Country, Catalogna, Bavaria or Northern Ireland. Although some have a history of self-governance, the lack of continuous democratic tradition also means that there are no operational models and historical know-how which can serve as guidelines for modern regional movements. The only administrative and governing models come from regions in "old" EU Member States, which have, as already said, different capacities and thus different aspirations. This means that regionalist movements in CEE are frequently inconsistent and short-loved.

The last factor which plays a role in regionalism is economic performance. Here researchers disagree whether regionalism has its foundation in economic underdevelopment or in economic prosperity. Under the first line of thinking, regions revolt to what is described as internal colonialism, or the prevalence of the central state and the core over peripheral areas, which are left underdeveloped and poor. Under the economic development perspective, richer regions seek regionalism in order to protect their resources and have higher saying over the spending of revenues generated on their territory. Dahl Fitjar's quantitative research on Western Europe has found a positive correlation between a high level of economic development and stronger regionalism, and it appears that in CEE countries that is also more often than not the case as well. In the cases of Pirin Macedonia and Istria which are border regions with highly developed trade and human resources mobility with neighbouring countries, economic development should be also analysed through the prism of EU integration. The free movement of goods, services, products and capital has further strengthened their specific border cultures and economy. The intensified economic exchange has also weakened to a certain extent central states, as regions have been able to benefit directly from the economic opportunities provided by the mobility of capital and labour. It has also increased the competition between regions for the acquisition of resources which would boost their economic development[26] (be they foreign investments, qualified labour or foreign visitors). Keating distinguishes between old

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[26] Keating, Michael. "Asymmetrical Government: Multinational States in an Integrating Europe."*Publius*: *The Journal of Federalism*, 1999, 29(1), pp. 71-86.

and new paradigms of regional development. According to him, competition over the distribution of wealth within a region characterized the old model of regional development. This has largely given way to a system of competition between regions for the wealth of the nation. [27] In CEE states, despite indications that this new paradigm is beginning to emerge, it has not fully replaced the old one, and for the time being both seem to co-exist. As border regions, Pirin Macedonia and Istria have a natural advantage over the rest of their countries in the attraction of foreign capital but because of their export potential, also of domestic investment in sectors which are prone to bring high returns. They are thus successful in the competition with other regions for the wealth of the nation. Nevertheless, because of the centralized nature of both states, which means that a lot of the regional resources are transferred through taxation to the central level, competition for the distribution of wealth within a region is also a factor in decentralization and regionalism. Within such a perspective of looking at EU integration, increased mobilization of local and regional identities might emerge as a reaction against the control of the centre (both on national and EU level) and the perceived economic and cultural homogenization brought about by the EU. [28] Regardless of whether it is in opposition to or as a deliberate product of EU integration, regionalism is positively related to the latter process, so the question to be answered is not whether EU integration leads to regionalism but why it does so only in certain cases.

In order to build understanding why regions with seemingly comparable initial characteristics differ in levels of regionalism, in particular in the context of "new" EU Member States, it is needed to study the correlation between all four above listed factors – specific regional culture, decentralization, political party system, and economic development. Instead of carrying out further quantitative research testing Dahl Fitjar's four factors on "new" Member States, I would take his findings as a premise and make a detailed case study comparison between two regions in which all four factors are present, but which have nevertheless developed different levels of regionalism. Istria and Pirin Macedonia are economically prosperous, culturally-specific EU border regions operating within highly centralized nation-states which have undergone some limited administrative decentralization. Both have regional political parties which are, however, very different in ideology and level of success, and both associate their prosperity with trans-border trade,

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[27] Keating, Michael. *The New Regionalism in Western Europe: Territorial Restructuring and Political Change.* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998, p. 140.
[28] Friedman, T. L. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000 as referred to in Dahl Fitjar (2009).

which means that they are, at least as far as the economy is concerned, right in orientation, which is not necessarily the case in the rest of their countries. Overall, in both Bulgaria and Croatia, decentralization was driven by concerns for administrative efficiency rather than democratization; economic development prevailed over cultural issues; and the influence of the EU was more indirect and symbolic than direct. That, together with the relatively small size of their subnational administrative units, which eliminates autonomy as a viable option, justifies comparisons between the two countries. The following section will explain in more detail the rationale for the selection of the particular case studies.

2. Case selection

The research's objective is to implement a most similar systems design, identifying two regions in which the four factors identified to be conductive for regionalism by Dahl Fitjar are present but which have developed different levels of regionalism, and trying to explain why that has been the case by assessing in detail the effect of each factor and their interconnectedness. To do so, it is also needed to limit additionally the type of region which will be studied by selecting the one with the highest level of regionalism in CEE and identifying a region with similar fundamental characteristics.

The cultural diversity of CEE states on subnational level is substantial and relatively well preserved. Yet, regionalism as a political project is rare and frequently short-lived. Istria stands out as the only region which has successfully politicized its regional identity and status and has maintained a high level of political regionalism continuously over the past two decades. Istrian exceptionalism has been studied widely within the context of the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia, when it presented a unique example of identity building as a function of multi-culturalism and regionalism as opposed to nationalism. A decade later, Istria has surpassed its role as an indigenous region, and has become an example of a largely independent self-governance structure operating in a highly centralized state. It has done so by establishing specific relations with the central government which provide it with a certain degree of autonomy in decision-making, but also by selective learning and socialization through its relations with EU institutions and other sub-national regions. Although its jurisdictions are limited by existing legislature, meaning that it possesses by law exactly the same rights and responsibilities as other Croatian counties, Istria has in practice higher independence than can be predicted. Since it is one of the most developed

Croatian regions, the county authorities have significant budgets at their disposal. Furthermore, political arrangements with the central level frequently ensure that the central authority does not exercise its control and supervision functions in that county. There appears to be unwritten agreement which leaves county authorities alone as long as they do not disturb the balance of power on national level. As far as EU integration is concerned, Istrian leaders have used the EU pre-accession period as an opportunity to connect with and copy practices from the more developed and autonomous regions in "old" Europe. This initiative has come from the region itself and was not dependent on formal EU or national policies. That also suggests that decentralization reforms by themselves have not been the crucial factor for Istrian regionalism. Given the fact that the Istrian region is indeed the only one with developed regionalism in Croatia, comparisons with other regions within the same state would indicate the reasons behind Istrian exceptionalism on national level. Those have been already researched widely, as already mentioned in the context of the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia. Such studies, however, fail to connect Istrian regionalism with the wider trend on EU level. Even in federalized EU states, some regions develop stronger regionalism than others, which means that regionalism, despite its different manifestations, is more of an exception than a universal process on national or EU level. As such, it needs certain pre-conditions to flourish which are not necessarily vested in national legislature. According to Dahl Fitjar's quantitative research, enabling legislature is but one of the factors conductive for regionalism. Much stronger impact on the process have the existence of a regional culture, in particular regional language, a high level of economic development, a regionalized party system, and close integration into the European Union. Comparing Istria with other counties in Croatia, it is indeed the only one where all of those four factors are present, and since it is also the only region with strong regionalism, it seems that Dahl Fitjar's findings are valid on national level. Istria is very small in size, operates in a centralized state which is member of the EU, and is characterized by fluid regional culture which is not based on a minority ethnicity or religion. In addition, the county is one of the most developed in Croatia, and has a strong regionalist political party which has politicized the regional identity and thus gained political control over the region.

The following four basic Istrian characteristics, in addition to Dahl Fitjar's 4 factors, will be the foundation for the selection of a region for comparison purposes. Firstly, the unit for analysis utilized in this research will be the county as a formal administrative-territorial level between the central and the local level. The county, however, is only interesting for

studies on regionalism as long as its boundaries coincide with those of a cultural region. Despite the initial assumption that such an overlap is relatively common since "historical cultural regions" present a natural unit for regional development, and therefore for administrative and financial decentralization, it appears that, in particular in CEE, that is not the case. Regionalization processes have led to many of those regions being split or merged thus reducing their cohesiveness and their potential for regionalism. It is as a result relatively difficult but critical to identify another cultural region which functions simultaneously as a cohesive territorial and administrative unit. Secondly, the rights granted to regions in federal states are relatively evenly distributed and apply in the same measure to all administrative units. In contrast, the centralized nature of CEE states, and in particular Croatia, means that regionalism is not necessarily the result of the introduction of supporting legal and administrative framework, but that regions' formal rights and responsibilities are frequently very limited. Thirdly, the size of a region defines the political and economic options available for its leaders. This is a study of a very small border region which, however, does not have a culture associated with minority nationalism. Because of its small size, it is not looking to obtain full autonomy from the central state, and because of the lack of an ethnic orientation of its regionalism, it is not having the option to join a neighbouring "mother" state either. That means that its regionalism is, politically speaking, an internal phenomenon, despite the possible international orientation of the regional economy. Such regions play a very limited role in international relations, mostly in a joint capacity (through participation in common organizations). The influence of the EU over them, although present, is mostly in the area of rhetoric and best practices, and rarely has a direct political expression. Lastly, the regionalism researched here does not include violent attempts for gaining autonomy. Such have taken place in the 1990s in federal states, and have had a strong ethnic overtone. In its focus are prosperous and peaceful regions which have benefited economically from globalization (EU integration) and the multiculturalism of their population.

Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria shares all four of those basic characteristics with Istria. In addition, the factors identified by Dahl Fitjar as conductive for strong regionalism are also present in that region. The historical regions of Istria and Pirin Macedonia coincide (roughly) [29] with the administrative units of Istria County and Blagoevgrad County.[30]

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[29] A small part of Croatian Istria is included in Primorije-Gorski Kotar County and a small part of Pirin Macedonia is divided between neighboring counties, yet that division does not disturb the cultural, political or economic wholeness of the two regions studied by this research.

Territorially, Istria County and Blagoevgrad County exist between the national and local levels, and are part of the administrative divisions of their countries. Functionally, while the term "county" denotes a territorial and administrative meaning, the growing adoption of the term "region," in both colloquial use and formal documents and translations, indicates a tendency to transcendent those counties' role as administrative units responsible for implementing state policy on the local level. The term "region" denotes a cultural element which the term "county" lacks both by design and in common perception. Specifically, in the border regions of Istria and Blagoevgrad, social culture is based on the mingling of neighbouring national identities which has resulted in the creation of a common regional identity based on multi-culturalism, tolerance, and a mixing-pot kind of rationality. In other words, in those regions, identity is not expressed solely through the lens of ethnic or national belonging but rather through regional one. That is not to say that ethnic or national identities do not exist, but that rather a parallel regional identity exists which is at times overcoming all other identities[31] since, unlike them, it is inclusive rather than exclusive and thus easily adopted. When referring to Istria and Blagoevgrad Counties, I will interchangingly use the terms "region" and "county," although in essence it is the latter's frontiers and institutions that provide the quantitative and qualitative foundations needed to carry out the comparisons. [32]

Both Istria and Pirin Macedonia are very small regions, which cannot exist separately from their nation-states. For comparison purposes, an average region in France has a population of 5 million, in Spain of 3.7 million, and in Poland of 3.2 million. [33] Moravia in the Czech Republic has a population of about 3 million, and Upper Silesia in Poland – of 5 million.

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[30] For a similar identification of Dutch provinces, see Hendriks, F., Raadschelders, J. and Theo A. J. Toonen. "The Dutch Province as a European Region: National Impediments versus European Opportunities," in Keating, Michael and Barry Jones (eds.). *The European Union and the Regions*, 1995, p. 215.

[31] For the case of Istria, please see Banovac (1996, 1997) and Suran (1993). For Pirin Macedonia, see Frusetta (2004) and Schwartz (1993).

[32] It should be clarified that Istria and Pirin Macedonia do not coincide with the NUTS 2 regions introduced in Bulgaria and Croatia under EU guidance during the negotiations for accession to the EU, but are rather natural historical and cultural entities which are increasingly looking for and finding political forms of expression. NUTS 2 regions serve, for now, an entirely administrative role - they provide statistics on regional level and are comparable in size with NUTS 2 regions in other EU states. Furthermore, since those were drafted on criteria related merely to their geographic location and size, they have neither the institutional nor the historical backing of counties or municipalities, and are in reality a non-factor, at least as far as governance is concerned. Their role is expected to grow in the future as Structural Funding is supposed to be planned and distributed on NUTS 2 level in accordance with practices in "old" Member States, but no such trend is yet visible.

[33] Koprić, Ivan, analysis at www.telegram.hr/price/predsjednica-kaze-da-bi-ukidanje-zupanija-destabiliziralo-zemlju-cijenjeni-strucnjak-objasnjava-zasto-je-to-potpuno-netocno

Those regions are larger than some EU Member States, and can both have a sustainable regional economy and make meaningful demands for political autonomy. Istria, with its population of 244 thousand, can only operate within the framework of a larger state, which makes relations with the central government rather specific (a combination of cooperation and juxtaposition). Pirin Macedonia is a slightly larger region (with a population close to 324 thousand), yet still insufficiently large to demand either a status as a federal unit, or full independence, especially given the hostility of some neighbouring states. Additionally, in comparison with other regions within the same state, but also with regions in other "new" EU Member States, both Istria and Pirin Macedonia do not have particularly large ethnic minority groups. If one is to look at the statistics, those are by far not the most ethnically diverse regions in their countries.[34] According to the 2011 population censuses,[35] 88.6% of the population in Pirin Macedonia identifies itself as Bulgarian and 68.3% of Istrians identify themselves as Croats. The percentage of national minorities in Istria County is 16.2%, of which 6% are Italians, 3% are Bosniacs, 3.5% are Serbs, about 1% each - Albanians and Slovenians, and the rest are members of smaller groups. More than 12% of Istrians declare a regional identity. Less formally, field surveys[36] carried out in 1993 and 1995 in Istria on a sample of 1000 reveal that 40% of Istrians professed a regional consciousness. A majority of those surveyed indicated that they associated the term "Istrianity" with neutral belonging to a local community,[37] while 69% declared themselves against demands for any territorial or political autonomy.[38] In Blagoevgrad County, 10.5 % declare belonging to a national minority group, with the largest groups being Turkish and Roma.[39] Since Macedonian identity is treated as regional rather than ethnic, it is hard to predict the exact number of people identifying themselves as Macedonian based on formal

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[34] The largest national minority in Istria is the Italian one with 6% of the population, and in Pirin Macedonia – the Turkish one with 6 % (less than the national average). In comparison, there are counties in Bulgaria where the Turkish national minority constitutes 60 % of the population, and in Vukovar-Sirmium County, the number of Serbs, even after the recent conflicts, is still a high 15.5%.

[35] For Croatia, see "Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2011, Population by Citizenship, Ethnicity, Religion and Mother Tongue." Statistical Reports. Zagreb: Croatian Statistical Institute, 2013. For Bulgaria, see Census of Population and Dwellings of the Republic of Bulgaria 2011, Blagoevgrad County, "Population by Residence, Age and Ethnic Group." Sofia: National Statistical Institute, 2011, available online at
http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R7.aspx?OBL=BLG

[36] Banovac, Boris. "Modernizacijski procesi i oblici teritorijalne pripadnosti." *Društvena istraživanja*, 1997, 1, pp. 23-48.

[37] Banovac (1997), p. 44 as referred to in Šantic, Neven. "Politicki aspekti drustvenog razvoja Istre." *Revija za sociologiju*, 2000, 31 (3-4), pp. 153-164.

[38] Banovac (1997), p. 43 as referred to in Šantic (2000).

[39] Census of Population and Dwellings of the Republic of Bulgaria 2011, Blagoevgrad County, "Population by Residence, Age and Ethnic Group." Sofia: National Statistical Institute, 2011, available online at http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R7.aspx?OBL=BLG

population statistics only[40]. On national level, during the 2001 census, 5 071 people (0.06% of the population) have declared themselves to be of Macedonian ethnicity,[41] and in 2011 - 1 654 people[42]. In the other extremity, FYROM sources determine the number of Macedonians in Bulgaria to be around 200 000.[43] The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee which has carried out significant research on the "Macedonian question," estimates that between 15 000 and 25 000 Pirin Macedonians (5-8% of the region's population) associate with a separate Macedonian identity, and that the vast majority of the population in Pirin Macedonia has a Bulgarian national self-consciousness and a regional Macedonian identity.[44] In short, what is specific to Istria and Pirin Macedonia is not the existence of large national minorities but rather the crystallization of a regional identity built on the mingling with neighbouring cultures, and based on multiple parallel identities (national, ethnic, European) which do not compete with each other but rather form different layers of a single whole (commonly referred to as Istrian and Macedonian identities). Many Istrians see themselves simultaneously as Croat, Slovenian and Italian, as their regional identity is inevitably constructed by the mixing of those cultures, and similarly, a resident of Pirin Macedonia could easily embrace a Bulgarian, Greek or Macedonian identity.

The distinguishing trait of Istrian and Pirin Macedonian identities is culture as defined by every-day way of living, rather than by a minority ethnicity, religion or language. In both regions, where the speaking of various dialects has been popular until after World War II, contemporary speaking patterns are an unusual mixture, incorporating words and syntax from neighbouring languages, but not forming a sufficiently cohesive independent language. It should thus be emphasized that neither Istria nor Pirin Macedonia have separatist ambitions (with the exception of a small minority of extremists). As a matter of fact, separatism is a politically pointless agenda in those regions, as it is not a reflection of the regional identity described above. Political agendas with focus on unification and

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[40] Regional identification is not an available option in population censuses. All quoted statistics refer to "Macedonian" as an ethnic category.

[41] Census of Population and Dwellings of the Republic of Bulgaria 2001, "Population by County and Ethnic Group as of 01.03.2001." Sofia: National Statistical Institute, 2001, available online at http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Ethnos.htm

[42] Census of Population and Dwellings of the Republic of Bulgaria 2011, "Population by Residence, Age and Ethnic Group." National Statistical Institute, 2011, available online at http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/ 2/R7.aspx

[43] Popov & Radin, 1989, p. 17, referring to numbers of an old census carried out in 1956, according to which there were 187,789 Macedonians, over 95 per cent of whom lived in the Pirin region (63.8 per cent of the population).

[44] Kanev (1998), interview, as referred to in Lenkova, Mariana. "Minorities in Southeast Europe: Macedonians in Bulgaria." Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe, http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/pdf/cedime-se-bulgaria-macedonians.doc

multiculturalism rather than division are more likely to generate support. If higher political and economic autonomy is demanded, it is within the established state borders and institutions.

Economically, both regions are among the richest and most developed in their countries. They rely heavily on their border location and the opening of borders brought about by globalization and EU integration for the attraction of foreign capital, investments and trade. Their prosperity is not historical but dates back to the communist period; prior to that, both regions had been underdeveloped, lagging behind, and badly devastated by both world wars.

The processes of administrative decentralization which were initiated by the central governments of Croatia and Bulgaria in the early 1990s and in the 2000s have not had a significant impact on the economy of both regions, as the countries have remained both financially and politically centralized. Both Croatia and Bulgaria were late reformers, and they underwent relatively similar regionalization processes. Both carried out a first phase of administrative decentralization in the early 1990s which was limited to changes in the legal framework, followed by deeper transfer of financial responsibilities and administrative functions to the local and county levels in 2001. In both, decentralization was justified by the need for financial austerity and direct responsibility on local/county level. Furthermore, since the two countries joined the Union later than other "new" Member States,[45] they also experienced relatively similar accession negotiations, and underwent similar accession paths[46]. Direct EU conditionality played little part in the initiation or carrying out of regionalization, with EU influence being mostly in the realm of rhetoric and perception. National and local elites referred to EU best practices, frequently presenting decentralization as an obligatory step in reform processes, rather than one of few available options. That meant that central governments were the key actor in the process, and that reforms addressed predominantly their needs, strengthening their overall control over decision-making, tax collection and the administrative apparatus. The preservation of specific regional cultures and the addressing of regional populations' needs through the transfer of decision-making to a level closer to them were not of importance for central governments and were thus not a priority in regionalization processes. Specifically in Pirin Macedonia and Istria, they were of secondary importance for regional actors as well, and

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[45] With the exception of Romania.
[46] Romania also followed a similar negotiation process, however, it is a much larger state, and regionalism on its territory is ethnically-based.

were mostly used as a means for generating public support rather than the desirable end result of reform processes. The lack of significant national minority group on regional level, combined with the regions' complex histories, make association with neighbouring states unlikely. A large majority of the subnational regions in CEE leans typically towards closer relations with an external "mother" state, with irredentism being at least in theory a possible option. [47]Furthermore, both Pirin Macedonia and Istria as historical regions correspond only roughly with the Counties of Istria and Blagoevgrad; parts of them are included in neighbouring administrative units. That reduces the regions' capacities and makes it economically and politically unsound to pursue independence from their respective states. To put it shortly, any regionalist tendencies in Pirin Macedonia and Istria can take place only within the framework of nation states, and in order to be successful, regional leaders need to simultaneously cooperate and compete with central governments. Cooperation is needed in order to secure funding and influence reforms in a desirable direction; while juxtaposition in political agendas ensures differentiation and political success on regional/national level.

Both regions also fulfil, albeit to a different extent, the last pre-condition identified by Dahl Fitjar as positively related to strong political regionalism, namely the existence of differentiated political system on regional level. In the case of Istria, the regional political party IDS, although registered as a national party, is in effect only politically active in that region, and has won all political elections in the region (be they national or local) since its founding in the early 1990s. Because of IDS's weakness on the national level, and its strength in the region, it is in its interest to support the political transfer of power to the regional level in order to increase its own importance.[48] Although its jurisdictions are limited by central authorities, it has still been able to secure control over regional administrative and political institutions and processes. Pirin Macedonia has its own regionalist party, which however has played a minor role in the politicization of the region's identity so far. Furthermore, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which is associated with the Muslim minority in the country, has higher levels of support in that region than in most other counties. In the opposite political spectrum, Bulgarian nationalist parties are also popular and register above average support in Pirin Macedonia when compared with

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[47] For example, Latvian Latgale, which is comparable in size to both Istria and Pirin Macedonia, is pro-Russian in orientation and presents a case of minority nationalism.
[48] Dahl Fitjar (2009), p. 24; Hopkin, J. "Political Decentralization, Electoral Change and Party Organization Adaptation: A Framework for Analysis." *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 2003, 10 (3), pp. 227-237. According to Dahl Fitjar, the incentives for regionalism grow with the security of a party's position in a region and decrease with the strength of its position at the national level.

the rest of the country. In both regions, there are strong traditions of support for the left political option as both had begun growing economically precisely during the communist period. The political vote for the left is relatively stable, and varies less than on national level.

Istria and Pirin Macedonia thus present a specific type of sub-national region with distinct regional culture shaped by a traditional border location, and recognized administrative status as a unit of the public administration on county level. Their population associates with the predominant ethnicity and religious affiliation in their respective state, yet professes cultural differences from the majority shaped by a specific regional way of life founded on such principles as multiculturalism, multilingualism and free cross-border trade. Overall, both regions are comparable in size, regional identity, political party system, economic development, and administrative organization. Variations exist in most of those factors, and it is the objective of this research to identify which of these variations have been crucial for their divergent paths of regionalism.

3. Introduction of Istria and Pirin Macedonia

3.1. Istria

3.1.1. History

The history of the Istrian peninsula is characterized by frequent shifting of state borders, political regimes and systems.[49] From the 9th to the early 19th century, it was consecutively included in the Holy Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy and the Austrian Empire. Later on, within a century (early 19th century until the 2nd World War), it changed three entirely different rules: from the Habsburgs to the Royal House of Savoy to Mussolini's fascist regime. In 1943 the largest part of the peninsula joined Yugoslavia as part of socialistic Croatia, and finally, with the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, it became part of the Republic of Croatia. Those shifts from one political system to another have not

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[49] Gruber, Dane. *Povijest Istre*. Zagreb: Braća hrvatskog zmaja, 1924 as referred to in Šantić, Neven. "Politicki aspekti društvenog razvoja Istre." *Revija za sociologiju*, 2000, 31 (3-4), pp. 153-164.

always been peaceful, and the region has seen its share of attempts for aggressive assimilation and nationalistic conflicts.

Istria's modern identity is product of the influence of all those regimes, most importantly, the federalist inheritance of the Habsburg Empire, and the more recent centralizing influence of socialist Yugoslavia. The Habsburg Empire had developed features of federalism prior to its western neighbours. Already in the 19th century, the idea of multi-nationalism altered relations between the different nationalities. Socially, the Istrian Peninsula was characterized by Italian urban sphere along the coast and a Slavic rural sphere in the hinterland. The Italian middle classes generally provided the local and regional leadership of Istria until the 19th century, when nationalist tensions mounted between the Slavs and the Italian community, and the Slavs began challenging Italian political and economic hegemony. Demands for representation and autonomy became stronger and eventually led to the transformation of the *Reichsrath*, with a second chamber appointed by the councils of the Kronländer in 1861 and elected directly since 1873.[50] In 1861 Istria became an autonomous province with own legislative assembly located in Poreč. In 1867 the *Ausgleich* transformed the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a dual monarchy, dividing it into Austrian and Hungarian halves, and thus legitimizing further the pressures for recognition of other nationalities.[51] That process coincided roughly with the gradual enrichment of Croats in Istria[52] and the intensifying of their national consciousness and political activism. By the late 1880s, representatives of the Croatian-Slovenian party had won power in most Istrian municipalities.[53] The first general elections with universal manhood suffrage took place in the Austrian Empire in 1907, and the Croatian-Slovenian party won 3 out of the 5 Istrian seats in Parliament.[54]

Ironically, Istria's growing autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian Empire was achieved by nationalist movements fighting for integration with the rest of Croatia. When the latter did take place, by the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, the

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[50] Being the majority, Serbs opposed the creation of a federal state in favor of a centralized structure; see Caramani, D. "State Administration and Regional Construction in Central Europe: A Historical Perspective," in Keating, Michael and J. Hughes (eds.). The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe: Territorial Restructuring and European Integration. Brussels: P.I.E./Peter Lang, 2003, p. 23.

[51] Rokkan, 1999, p. 213 as referred to *ibid*.

[52] At that time the region included the city of Trieste and Gorizia in Friuli.

[53] Šetić (1993), p. 598.

[54] *ibid*

new union was built as a highly centralized structure, rather than a federation,[55] and Istria lost the autonomy it had fought for in the 19th century. Soon after, it fell under Italian control, and with the advent of fascism, the Istrian Croats and Slovenes were exposed to a policy of forced Italianization and cultural suppression. After the end of World War II, most of Istria was united with the rest of Croatia for a second time by becoming part of the Republic of Yugoslavia.

The rise of communism in Yugoslavia led to a process of strict centralization. This process was again in contrast with the autonomy devolved to Istria under the Habsburgs, which had in some cases survived, especially in large towns.[56] In theory, the Constitution of 1974 gave the republics the right to decide independently on their status, and provided municipalities [57] with the power to levy taxes on their inhabitants. In reality, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia had full control over the system. [58]

The collapse of Yugoslavia and the ensued fighting on the territory of Croatia was accompanied by further centralizing and the suppression of genuine decentralization processes. Although the 1991 Act on the Territory of Counties, Towns and Municipalities provided for the territorial and administrative division of Croatia, the impact of the war and secessionist tendencies in regions inhabited by the Serbian minority were manifested in tendencies towards the strengthening of central institutions, especially the Presidency.[59] This centralization was accompanied by an intensified need to control financial flows, necessitated by efforts to efficiently gather resources for militarization and warfare, but also for keeping needed groups of the population.[60] The Croatian administrative system in the 1990s could be described by four characteristics: statism, centralization, excessive authoritarian politicization, and low levels of expertise and professionalism among employees.[61] The whole country was preoccupied with the warfare, while in Istria, which was at the time already one of the most developed regions in Croatia, concerns over the waning economy were predominant. Overall, the highly developed tourist sector, the open border with Italy and the latter's role as a connection to western Europe, the relatively

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[55] Caramani (2003), p. 27.
[56] Ashbrook (2008), p. 54.
[57] *Općina* in Croatian
[58] Cabada, Ladislav. "Decentralization Processes in Croatia and Slovenia." *Politics in Central Europe,* 2008, 4 (1), p. 28.
[59] *ibid*, p. 30.
[60] *ibid*
[61] Ivan, Adrian L. and Claudia Anamaria Iov. "Croatia: Administrative Reform and Regional Development in the Context of EU Accession." *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, 2010, 31E, pp. 93-113.

large distance from the areas where fighting was concentrated, and the initiation of democratic processes on regional level all contributed to the shaping of a regional political identity different from the rest of the country.

3.1.2. Building of a modern regional identity

The building of a regional identity in Istria is a contemporary process, despite its connection with and continuation of older processes. It was to a big extent constructed in the 1990s by a regional political party (Istrian Democratic Assembly -IDS), which built its platform in opposition to the central government's policies of centralization and authoritarianism. IDS regionalists opposed the platform of monoculturalism and intolerance promoted by supporters of the nationalist ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Alliance (HDZ).[62] Unlike nationalists,[63] who portrayed Istrianity as an identity which competed with Croatian nationality and caused tension between the peninsula and the centre, regionalists suggested that Istrianity was complementary to national as well as to other forms of identity. IDS adopted a definition of Istrianity which could be widely accepted by those living in the region without challenging existing interpretations of regional, national, local or other identities. It presented the population of the peninsula as a historical mix of Italian, Croatian and Slovenian cultures, with some Germanic influences, blended together in a unique regional identity.[64] This historical multiculturalism encouraged an inclusive and accepting identity based on cooperation and multiculturalism. By identifying with the proposition of complementarity of different identities, one could also link oneself to national and European identities via the vehicle of Istrian regionalism (see Map 1).[65]

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[62] Ashbrook (2005), pp. 459-487.
[63] At the time, by far the loudest and strongest voice in the rest of Croatia.
[64] Ashbrook (2008), p. 78.
[65] Jakovčić et al., pp. 11-26 as referred to in Ashbrook (2008), p. 78.

Map 1. Istria in Europe

Additionally, IDS has been very active in driving Croatia closer to the EU by promoting and
seeking cooperation with EU institutions in all spheres of public life. There is no ideal
decentralization model or administrative organization on European level which serves as an
example for candidate states. Most of the time, accession is about the transferring of
experiences in the form of generally accepted principles, such as transparency,
decentralization, partnership or subsidiarity, from the European level to the national,
regional or local one.[66] The Europeanization of the Croatian territorial and administrative
organization has referred to the achieving of developmental standards outlined in the
acquis communautaire, and to the adoption of common EU principles.[67] On central level,
compliance has been achieved through EU conditionality, i.e. by using the prospect of EU
membership as an instrument for directing behaviour in a desired direction. On regional
level, change has been triggered by providing opportunities for social learning and copying
of best practices from EU Member States, and of course, by offering the "carrot" of
financial assistance. Projects financed by the EU and other international donors have been
important because of the funding they have provided for regional projects, but also
because of the knowledge and experience they have brought, the establishment of
partnerships, and the strengthening of administrative capacities. As most projects have
relied on co-financing, i.e. have been partially financed by county budgets, educational

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[66] Ivan and Iov, p. 101.
[67] Ivan and Iov, p. 101.

institutions, NGOs or the business sector, all those actors have also been subjected to processes of socialization. In addition, a number of new regional institutions have been created in Istria (for example, IDA- Istrian Development Agency, AZRRI – Agency for Rural Development of Istria, and Natura Histrica – county public institution for nature protection) to help acquire funding and contribute to regional development, and their operations are increasingly independent from the control of central authorities.

3.1.3. Territorial and administrative decentralization

The peninsula of Istria is located in the north-eastern part of the Adriatic Sea. It is divided among three states: Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. The largest part belongs to Croatia, of which 90% is part of Istria County (4.98% of the total surface of the Republic of Croatia). Istria County was established by the 1992 Act on the Territory of Counties, Towns and Municipalities in the Republic of Croatia as one of 21 Croatian counties forming the intermediate administrative level. The other administrative divisions are cities and municipalities (on the local level) and the nation-state. Since then, a number of amendments and changes in the territorial and institutional framework have been carried out,[68] and in 2001 a new Act on Local and Regional Self-Government was passed, defining counties as units of regional self-government.[69] The main objective of the Act was harmonization with the *acquis communnautaire*.[70]

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[68] The division of responsibilities, the territorial organization and local budgets are regulated by various legislation acts, e.g. the Budget Act, the Act on the Financing of Units of Local and Regional Self-governments, the Local and Regional Self-Government Act, the County, Municipality and City Areas Act, the City of Zagreb Act, the Act on the Areas of Special State Concern, the Hill and Mountain Areas Act, and the Islands Act.

[69] Prior to that, counties had a double function: on one hand, they served as delegated branches of central government, on the other, as self-government units. This parallel role had created an unclear institutional structure and led to mingling of responsibilities on the county level. See Kordej De-Villa, Z., Stubbs P. and M. Sumpor (eds.). "Participativno upravljanje za odrzivi razvoj." Zagreb: Economic Institute, 2009, p. 139.

[70]Kersan-Skabic, I. "How prepared is Croatia for the acquisition of EU regional policy funding? The example of Istria" in Ott, Katarina (ed.). *Croatian Accession to the EU*. Zagreb: Institute for Public Finance/ Zaklada Friedrich Ebert, 2005, p. 255.

Map 2. Contemporary Istria tucked between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia[71]

The provision of a legal base was followed in July 2001 by a process of decentralization, which involved the transfer of certain public functions from the central to the subnational level.[72] It comprised the delegation of self-governing responsibilities to local and regional administrative units,[73] and fiscal decentralization, or the provision of additional income for the financing of material and financial expenses and public services. The responsibilities for the provision of public services on the regional and local level were given to authorities closer to citizens, according to the EU principle of subsidiarity, while the central level was only to be involved in the event that the coordination and distribution of benefits on lower levels was impossible or less effective.[74] The financing of public services continued in their foremost part to be provided by central authorities.

At the end of 2006, the Act on Financing of Units of Local and Regional Self-Government[75] was passed introducing further changes in the distribution of financing. The share of income tax increased in favour of units of local and regional self-government, while profit tax was no longer shared but was in entirety contributed to state budgets. Apart from a

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[71] Map taken from www.honeyguide.co.uk/images/istriamap.gif
[72] Kordej De-Villa, Z., Stubbs P. and M. Sumpor (eds.). "Participativno upravljanje za odrzivi razvoj." Zagreb: Economic Institute, 2009, p. 49.
[73] 21 with the City of Zagreb, which is simultaneously a city and a county.
[74] After the Maastricht Treaty, introducing the principle of subsidiarity, entered into force (1993), the Croatian government made some amendments to the Constitution through which it introduced the concept of "local self-governance" (Croatian Constitution, Articles 128-131).
[75] A legislative norm needed for synchronization with the *acquis communautaire*.

share of the personal income tax, cities and municipalities were to also receive 60% of taxes on real estate transfers taking place on their territory.

The role of the European Union on the process of regionalization appears significant. It was the trigger that initiated decentralization in the 2000s, and outlined the processes of fiscal and administrative decentralization that Croatia should follow. This was not done directly by the setting up of milestones, but rather by pushing for legislature which was later implemented, according to the central government's preferences and capabilities, yet within the legal confines of the new laws. The increased fiscal powers of the regional level, for example, are a direct result of the Act on Financing of Units of Local and Regional Self-Government, which increased the autonomy of counties from the state budget, and thus from the central government. Furthermore, the building of National Regional Development Strategy and Regional Operational Programmes on county level have shifted focus at least theoretically from the sectoral approach adopted during communism to regional development. They have also served as a capacity-building tool, as the crystallization of regional development strategies have contributed to the strengthening of the human and material capacities of regional self-governments, and their role on national level.

Overall, however, Croatia's strong traditions of centralization have not been weakened but rather confirmed during the past two and a half decades. Despite the acquiescence of some power to the EU and local and regional levels, and despite the opening up of the governing process to involve regional, civil and business actors, central governments have retained their leading position in decision-making, policy implementation and distribution of resources.

3.1.4. Economic aspects of Istrian regionalism

Regionalism and the construction of a regional political identity in Istria in the 1990s were significantly shaped by economic concerns.[76] Ashbrook identifies the failing economy and lowered standard of living as the greatest driving forces in the politicization of Istrian identity and the success of the regional movement.[77] Many Istrians were accustomed to living in or in proximity to multi-cultural communities, saw the prevailing nationalism of the

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[76] Ashbrook, John. *Buying and Selling the Istrian Goat: Istrian Regionalism, Croatian Nationalism and EU Enlargement.* Brussels*:* P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2008, p. 17.
[77] *ibid,* p. 17

country in the 1990s as hostile to those professing a non-Croatian identity, and were worried about the politicization of the *national* identity at the expense of all others.[78] However, the majority of Istrian supporters of the regional movement led by IDS were Croatian, which does not explain why they felt threatened by the ethno-nationalism in the country and sought actively alternative political courses. The only sphere where the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia directly impacted their lives was the economic.[79] They saw ethno-nationalism as regressive, violent and "Balkan" [80] distancing Croatia from the "West," and threatening its economic future.[81] The main reasons for the regional movement's success thus could be easily related to the economic prosperity many enjoyed before Yugoslavia's collapse, and to the major drop in economic performance and standards registered in the region in the beginning of the 1990s, due to shrieking exports and tourist sector.[82]

Currently, Istria County is the richest region in Croatia,[83] and according to its political leadership, one of the most open markets in the country. Economic activity is developed in all sectors of the economy, from agriculture and forestry to transport and communication, with tourism serving as its focal point. Annually, around 20 million overnights are registered in Istria, and around 3 million visitors visit the county.[84] For its success, the tourist sector relies heavily on cooperation with neighbouring countries or regions.

Cooperation with Italy is particularly important because of the large Italian minority in Istria but also because of Italy's perception of the region as a sphere of traditional Italian influence. For Istria that has means the attraction of foreign investment, the establishment of export channels, and the promotion of its tourist sector. In the 1990s, the EU Cross-Border Cooperation Programme[85], which also included the Slovenian coast, was established and contributed to the strengthening of interregional affairs. The construction of highways through neighbouring regions in Italy and Slovenia and the development of cross-border connections[86] made the region more accessible and attractive, and its tourist sector more competitive compared to the densely populated Trieste-Venice strip and the narrowly confined space of the Slovenian coast.

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[78] *ibid*

[79] Unlike in other parts of Croatia, no physical fighting took place on Istrian territory.

[80] As a cultural and value system opposed to the "European" one.

[81] Ashbrook, p. 17.

[82] *ibid*

[83] With the exception of the City of Zagreb which is simultaneously a county.

[84] Statistics for 2012 and 2013. "Tourism in Figures" publication of the Croatian Tourist Board and the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia, available online at www.mint.hr

[85] European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).

[86] Frequently, with EU funding.

Istria's strongest links are established on regional level with the neighbouring region of Friuli Venezia Giulia. The structure of cross-border flows is complex and occurs reciprocally.[87] Cross-border flows from Friuli Venezia Giulia to Istria are mostly represented by weekend and seasonal tourism, trade of capital goods, and a variety of impacts associated with the polarizing role of Trieste. In the opposite direction, flows from Istria to Friuli Venezia Giulia come in the form of shopping and flows related to employment, trade and provision of services.[88]

3.2. Pirin Macedonia

3.2.1. History

Until 1878, for five centuries, Bulgaria had been part of the Ottoman Empire. The latter had entered the 19th century as the least reformed of the European powers, not carrying out any major advances in industrial and commercial life, science and technology, and political and military organization since the 16th century. To preserve the integrity of the empire, curb the power of semi-independent governors, local notables, valley lords, and other groups that wielded political power, and catch up with the reform processes taking place in Western Europe, the sultan initiated a process of centralization and modernization. Ultimately, the entire system of minimal government[89] – by which political, economic and social decisions were left to local organizations – was replaced by one in which the state centralized decision-making.[90] Those reforms created a systemic weakness as centralization removed the checks on the power of the sultan, and reduced the power of local actors, facilitating and deepening nationalist ideas and attempts to gain independence by the empire's Christian subjects.[91]

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[87] Pavičić Kaselj, Ana. "Local Democratic Governance in Istria County." Rome: SeeNet Programme: A trans-local network for the cooperation between Italy and South East Europe, 2010, p. 12.
[88] *ibid*, p. 13.
[89] The system had almost no effect on the Christian subjects of the sultan, a large majority of who were farmers, as they rarely held any political or governing offices. Furthermore, because the Empire was considered backward and oppressive by all Christian nation states which emerged at its collapse, they were quick to abolish any links with the Ottoman organization and system, so no continuation of policies and structures from this period can be claimed.
[90] "Ottoman Empire." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
[91] *ibid*

Similarly to Croatia, Bulgarian nation building was initiated in the 19th century and completed in the 20th century. It coincided with the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and with the educating and enrichment of Christian groups living on its territory. The Bulgarian state[92] gained its independence in 1878, adopting its first constitution in 1879. The basic territorial division of the country dates back to this constitution and has not changed much since. It established the premises of the centralized state limiting the powers of regional authorities to the implementation of nationally-adopted policies.[93] Russian influence on the development of local government was strong, due to Russia's central role in the country's liberation process from the Ottomans, and was likely to have directed the formation of a strong centralized state.[94] Centralization was also a reflection of processes of nation-formation taking place elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Macedonian region followed a somewhat different historical course. Acquiring independence from the Ottoman Empire later than neighbouring areas, it passed through a period of autonomy within the empire (similar to Istria in the Austro-Hungarian Empire) lasting until the beginning of the Balkan wars in 1912. The ensuing period was characterized by frequent shifts in state borders, with the young Balkan nations fighting to expand their territory based on distant historical claims. The region of Macedonia was as a result split between Bulgaria, Serbia (Yugoslavia) and Greece, with different areas falling under different control during the two Balkan and the two World Wars. Throughout this period, intensive campaigning, at times even aggression, took place in all areas of Macedonia to impose identities corresponding to the interests of the controlling states. The final division of Macedonia was carried out after World War II, when the Republic of Macedonia was founded as a composite entity of Yugoslavia, and the rest of the region was partitioned between Bulgaria and Greece.[95]

The "Macedonian Question," which came into being in the second half of the 19th century with the beginning of the Macedonian struggle for liberation from the Ottomans, became especially prominent after the Balkan wars in 1912-1913, and the above mentioned subsequent division of Macedonia between Bulgaria, Greece and Yugoslavia. This

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[92] Macedonia, including Pirin Macedonia, was not part of that state, but remained under Ottoman control.

[93] The country was divided into 21 territorial administrative units called *okrazia* (regions) and 58 *okolii* (districts), see Yanakiev, Alexander. "The Europeanization of Bulgarian regional policy: a case of strengthened centralization." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2010, 10 (1), pp. 45-57.

[94] *ibid*

[95] The area within Bulgaria is known as Pirin Macedonia, while the area in Greece as Aegean Macedonia.

partitioning had a tremendous influence on the development of the Pirin Macedonian regional identity. After the Balkan wars, Bulgaria, being the loser over Macedonia, received a large number of refugees from "the lost territories." By 1934, more than 10 per cent of Sofia's population was made up of Macedonian and Thracian refugees. Macedonian activists caused much instability by continuing their feuds and violence within Bulgaria.[96] The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO)[97] which had been founded at the end of the 19th century, and which was the force behind the politicization of the Macedonian identity, had by the time split in a number of fractions, each claiming a different national belonging for Macedonia. Members of the organization in Bulgaria, who claimed Bulgarian nationality and regional Macedonian identity, effectively controlled the southwestern region of the country (i.e. Pirin Macedonia).[98] From there, they launched numerous armed raids into the territory of the New Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) and into Greece,[99] acting as a de facto autonomous institution within the state. In 1921, the then Bulgarian Prime Minister Alexander Stamboliyski started a campaign against VMRO, denouncing their activities and undertaking obligations to dismember the organization.[100] VMRO considered this act a fatal treachery, and responded with violence which culminated in the assassination of the Prime Minister.[101] VMRO's terrorist activities on the territory of Bulgaria became too costly,[102] and were put to an end by 1932. The province was gradually integrated in the rest of the country, and the coming to power of communism further increased the process of centralization.

Even though the two constitutions adopted during the communist regime formally proclaimed the right to self-government for local administrative units (the municipalities), no such thing happened in practice. During the late 1940s and 1950s, a series of reforms of local government were introduced. These reforms reflected both the decision making processes adopted by the Communist Party and the increasing urbanization of Bulgarian society. The municipalities were shaped as bureaucratic power centres executing orders from above, in effect acting as local agencies of state authority. Although legally lower-tier municipalities were granted a certain amount of autonomy and competence, in reality "democratic centralism" and the one-party system imposed a rigid hierarchical and

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[96] Poulton (1995), pp.79-80, as referred to in Lenkova, p. 6.
[97] *Vutreshna makedonska revoljutsionna organizatsija* – VMRO.
[98] Lenkova, p. 6.
[99] Poulton (1995), p. 80, as referred to in Lenkova, p.6.
[100] Poulton (1995), pp. 82-85, as referred to in Lenkova, p.6.
[101] *ibid*
[102] The death toll for the ten years until 1934 was believed to be about 884 lives, see Poulton (1995).

centralized structure.[103] Local governments served as an administrative arm of the central government rather than a genuine form of self-government.[104] There was a significant similarity in the legislative and administrative frameworks of all ex-communist countries,[105]and despite the differences in the Bulgarian and Yugoslav political systems and economy, their administrative and territorial divisions were in essence identical.

3.2.2. Building of a modern regional identity

Bulgaria was ruled since 1912 by centralized regimes. The administrative power of the regimes originated from the centre and was extended to control the entire territory of the state. Yet significantly, Pirin Macedonia proved resistant to central control; local interests and organizations contested the centre and preserved the region's specificity and culture. While the governing regimes sought to foster a central "territorial consciousness," rival forms of consciousness in the region persisted. The process of identity formation in Pirin Macedonia was thus interactive. Efforts to promote nation-building and local consciousness competed with each other and took precedence during different historical moments, each leaving lasting marks on the other.

In the second half of the 20th century, the isolation of the Bulgarian communist regime from both the Western democracies and Yugoslavia meant than for almost 45 years cross-border relations were reduced to a minimum. Each of the three Macedonian regions developed in the national context of the countries to which it belonged, and the cultural differences between them increased. However, despite the strong centralization and the lack of support for regional movements, Pirin Macedonia preserved its unique regional identity constructed by the mingling of cultures and nations. A majority of Pirin Macedonians nowadays professes Bulgarian national and Macedonian regional identity,[106] and very similar to Istrians in Croatia, they perceive their Macedonian identity as complementary to their Bulgarian and European ones. Despite the diversity of Bulgarian regions, no other area in the country has a pronounced regional identity based on multi-

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[103] Ushkalov and Khorev (1989) as referred to in Caramani, pp. 35 & 39.
[104] Jepson, David, McDonnell, Valerie and Belin Mollov. "Local Government in Bulgaria" in Coulson, Andrew. *Local Government in Eastern Europe: Establishing Democracy at the Grassroots.* Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1995, p. 105.
[105] Caramani (2003), p. 39.
[106] This is similar to the identity of the Macedonians in Aegean Macedonia, who most often profess a Greek national and a Macedonian regional identity.

culturalism and regional consciousness. Outside of the context of Pirin Macedonia, diversity is typically expressed in the existence of large minority groups, which do not identify with the Bulgarian ethnicity.[107] In contrast, and again similar to the population in Istria, the majority of Pirin Macedonians profess Bulgarian nationality, and do not perceive themselves as a minority. Regional political parties and NGOs are active and very vocal, and although neither has generated massive support, they have certainly been involved in decision-making, and have had an impact on the setting up of the political identity of the region. In recent years, the strong traditions of Bulgarian nationalism in Pirin Macedonia seem to undergo a process of revival receiving above average support on regional level.

Parallelly with the trend of growing Bulgarian nationalism in the region, the immigration of ethnic Macedonians from FYROM[108] is also slowly having an impact on the regional identity of Pirin Macedonia by bringing new interests and actors in decision-making on regional and local level. Within the context of EU integration, Pirin Macedonia is bordering with the only "old" EU Member State in the Southern Balkans, and because of the common history and cultural similarities of the cross-border areas, it has achieved high level of integration with the neighbouring Aegean Macedonia (see Map 3). The flows of people, goods and finance between the two regions have been enabled by globalization and EU integration, and have had a significant impact on both the economy and identity of Pirin Macedonia. The impact of EU funding has been less significant and defining, although for EU funding purposes Pirin Macedonia and Aegean Macedonia have been frequently treated as a single cross-border region.

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[107] Turks, Roma, Romanians, Serbs etc.
[108] As a result of Bulgaria's "soft" integration policy towards FYROM which has authorized the issuing of Bulgarian passports to Macedonians who profess Bulgarian ethnicity.

Map 3. Blagoevgrad County (Pirin Macedonia) in Bulgaria and neighbouring states[109]

Overall, contacts with Greece and FYROM have been facilitated by globalization and EU integration,[110] and have brought about the emergence of new actors (regional political actors, NGOs and business representatives), which are more likely to support regionalism as an economic and political agenda.

3.2.3. Territorial and administrative organization

Prior to the fall of communism, in 1987 a major administrative reform was carried out in Bulgaria replacing the 28 intermediate-level counties[111] with 9 larger units.[112] Regulations on the self-government of territorial units were improved, with municipalities and their executive bodies - mayoralties - becoming the main units of territorial management. The newly-established counties were given limited functions related to control and coordination.[113] Four years later, the post-communist Constitution of 1991 established

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[109] Author's modification of map provided by Blagoevgrad County administration (http://www.bl.government.bg/)
[110] Greece and Bulgaria are Member States, while FYROM is a candidate country.
[111] In Bulgarian, *okruzi*
[112] In Bulgarian, *oblasti*
[113] Nikolova, Pavlina. "Europeanisation as a Contest: The EU and Sub-National Governance in Bulgaria," paper prepared for the 10th Biannual Conference of the European Union Studies Association, Montreal, 17-19 May 2007, p. 12.

Bulgaria as a unitary state with local self-governance and no autonomous territorial formations. Priority was given to municipal decentralization although the approach of designating municipalities was top-down. In 1991, the Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act was adopted, introducing direct elections on the local level, and increasing the number of and responsibilities of municipalities. In 1999, as a result of the negotiations for EU membership, additional administrative-territorial reforms were undertaken at the intermediate level, reinstating the 28 administrative counties existing until 1987 and creating six planning regions at NUTS II level.[114] Furthermore, the formulation of regional development strategies shifted focus from sectoral to regional planning.

Nowadays, counties serve as territorial units at NUTS III level, where state authority is somewhat deconcentrated but without the introduction of directly elected bodies. They are almost exclusively dependent on financial transfers from the state budget.[115] Overall, the political and organizational structure after the end of communism continues to be dominated by centralism. The EU's impact on administrative-territorial reform in Bulgaria has been partial, mostly limited to the introduction of ideas of participatory governance, and the creation of new channels for participation of actors other than the central government.

3.2.4. Economic aspects of Pirin Macedonian regionalism

Pirin Macedonia is one of the most developed regions in Bulgaria.[116] In comparison with other parts of the country, people are relatively well-off, mainly due to the proximity of the Greek border and the business opportunities flowing from that.[117] The region has the second highest employment rate (65.4% in 2012) in the country.[118] Its economy is, similar to the Istrian, characterized by a diversified branch structure dominated by the tourist

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[114] *ibid*, p. 13.
[115] *ibid*
[116] The small town of Petrich, located in proximity to the Greek border, for example, is called "the town of the millionaires."
[117] Interview with Kanev, Krassimir. Chair of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. CEDIME, June 22nd, 1999 as referred to in Lenkova, p. 9.
[118] Due to the world recession and particularly the economic crisis in Greece, the trends are negative – unemployment has increased from 3.4% in 2009 to 13.5% in 2013, and the employment rate has fallen from 69.4% in 2008 to 63.3% in 2013 – see National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, Regional Statistics, Blagoevgrad County, available online at www.nsi.bg

sector and cross-border trade. The infrastructure has been significantly improved and modernized with the help of EU funding instruments, and this has made the region even more favourable for business and tourist activities. Tourism is a growing segment, and the area boasts the country's most visited ski and spa resorts (Bansko and Sandanski), and the most famous monastery (Rila Monastery). Pirin Macedonia is traditionally the fourth most visited county in Bulgaria (more than 1 million registered overnights in 2013), ranking only after the sea regions and the capital.[119]

The economic prosperity of the region can be traced to the communistic period, when central authorities concentrated investments and resources in some areas of Pirin Macedonia, as well as in other "nationally sensitive" regions like Kurdzhali (with a majority of ethnic Turks) and Smoliyan (with a large number of Bulgarian Muslims/Pomaks).[120] At present, economic development is associated with the business, trade and tourist opportunities arising from the proximity of Greece. Greece has been the third largest foreign investor in Bulgaria since 1996, while Bulgaria is the fourth most important destination for Greek exports. Greek investments in Bulgaria in the period 1995-2010 have amounted to 3.5 billion euros,[121] a large part of which have been invested in Pirin Macedonia.[122] Some 1,500 Greek businesses operate in Bulgaria in the areas of telecommunications, banking, light and food industry, and between 80,000 and 100,000 jobs have been created.[123] Bulgarians, on the other hand, run businesses across the border in the areas of logistics, retailing, food and industrial production. 130,000 to 150,000 Bulgarians are estimated to work in Greece, while over 800 people cross the border every weekend.[124] In addition to foreign investment, Greece has provided funding for large-scale infrastructural projects and regional cooperation through the Hellenic Plan for the Economic Reconstruction of the Balkans – HiPERB which was worth 550 million euros.

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[119] *ibid*

[120] Lenkova, p. 22.

[121] Speech by President Georgi Purvanov at Bulgarian-Greek Business Forum. Sofia: November 2010.

[122] No statistical data as to the distribution of this investment by counties or regions exists.

[123] Sources differ as to the exact number of employees. In a speech at the Bulgarian-Greek Business Forum from November 2010, President Georgi Purvanov mentioned 100 thousand people, while the Greek Ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Dimosthenis Stoidis, in an interview for newspaper *Standart* published on 16 December, 2014, talks about 80 thousand Bulgarians working for Greek companies in Bulgaria. Since there is a 4-year period between the two sources, it is possible that there was a reduction in the number caused by the world economic crisis and the recession in Greece.

[124] Interview with Mrs. Danai-Magdalini Koumanakou, Ambassador of Greece to Bulgaria, for the "Greek Survey" ("International Survey: Bulgaria-Greece") of *Novinite.com*, April 2010.

Within an EU context, Blagoevgrad County has established strong relations with the district of Serres in Greece, which has resulted in the drafting of a joint action plan of Greek and Bulgarian firms, entailing the exchange of expertise and information between firms located at the two sides of the border. At present, over 500 firms from Serres and the nearby towns work with Bulgarians firms, and over 200 have commercial offices in Bulgaria (usually Pirin Macedonia).[125] A lot of Bulgarian firms distribute their products in Serres, and the largest number of foreign visitors to Serres comes from Bulgaria.[126] A number of joint projects, mostly in the areas of tourism, entrepreneurship and human resources, have been developed and approved for funding by EU financial instruments.

Overall, Pirin Macedonia is a well-developed yet economically small region which relies heavily on cross-border exchange with Greece, but also on central government funding for infrastructural projects and distribution of resources (through national and EU programs). Similar to Istria, it is thus on the one hand influenced by economic centrism which makes it dependent on central government spending, and on the other hand by open market forces which increase its economic freedom and independence, and provide it with resources for grass roots development.

4. Conclusion

Since both Croatia and Bulgaria are highly centralized states, regionalism within their borders should be studied as an isolated case rather than the result of universal processes and reforms, which means focus needs to be placed on the factors and developments within the regions themselves. International and broader national processes are interesting to the extent to which they have created the context within which regional parties and leaders have operated. Istria and Pirin Macedonia are examples of peripheral EU and national regions with developed in national context economies, distinct multicultural identities established on the border between different nation-states and through the mingling of different ethnicities, relatively unique regional political identities, and limited options for increased autonomy. They do not present examples of minority nationalisms as the majority of their population views its regional identity as complementary to its (majority) national one. Regionalism in Istria and Pirin Macedonia is about the sharing of

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[125] Interview with Politis Efstathios, Vice President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the city of Serres, Greece, March 2010, http://novinite.info/view_news.php?id=115029
[126] *ibid*

common traditions, lifestyles, everyday practices and a special relationship with the territory. It is about the ability to negotiate rights and responsibilities in centralized states, and to derive benefits from the geographic proximity to foreign markets and international developments, such as globalization and EU integration.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The research makes an empirical comparative analysis of two sub-national regions, Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria and Istria in Croatia. The author has spent significant time in both regions,[1] and has established contacts and relations with both Pirin Macedonians and Istrians but also with Bulgarians and Croatians who are not from those regions, thus building an internal and external portrait of the identities of the regions and their population.[2] The research is multi-disciplinary, combining economic, political, social and historical analyses, and relying on primary and secondary sources. When referring to secondary sources, the author has reviewed primary sources mentioned by other authors verifying, when possible, the correctness of the information. Original documents have been used in their original language, and most translations have been made by the author, therefore, there might be some difference with formal translations of legal acts and other formal documents, although the author has tried to reconcile her translations with existing translated documents. It is specified in the footnotes which translations have been made by the author.

Prior to continuing further, it is important to clarify the use of some terms and names, as those can have a couple of parallel meanings. In this research, Pirin Macedonia has been equated with Blagoevgrad County, which is a formal state administrative division, and thus fixed territorially. The overlap between the region and the county is only rough, however, in order to facilitate the research, not least because of the collection of economic and demographic data, the county has been used as a unit of analysis. The same administrative unit existed throughout the communist period, so the collected data has been consistent. Pirin Macedonia is geographically also part of the wider Macedonian region, which includes Aegean Macedonia in Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Those two (sub)regions are not the subject of this research, and cross-border comparisons and analyses have been limited and used only to the extent to which they impact the studied Bulgarian and Croatian regions. Whenever the author talks about Macedonia, she uses the

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[1] 3 visits over the last three years in each region, and continuous stay in both countries.
[2] In addition, the author has established direct contact with representatives of the two regional political parties, VMRO and IDS; with the non-government civil society cooperative Praksa active in Pula, Croatia; and with a number of consultants active in the area of EU funds.

name interchangeably with Pirin Macedonia, unless otherwise indicated in the text. The state of Macedonia has been referred to by its formal name FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), although a lot of the sources cited in this research frequently use only the name (Republic of) Macedonia. Croatian Istria is similarly to Pirin Macedonia part of a larger region split between Italy and Slovenia. In the research, Istria has been equated with Istria County which is part of and a formal state administrative unit in Croatia. Again, all statistical and demographic data have been generated on the county level. The name Istria has been used only in reference to Istria County unless otherwise indicated in the text.

Related to the complexity of terms and meanings associated with Macedonia, however, unlike IDS in Istria, the regionalist political party in Pirin Macedonia (VMRO) dates back to the 19th century. Since then, the organization has changed its name a couple of times, split into a number of factions, was dissolved during the communist period, and took different forms, from a cultural organization to a political party, in the post-communist period. Additionally, nowadays, two independent political parties with similar names are also active in FYROM. Although the author is well aware of those processes, they have largely not been covered by the research. To begin with, it is not the objective of this research to make a historical analysis of VMRO, but rather of its impact on the regional identity and regionalism in Pirin Macedonia. Secondly, the party's activities and spin-offs focused on Aegean and Vardar Macedonia have been excluded because of the limitations imposed on studying regions within the borders of a nation-state. Focus has been placed on the period since World War I until nowadays, and on the fraction of VMRO which has operated on the territory of Pirin Macedonia.

The research is predominantly qualitative in orientation; however, certain quantitative indicators have been used, primarily statistical and demographic data. The chapter on the economies of Pirin Macedonia and Istria also relies on detailed analysis of state and county budgets, using predominantly primary documents, namely annual county budgets and spending reports of the Istrian County administration; republican and consolidated budgets of counties, towns and municipalities by the Croatian Ministry of Finance; annual budgets and reports of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers; and regular publications by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and the Bulgarian Statistical Office. In the case of Blagoevgrad County, the author has not had access to county budgets as those are not published independently from the state budget, and the county authorities have not responded to the author's

request for information. Nevertheless, the national budget provides information about county revenues and expenses, and the author has used those to calculate county budgets. Those calculations have been confirmed by other sources (statements by the county governor regarding annual budgets and secondary sources by other researchers). It has been assumed that the financial information provided by county and state authorities is correct and comparable across countries although analysts occasionally warn against prejudiced inclusion/exclusion of data. Both Bulgaria and Croatia are now members of the European Union, which means that they have coordinated their statistical offices, including what data is included and how it is presented, with EU standards. The author does not have the opportunity to verify the correctness of data without turning that into an independent research project, nor is it necessary to do so for the purposes of this research, as overall trends and levels are sufficient for comparison purposes.

The author has carried out some unstructured and informal interviews with both persons from the regions and outside of them. The interviewees have come from all spheres of life (cultural and social activists, media representatives, politicians, ordinary citizens), and the author has been primarily interested in their subjective experiences and opinions on regional identities. For more structured and quantitative analysis of the regional population, the work of other researchers has been used. In the case of Pirin Macedonia, a team of researchers from Sofia University, led by Mihail Gruev,[3] has carried out a project in the region that is significant in scale and findings. The research published in full 60 interviews with Pirin Macedonians who have lived through the period from World War II until the present and share their life stories with the interviewers. In Istria, Pamela Ballinger has carried out an array of interviews which, although not published in full, are available in abridged form in Ballinger's works.[4] In addition, Bjørn Thomassen,[5] and

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[3] Gruev, Michail, Tepavicharov, Vesselin, Vassileva-Grueva, Petya, Kotzeva-Popova, Violeta & Maria Kostadinova (eds.). *Violence, Politics and Memory: The Communist Regime in Pirin Macedonia – the Reflections of the Contemporary and the Researcher (Nasilie, politika i pamet: Komunisticheskiyat rezhim v Pirinska Makedoniya – refleksii na savremennika i izsledovatelya)*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2011.

[4] Ballinger, Pamela. *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003 / Ballinger, Pamela. "At the Borders of Force: Violence, Refugees, and the Reconfiguration of the Yugoslav and Italian States." *Past and Present*, 2011, 210 (suppl. 6), pp. 158-176/ Ballinger, Pamela. "'Authentic Hybrids' in the Balkan Borderlands." *Current Anthropology*, 2004, 45 (1), pp. 31-60.

[5] Thomassen, Bjørn. "Italy From Below and From Outside-In: An Istrian Life Story Across the Italo-Yugoslav Border." *Acta Histriae*, 2006, 14 (1), pp. 155-178.

Anita Skelin Horvat and Vesna Muhvić-Dimanovski[6] have also published excerpts from interviews with Istrians. The interview materials have been mostly used in the chapter dealing with regional identity, and although unarguably highly subjective in nature, they are also so diverse in opinions and experiences, that together they present a balanced and highly revealing account of the post-World War II and communist periods. The author has found personal accounts, in particular in the case of Pirin Macedonia to be more useful in establishing the boundaries, or lack of such, of regional identities than academic analyses, which are frequently focusing on a specific period of history, and also appear to be too absorbed with national identities. As the purpose of this research is to explore regionalism as an expression of an identity parallel to the national one, accounts on the national identification of the regional population are not particularly relevant. Neither is a detailed historical analysis, as change of both state borders and populations was frequent, if not necessarily rapid, so it does not shed enough light on present-day processes and identities. A review of history is useful in that it identifies repeating trends, thus enabling the making of comparisons with present-day developments. The author has found that a constructivist or phenomenological approach viewing meaning and relationships between variables as fluid rather than static is best suited to capture the fluidity of both the identification and political allegiance of the population.

Furthermore, as already said, this research does not study the larger regions of Macedonia and Istria but instead their composites, Pirin Macedonia and Croatian Istria, which have been reviewed and studied as isolated and complete entities. Within such a research framework, it is important to emphasize that those two sub-regions have become independent regions only in the 20th century, when they became part of Bulgaria and Croatia respectively, which explains the focus of the research on more recent history. Prior to that, even when, and if, Macedonia and Istria did exist as regions within different empires, Pirin Macedonia and Croatian Istria did not have independent identities or political lives. Therefore, although in an ideal version, regionalism based on multi- or pluri-culturalism and fluidity should be seen as a universal concept, for practical reasons (i.e. the methodological restrictions imposed for research and comparison purposes), but also for a truer presentation of reality, regionalism is here studied as an enclosed occurrence, limited by physical and administrative borders. Conceptually, however, regionalism and the hybridity of border populations should not be limited by territory – in their essence they

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[6] Skelin Horvat, Anita and Vesna Muhvić-Dimanovski. "My Mother Tongue...Croatian, Istrian, Local,...Depends Where I am...The Perception of Mother Tongue in Multilingual Settings." *Jezikoslovlje*, 2012, 13 (2), pp. 493-511.

refer to hybrid, deterritorialized and denationalized people. There thus exists a certain discrepancy between existing political regionalist movements and regionalist ideology. Although, theoretically, regionalism should be based on supranationalism, in reality, it proves to be an antithesis to nationalism, which, however is limited by national borders, and thus does not turn into real supranationalism. This contradiction has historical roots in both Macedonia and Istria, where "autonomist" parties and organizations had masked irredentist or nationalist agendas. Supporters of the Italian cause in Istria, for example, adopted an "autonomist" rhetoric and agenda in the early 20th century as a strategy to pursue separation from Austria and unity with Italy.[7] Similarly, VMRO's different branches (initially, while the entire region of Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire and later, while Vardar Macedonia was part of Yugoslavia) at times also sought active unity with Bulgaria, and saw the formation of an autonomous Macedonian state as a means to achieving future unity with Bulgaria.[8] In more recent history, although not secessionist, IDS had to restrict its vision of a pan-Istrian, trans-border union to a concept of a region limited within the borders of Croatia, as that was a safe and winning political strategy in the region as opposed to HDZ's nationalism. In current Bulgarian VMRO agenda, unification of the entire region with Bulgaria is not explicitly stated[9] as it would not be politically correct to do so nor well accepted by voters, however, irredentism can be at times read between the lines, and some VMRO politicians (in FYROM) have openly propagated such unification.[10] Thus, we can talk about nationalism and cosmopolitan regionalism reinforcing each other (Istria) but also cooperating together by being two halves of the same thing (Pirin Macedonia).

For that reason exactly, in the chapter on regional identities there is a discrepancy between the section dealing with Pirin Macedonia and Istria. Since discussions on identity in Pirin Macedonia (and the wider transnational Macedonian region) have focused on the national identity of the population (are Macedonians Bulgarians, Serbians or a separate nation?), academic work has attempted to "prove" what that identity is by citing demographic statistics/population censuses. The author has also discussed the censuses in detail, however, with a different objective, i.e. to demonstrate the fluidity of regional

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[7] For further information on the overlap between regionalism and nationalism in Istria, see Ballinger (2004), p. 38

[8] See Poulton, Hugh. *Who Are the Macedonians?*. London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 1995.

[9] Separatism is illegal by the constitutions of both Bulgaria and Croatia, and will threaten the endurance of political movements which openly propagate it.

[10] For example, see interview with Alexandar Chulev, president of VMRO-Vardar for news.bg, published on 24 March, 2007, available online at http://news.ibox.bg/interview/id_275867177, or

identification. Since regional identity is studied as parallel to the national one, the second layer of identification with a specific nation has not been explored, first, because of the subjectivity of most academic work on the topic, and second, because regional identity has not been seen as alternative but rather as complementary to national one, thus not impacting allegiance to the latter. According to Falkenhagen, the configurations of (personal and collective) identities take several ideal-typical forms. The most relevant for this research are the following forms: a dominant identity, where one identity is universally shared, while the other is irrelevant; a strong identity, where one identity is almost universally shared, while the other is significantly shared and is nested within the strong identity; twinned identities where both identities are universally shared; and lastly, conflicting identities where both identities claim a significant proportion of the population without much overlap and without either being able to claim a majority.[11] Arguably, in Istria the population is more prone to identifying with twinned identities where regional and national identification are universally shared, while in Pirin Macedonia the national identity is the strong one with regional identification nested in it. These different configurations of identity lead to both the formation of different regionalist parties, but also to a difference in the academic work carried out on these two regions. In Istria where regional identification has become at least as strong, if not stronger, than the national one,[12] there is significant analytical and descriptive work on IDS, its political agenda, and the characteristics of the regional identity. In Bulgaria, the national identity remains the primary one, in particular in the political realm, which means that for her analysis the author had to rely mostly on interviews with Pirin Macedonians, and less on published academic work, in order to establish the characteristics and parameters of regional identification.

In the political sphere, the two main regional parties in Istria and Pirin Macedonia, IDS and VMRO have built entirely different political platforms. The characteristics of these political platforms have been established through qualitative analysis of official political party agendas and documents, and newspaper articles/interviews with party leaders. Also, in order to establish trends and connections, a historical analysis of the political movements in the two regions is made, mostly focusing on the 20th and 21st centuries. Falkenhagen

[11] Falkenhagen, Frédéric. "National Identity and Ethno-Regional Party Types." *CEU Political Science Journal*, 2009, 3, pp. 389-418.
[12] For more detailed explanation of the use of the terms "weaker" or "stronger," see Suran, Fulvio. "Istrianity as the Weaker (And Stronger) Identity." Zagreb: *Društvena Istraživanja,* 1993, 6-7 (2), pp. 769-782.

attributes the difference in political platforms to the different configurations of regional

collective identities listed above, and attempts to establish predictable connections

between them. For the purposes of this research, it is sufficient to acknowledge that

regional political parties vary in type, agenda and campaigning style.[13] Therefore, although

VMRO and IDS are both regionalist parties in that their primary political agenda is focused

on specific sub-national regions, the two parties are very different from one another, and

that leads to different levels of politicization of regional identities. Here, it is important to

mention that the author has identified a type of regionalist party which has been very

poorly studied in academic work, namely regionalist parties with an ethno-nationalist

agenda. This ethno-nationalist agenda is not centred on the regional identity and its ethnic

specificity, which is very typical for regionalist parties in countries like Spain, Scotland or

Canada, but quite contrary on an overlap between the regional and national identity of the

majority on state level. This is definitely the case with VMRO in Pirin Macedonia, and this

example is not isolated. It has its equivalent in other European countries. For example in

Croatia, a similar nationalistic agenda is shared by the Croatian Democratic Alliance of

Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB) whose electorate is almost exclusively regionally based.[14] The

connection between a more traditional type of nationalism and present-day regionalism

needs to be further explored in academic work. It is, however, not the focus of this

research.[15]

Lastly, in certain areas of this research, the author cannot claim to be exhaustive in

pursuing all possible variants and occurrences. When dealing with administrative divisions

in Bulgaria and Croatia, the county is a major unit of organization in both countries,

however the essence and jurisdiction of counties in Bulgaria and Croatia are fundamentally

different. In Bulgaria counties are part of and a division of the central government, and

have no formal autonomy from central government institutions. In Croatia, counties are a

form of self-government with significant decision-making and financial jurisdictions and

independence from central state institutions. The dependence of county governors in

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[13] Falkenhagen categorizes them as national-federalist, euro-federalist, secessionist, or
spokesperson.
[14] For detailed information on HDSSB, please see Kukec, Marko. "Think Croatian, Act Slavonian: The
Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja as a Regionalist Patriot," master thesis
submitted to Central European University, 2013. Kukec calls regionalist parties with ethno-
nationalist agenda which coincides with the primary state nationality as "regionalist patriots."
[15] Slavonia and Baranja are presently not forming a single administrative unit, and differ significantly
in their geographic position (the latter is part of a county which borders two countries, Hungary and
Serbia, while the former is centrally located), so it is hard to analyse, or even perceive, them as a
region. Additionally, their poor economic situation and lack of specific regional identity different
from the Croatian one make them incomparable with Pirin Macedonia.

Bulgaria on central executive institutions, and their tendency to follow central policy on the regional (county) level, have been demonstrated by presenting examples where county governors have been dismissed from their positions when they have disagreed with central authorities, or have followed policies unsupported by the latter. Although not exclusive, this approach, together with the analysis of the legal framework, is effective in demonstrating the dependent position of county authorities in Bulgaria, and thus opposing it to the situation in Croatia. Similarly, the historical analysis of Istria and Pirin Macedonia focuses on movements and developments related to regionalism, and is mostly limited to events taking place in the 20th and 21st centuries. The author does not claim to make an exhaustive historical analysis of all events and political movements in those two regions, nor is this research historical in orientation. It is using historical events selectively and as objectively as possible in order to portray the foundations of current regional political parties and the formation of regional identities.

The Bulgarian nationality of the author, and the "Bulgarian" education which the author has received, primarily in history, might affect the author's way of thinking, although the author has been aware of this possibility and has tried to analyse the regions in as objective way as possible.

It should be also noted that the research identifies the two studied regions as border regions neighbouring more economically developed EU Member States. While this was invariably true at the time the research was carried out, the current economic crisis in Greece has placed it on the bottom of economic development within the European Union. Nevertheless, although it is questionable whether Greece is nowadays economically more prosperous than Bulgaria, for the duration of the period covered by the research, it was certainly the country with higher standard of living and with better financial liquidity. The effects of the economic crisis in Greece have not significantly and negatively impacted the economic exchange with Pirin Macedonia. Quite contrary, new forms of economic exchange have emerged with many Greeks increasingly shopping in Pirin Macedonia because of the lower prices but also using Bulgarian banks and currency to escape the limitations on the Greek banking sector. In addition, some businesses have been transferred across the border precisely because of the inability to sustain operations in their home market.

Chapter 4

Legal and administrative framework: the connection between the processes of regionalization and regionalism in Istria and Pirin Macedonia

This chapter will explore the connection between regionalization as a state-led reform process of the legal and administrative framework, and regionalism as a bottom-up process for self-realization and increased political and economic autonomy. [1] It seems logical that the granting of higher decision-making powers, including regarding funding, to the regional level, is positively related to the politicization of regional identities and thus to the spread of regionalism. The premise is that deeper political regionalization leads to the politicization of regional identities as a process led from the centre, which in its turn deepens regionalism as a bottom-up process. The strengthening of regionalism and regional actors leads to further politicization of the regional identity, but this time as a process initiated from within the region itself.

Croatia and Bulgaria have similar units of local and regional (self) governance: towns, municipalities and counties (regions). While towns and municipalities undoubtedly perform functions of self-governance in both countries, for the purposes of this research it is important to see to what extent is the third and largest territorial unit, the county, politically and financially independent from central government. To do so, first it needs to be established whether counties in Croatia and Bulgaria are units of government (administrative regionalization) or self-government (political regionalization). Units of local and regional government are branches of the central state operating on local (town or municipal) and county level. As such, they are answerable to the central government, are politically and financially dependent on it, and are by law and in practice existing to support and extend its work on local level. Units of local and regional self-government are conceived to protect the interests of the local population by transferring decision-making, economic development, and provision of services to a level closer to it. To achieve this, they are granted by law and in practice independence from central governments over certain financial and political matters.[2] They are governed by councils and/or assemblies elected by direct elections, as opposed to units of local and regional government which are

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[1] All terms are aligned with Michael Keating's definitions, as detailed in Chapter 1.
[2] Those are defined by national legislation and vary from country to country. The rights granted to regional and local self-governments in Bulgaria and Croatia are described later in this chapter.

governed by councils appointed by the central government. To establish the status of regional governments in Croatia and Bulgaria, I will review the legal and administrative reform processes which have taken place in the two countries since the early 1990s.

1.   Regionalization-related reform processes in Bulgaria and Croatia

Both Bulgaria and Croatia have undergone processes of limited regionalization in the past two and a half decades. The following section will introduce the major legal and administrative reforms which have supported those processes.

The public administrative structures and their organization in Bulgaria and Croatia are defined in both countries' constitutions. The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria defines a region as "an administrative territorial unit for the conduct of a regional policy, the implementation of state governance on a local level, and the ensuring the concurrence of national and local interests.[3]" Each region is governed by a governor appointed by the Council of Ministers, the top central unit of executive power in the country, for an undefined period of time, meaning that he/she could be replaced at any time. Governors are responsible for ensuring the implementation of state policy, the safeguarding of national interests, law and public order, and the exercising of administrative control.[4] No self-government units are established on regional level. The governor, as a representative of the central state, is the single organ of the executive power on regional level and is supported by an administration.[5] The county governor and administration are directly financed by the state budget (as part of the budget of the Council of Ministers).

The function of the governor in Bulgaria stems back to the 14th century when the country became part of the Ottoman Empire. [6] Governors in the Ottoman Empire (called *beylerbey*

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[3] Article 142, Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, prom., State Gazette No 56/13.07.1991, amend. SG 85/26 SEP 2003, SG 18/25 Feb 2005, SG 27/31 Mar 2006, SG 78/26 Sep 2006 – Constitutional Court Judgement No.7/2006 , SG 12/6 Feb 2007, available online at http://www.parliament.bg/en/const

[4] *ibid*, Article 143

[5] Articles 19(3) and 29(1), Administration Act, prom., State Gazette No. 130/5.11.1998, effective 6.12.1998, Constitutional Court Judgment No. 2/21.01.1999, SG No. 8/29.01.1999, last suppl., SG No. 17/21.02.2013, available online at http://www.mi.government.bg/en/library/administration-act-382-c25-m258-2.html

[6] The Ottoman Empire was subdivided into provinces, or fixed territorial units, governed by provincial governors appointed by the sultan. From the 14th to the late 16th century, the provinces were called *beylerbeylik*, and were later renamed into *eyalets*. Additional reforms in the late 19th century replaced the *eyalets* with *vilayets*. The governors were respectively called *beylerbey* and *vali*. In their essence, both the nature of the provinces and the function of their governors remained

and later on, *vali*) were the principal representatives of central authorities in the provinces, wielding authority given to them directly by the sultan, and vested with both military and civil powers. As part of Sultan Mahmud II's efforts to centralize the Empire, a number of reforms were initiated in the 1830s. Those reasserted the power of regional governors as the main representatives of the central authorities on regional level, commissioned with implementing the policies passed by the sultan.[7] The sultan delegated rights to the governor, his representative in a specific province, who then undertook the responsibility to implement central policy in the province. He was thus directly controlled by the central authorities, was accountable for his actions to the Sublime Porte, and had a number of jurisdictions which limited the competences of regional councils.[8] He also served as an intermediary between the central authorities and the provincial population, particularly in the collection and distribution of taxes.[9] Further reforms in the late 19th century (the Provincial Regulation of 1858 and the Vilayet reform) preserved the role of the governor as the sole representative of the central government; all communication with Istanbul had to go through him. [10] Although problems with supervision and lax control led to governors being provided with more freedom of action than was pre-determined, the line of authority was very clear, and the subordinate role of the governor was indisputable throughout the whole period.

The position of the governor in independent Bulgaria in the first half of the 20th century was thus based on centuries-long tradition of central control over the regional level.[11] After a hiatus of almost 50 years when the function of the county governor was altogether abolished by the communist regime, the 1991 Constitution reintroduced governors as responsible for implementing state policy on county level, protecting national interests and

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unchanged since the 14th century, with reforms being more focused on centralizing the sultan's and the Sublime Porte's power. For more information, please refer to Georgieva, Gergana. "Functions and Prerogatives of the Rumeli Vali in the First Half of the 19th Century." *Balkan Studies (Etudes Balkaniques)*, 2003, 2, pp.57-77.

[7] Georgieva (2003), p. 58.

[8] *ibid*, p. 76

[9] *ibid*

[10] Shaw, Stanford J. and Ezel Kural Shaw. *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Volume 2, Reform, Revolution, and Republic*: *The Rise of Modern Turkey 1808-1975.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 88.

[11] Because of the size and the heterogeneity of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan and the Sublime Porte frequently struggled with the enforcement of strong central control and the imposing of order within the empire's borders. Nevertheless, in its design, the empire was centralized and reforms in the 18th and 19th centuries enforced more successfully the centralization.

the rule of law, and exercising administrative control over local self-governance[12]. Thus by law in Bulgaria the governor is not an organ of regional self-government but rather an instrument for control of the latter by the central government. He serves as a representative of the entire government and each of its ministers individually, and thus his competences are not associated with any specific economic activities or functions but rather with the overall functioning of the state administration in the county. Governors also serve as the link between local self-government on municipal and town level and central state authorities, however, by being part of the central state administration, on payroll from the budget of the Council of Ministers, and appointed and dismissed by the Council, they are likely to advance central government's interests. No representative function on behalf of the region is legally granted to governors,[13] except for establishing international contacts on regional level, including within the EU, which function they again serve as representatives of the central authority. As the only organ having jurisdiction on regional/county level, the governor is also responsible for drafting and implementing regional development programs and strategies. This means that, due to the structural and constitutional limitations placed on their autonomy, it is de facto the state government which develops and implements regional development strategies, especially because the primary sources of financing for counties come from state budgets.

In contrast, the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia defines any unit of government as self-government. According to Article 134,[14] municipalities and towns serve as units of local self-government, while counties (regions) serve as units of regional self-government. The responsibilities of all self-government units are broadly described, with counties being responsible for administering "affairs of regional significance, and in particular affairs related to education, public health, zoning and urban planning, economic development, transportation and transportation infrastructure and the development of the network of educational, health, social and cultural institutions"[15]. Furthermore, the Constitution also stipulates that counties have the right to autonomously regulate the internal organization

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[12] Article 143/ 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria and Article 31(1) of the Administration Act of the Republic of Bulgaria

[13] By comparison, municipality mayors are to represent the community and to be guided "by the law, by the acts of the Municipal Council, and by the decisions of the community," Administration Act, Article 33 (3).

[14] Article 134 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, *Official Journal of the Republic of Croatia (Narodne novine)*, No 56/90, 135/97, 8/98 – consolidated text, 113/2000, 124/2000 – consolidated text, 28/2001, 41/2001 – consolidated text, 55/2001 – correction, and Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (NN 76/2010), available online at http://www.sabor.hr/Default.aspx?art=2405

[15] *ibid*, Article 135.

and jurisdiction of their bodies, and to administer the tasks falling under their responsibilities. Financially, self-government units are granted the right to their own revenues, proportional to their powers, and the right to dispose of them freely in the performance of the tasks under their responsibility. In the event of overlapping powers, the Constitution stipulates that the European Union rule of subsidiarity should be applied, i.e. responsibility should be granted to the unit of government closest to citizens. [16] However, because of the limited jurisdiction of counties over revenue sources and tax levels, and the control of the central government over the legislative process, in Croatia subsidiarity is difficult to enforce. The legal framework is often confusing, with an abundance of regulations to be followed[17] and insufficiently qualified personnel on the regional and local level to sort them out[18]. A number of legal loopholes and a lack of clarity in the laws halt their proper implementation.[19] Furthermore, although tasks and responsibilities have been decentralized, i.e. have been transferred from the central to the local and regional levels, fiscal rates are still defined and taxes collected by the central authorities, which effectively blocks or delays the realization of programmes or activities which are not delegated, and thus financially backed, by the central government.[20] This is particularly the case with developmental programmes and strategies, which are not tied to a specific line of funding, require long-term planning and realization, and the involvement of a significant number of qualified personnel. Thus, according to some research of decentralization in Croatia,[21] despite the nominal decentralization taking place in the

[16] *ibid*, Article 135.

[17] The precise responsibilities of the different levels of government are defined by a long list of secondary legislation and regulations.

[18] Maleković, Sanja, Puljiz, Jakša & Mario Polić. "Institutional Capacity for Regional Development in Croatia on the County Level." *Croatian International Relations Review*, July-Dec, 2006, pp. 139-148; Konjhodžić, Halid and Meri Šuman Tolić. "Fiscal Decentralization in Croatia: Reform Process or Political Rhetoric." *Economic Thought and Practice*, 2009 (2), pp. 233-258, at p. 255.

[19] Šinković, Zoran. "Legal aspects of fiscal decentralization in the Republic of Croatia with the aim of implementing regional policy of the European Union." Paper presented at conference "Novelties Related to Local and Regional Self-Governance." Pag: June, 2014; Konjhodžić and Šuman Tolić (2009), pp. 233-258.

[20] Višić, Josipa and Branko Grčić. "Regional Policy of the Republic of Croatia in Terms of Accession to the EU." *Croatia and the EU: The Challenges of Integration*. Split: Economic Faculty Split, 2006, p. 128.

[21] Ott, Katarina. "How can public finances really become public? Citizen participation in the control of local budgets in Croatia, Macedonia and Ukraine." Zagreb: Institute for Public Finance, 2008; Petak, Zdravko. "Politics of decentralization policy: Explaining the limited success of the Croatian case after 2001."
 Croatian Political Science Review (*Politička Misao*), 2011 (5), pp. 72-84; Schmitt, Pierre, Ruys, Tom and Axel Marx. "The subsidiarity early warning system of the Lisbon Treaty – the role of regional parliaments with legislative powers and other subnational authorities," report commissioned by the European Union Committee of the Regions, European Union: November, 2013, p. 132.

country since 2001, one can talk about effective further centralization whereby the dominant role of central government units in decision-making is confirmed. Representatives of the units of local and regional self-government in Croatia, not in the least place from Istria, often express their dissatisfaction with the high level of centralization of the country.

Since counties serve as units of local self-government in Croatia, i.e. their primary function is to represent regional interests, their governors and deputy governors are directly elected for a period of 4 years, according to the Act on the Election of Municipality Heads, Mayors, County Prefects and the Mayor of the City of Zagreb of October, 2007.[22] Governors serve as executive units and their work is supplemented or assisted by county authorities and administration. They are nominated for office by political parties (or directly by voters) which means that while in Bulgaria they are typically members of the political party(ies) holding central power, in Croatia, they can be independent or from a different political party. This could lead to divergent interests on regional and national level. In Bulgaria, because of the organization of the different levels, the appointment procedure for governors, and the nature of the authority granted to them, governors typically share and protect the interests of the central government on regional level. They are always from political parties or coalitions holding central power, and serve those parties' interests, rarely following any different political line than the central government. According to Alexander Dolev,[23] functions in political parties in Bulgaria have merged with state and economic ones. On the top of the political and party hierarchy, party chairmen serve as prime ministers. Top ranking political actors from the party which wins parliamentary elections serve as deputy prime ministers or ministers. On the regional level, county governors are typically the chairmen of the regional structures of their political parties.[24] Political party members and activists are employed as state, municipal or regional civil servants. Dolev quotes the ex-governor of Plovdiv County who, when accused of conflict of interest for serving simultaneously as a municipal counsellor, chairman of the group of the municipal counsellors from his party, and a member of the board of directors of a large public company, stated: "If the party decides so, I would resign from my position on the

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[22] Act on the Election of Municipality Heads, Mayors, County Prefects and the Mayor of the City of Zagreb, prom., *Official Journal of the Republic of Croatia, NN*/ 12.10.2007, Article 2, available online at http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2007_10_109_3178.html

[23] Dolev, Alexander. "Treatise on Bulgarian governance: What is our problem", 1998, p. 9.

[24] Blagoevgrad ex-county governor Vladimir Dimitrov, at the time of his appointment as a governor in 2005, also served as a chairman of the county and municipal organizations of his political party, and was third on its list for parliamentary elections.

board of directors (of the public company)"[25]. Dolev's conclusion is that political structures in Bulgaria have overtaken all public institutions. No draft bill can be proposed in Parliament unless it has been pre-approved by party leadership. This is the case on local and regional level as well with political party leadership effectively overtaking control over all public institutions and structures.[26][27] Employment of personnel in public institutions is also done according to political "recommendations" rather than personal qualities. Staff's performance is not evaluated or deemed important as they are viewed as "politcommissioners" pushing for (their) political party's interests and not as civil servants serving the public interest.[28] Even if a county governor decides to pursue policies which are not approved by the political party which has nominated and appointed him through the Council of Ministers, the Council has the authority to dismiss him/her at any time without providing a specific reason. Thus, although the central government's control of the hiring and firing processes cannot exclude one-time divergent behaviour on the part of individual governors, it can ensure that incidents do not turn into systematic practices. Undesirable behaviour is "corrected" by the replacement of the political actor who has exhibited it.[29]

Overall, although both Bulgaria and Croatia remain highly centralized countries, there is a major difference in the legal set up of county authorities. In Bulgaria counties do not act as legal entities separate from the central government but as administrative branches of the latter, enabling the implementation of state policy on regional level and "moving" the government closer to citizens. In Croatia, they are units of self-government with independent budgets, staff and responsibilities, and in many ways autonomous from the central government. In Bulgaria, control of county governors' actions is enabled by control of the hiring and firing process, while in Croatia governors are directly elected and thus at least to a certain extent, independent from central government control.

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[25] Quote cited in Dolev, p. 9.

[26] Dolev, p. 9

[27] For example, in the early 1990s, a facsimile document by the ex-governor of Lovech County, Tsonjo Botev, addressed to the municipal mayors elected from his political party, and providing them with instructions how to replace the managing directors of all public enterprises in their municipalities, leaked to the media.

[28] Dolev, p. 9

[29] The governor of Lovech County, Marian Balev, was fired in 2003 with a decision of the Council of Ministers for "not following consistently on regional level the policy of the central government"; the governor of Stara Zagora county, Nedjalko Nedjalkov, was fired from his post as a governor and expelled from his political party for 'unregulated meetings with representatives of other political parties for the realization of personal interests' (author's translation from Bulgarian).

2.   Conclusion

The difference in the type of regionalization adopted in Croatia (political) and Bulgaria (administrative) seems to confirm the hypothesis made at the beginning of this chapter. Croatia, the country which has adopted a stronger political model of regionalization, is also the home of the region with more developed regionalism. Since Istria is having certainly the capacities and resources to make the most of the process of political regionalization which has taken place on national level, its leaders have been provided with ample opportunity to use the latter as catalysis for grass-roots regionalist aspirations. The hypothesis certainly holds ground when tested in a cross-country context. It is challenged, however, once the two processes are studied over time and within the context of internal politics. Istrian regionalism was the strongest in the beginning of the 1990s, when the politicization of Istrian identity took place, and when support for IDS was highest. At that time, decentralization in Croatia was highly limited, and regions were neither financially nor politically independent from the central state. Furthermore, the country had not carried out either administrative or political decentralization, which made it highly comparable to Bulgaria. Since then Istrian regionalism has been on decline, or has at least stagnated, while top-down decentralization, in particular political regionalization, has deepened. The trigger for the politicization of Istrian identity and the growth of bottom-up regionalism could thus not have been growing political regionalization on national level, although there is no evidence that the latter has had a negative effect on regionalism either. Furthermore, the growth of regionalism in Istria has been an isolated event on national level. The decentralization and reform processes carried out in Croatia have not led to the politicization of other regional identities, some of which have even stronger historical traditions of autonomy and cultural specificity[30]. The processes of regionalization and regionalism in Istria have evolved in a parallel rather than linear manner, with central and regional leaders operating on their own different jurisdictional levels. Since formal state-level processes and reforms seem to not have been directly associated with the growth of regionalism in Istria, the next step would be to look at more imprecise and intangible factors such as history and regional identity.

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[30] For example, Dalmatia and Slavonia.

Chapter 5

**Development of contemporary regional identities in Istria and Pirin Macedonia –
conflict and fluidity**

When studying the identities of the populations of Pirin Macedonia and Istria – border
regions identified by the co-habitation of different national groups as a result of frequently
shifting physical borders and cultural domains - the diversity of the populations is not the
regions' most striking trait, nor are inclusivity and tolerance the features which distinguish
them from the rest of their countries. It is rather the changing character of the populations'
personal and collective identities, their fluidity, which seems to provide the foundation for
the regions' specificity. Fluidity in this case signals both hybridity and movement. It refers
to the populations' simultaneous identification with a number of nationalities, which has
led to the formation of hybrid regional identities, and to the altering of those
identifications according to context. Unlike the typical separation between "us" and
"them," in this regional context the "them" easily becomes the "us"' as the otherness of
other national or ethnic groups has never been strongly felt. This feature of border
identities also makes them more receptive to political influence, particularly if the latter
incorporates symbols and characteristics from the regions themselves, and adopts an
inclusivist approach to their populations. Thus, in Bulgaria, Macedonian culture has been
continuously portrayed as one of the pillars of the Bulgarian nation, and in Croatia, the
multinational character and tolerance of the Istrian population have been presented as the
engines behind its economic success. Both strategies have proven to be successful
politically, but they have had two completely different objectives and thus effects. The
former was conceived in order to depoliticize Pirin Macedonia after the World War II,
incorporating the regional identity in the broader Bulgarian one, while preserving to a
certain extent its cultural uniqueness. The latter was aimed at politicizing Istria's regional
identity in order to oppose the nationalist tendencies of the central Croatian government in
the 1990s. Both were carried out in periods of great change and unpredictability, when
border regions' populations are the most prone to adopting novel identities driven by
security and economic rationale.

The following chapter will analyse Istrian and (Pirin) Macedonian collective identities,
focusing on their development since the 20th century. In their essence, both identities are

hybrid, inclusive and dynamic. They are founded on the premise of a shared cultural space rather than an ethnically-affiliated territory, yet the majority of the populations in both regions identifies with the predominant ethnic group in their respective country. With the exception of a small minority of political activists who promote the idea of separate Istrian and Macedonian[1] ethnic identities, the populations of both regions perceive Istrianity and (Pirin) Macedonism as regionally-based variations of the Croatian and Bulgarian ethnicities. This, together with their small size (making economic independence inviable and ruling out autonomy as a political option) and the relatively recent shaping of the current expressions of collective identities, makes the two regions highly comparable. Yet, the two have taken different trajectories of development in the early 1990s. Istria has undergone a (successful) process of politicization of its regional identity, while Pirin Macedonia has remained a cultural region without significant political aspirations. While political elites have played a significant role in the (re)shaping of regional identities, this chapter will focus on explaining the identification and mentality of the local population. It will try to identify the differences which have led Istrians to seek political expression of their regional identification, while Pirin Macedonians have remained satisfied with the preservation and practicing of their cultural specificity on regional level.

1. Theoretical framework and the basic premises of contemporary Istrian and Pirin Macedonian regional identities

The following section will analyse the theoretical framework within which contemporary regional identity can be studied, and introduce the basic premises of the Istrian and Pirin Macedonian regional identities. Constructivist approaches emerge again as best suited for explaining the historical and contemporary variations in the interpretation of personal and collective identities in Istria and Pirin Macedonia.

On a rudimentary level, identities have two dimensions: individual and collective,[2] which comprise a number of layers of identification (e.g. social and family status). The individual

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[1] The "Macedonian" identity referred to here is the one of Pirin Macedonia. The situation in FYROM is completely different – both the public and political leaders overwhelmingly agree on the existence of a separate Macedonian identity. In Pirin Macedonia, the identity is seen as regional variation of the Bulgarian ethnicity, and the Macedonian ethnicity in FYROM as a new, artificial construct.

[2] Keating, Michael. *The New Regionalism in Western Europe: Territorial Restructuring and Political Change*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998 cited in Semian, Michal and Pavel Chromý. "Regional Identity as a Driver or a Barrier in the Process of Regional Development: A Comparison of Selected European Experience." *Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 2014, 68 (5), pp. 263-270, at p. 264.

dimension can be described as the unique composition of factors affecting identity, reflecting personal experience, values, narratives, and ancestral heritage, as well as the influence of environment.[34] The collective dimension encompasses a sense of belonging. The keystone of this collective dimension of identity is the definition of one's group as distinct from other groups (Cohen 1986[5]; Massey & Jess 1995[6]; Hobsbawn 1996[7]; Siwek & Kaňok 2000[8]; Tuan 2003[9]; Carvalho 2006[10]). Collective identity may be founded on shared features, such as ethnicity, language, religion, literature and other cultural expression, and territory. The region someone identifies him/herself with is only one out of a set of numerous identity attributes at a range of spatial levels. The latter may be European, national or local, or non-territorial as in the case of class or gender. Regional identity is thus a layer of collective identity which can run parallel to national identity or be vested in it.[11] In the first case, it might generate regionalist projects demanding higher independence and even full autonomy.

Traditional interpretations[12] of collective identity refer to it as a composite of subjective and objective features with the former comprising one's "subjective sense of sameness and continuity,"[13] and the later emphasizing common cultural (language, literature and historical experience) and material (unemployment,[14] or reversely, high standard of living)

[3] Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[4] Zich, F. "Regionální identita obyvatel euroregionu Nisa" in Zich, F. (ed.) *Regionální identita obyvatel v pohraničí*. Prague: Sociologický Akademie, 2003 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[5] Cohen, A.P. (ed.). *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[6] Massey, D. & Jess, P. (eds.). *A Place in the World?* Oxford: Open University, 1995 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[7] Hobsbawn, E. "Language, Culture, and National Identity." *Social Research,* 1996, 63, pp. 1065–1080 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[8] Siwek, T. & Kaňok, J. *Vědomí Slezské Identity v Mentální Mapě*. Ostrava: Ostrava University, 2000 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[9] Tuan, Y.-F. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[10] Carvalho, J. (ed.) *Religion, Ritual and Mythology: Aspects of Identity Formation in Europe*. Pisa: Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press, 2006 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[11] Zich, F. "Regionální Identita Obyvatel Euroregionu Nisa" in Zich, F. (ed.) *Regionální Identita Obyvatel v Pohraničí*. Prague: *Sociologický Akademie*, 2003 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[12] Erikson, E. *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (Bulgarian translation). Sofia: *Nauka i izkustvo*, 1996, p. 38 / Kabakchieva, Petya. "Temporary Migrants: Beyond Borders, Across Identities." Sofia: CAS Working Paper Series No. 2, 2009, part of project "Roles, Identities and Hybrids: Multiple Institutional Cultures in Southeast Europe within the Context of European Unification," supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, p. 7.

[13] Erikson (1996), p. 38.

[14] Hearl, DJ, Budge, I and B. Pearson. "Distinctiveness of Regional Voting: A Comparative Analysis across the European Community (1979–1993)." *Electoral Studies,* 1996, 15 (2), pp.167–82.

elements. More recent analyses adopt a constructivist approach talking about fluid, multiple, imagined and negotiated identities.[15] Identity is seen as a construction, a process rather than an end result. In the words of Benedict Anderson, communities are not distinguished "by their fallacy/truthfulness, but by the way in which they imagine themselves as communities".[16] In the *Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, for example, document the adaptations and innovations that surround national symbols concluding that "'traditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented," the outcome of careful social engineering. [17] Such "invented" traditions are responses to "novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition".[18] According to Hobsbawm, the creation of traditions is politically or economically motivated and often in the interests of ruling elites. Stuart Hall adopts a similar approach to the interpretation of reality viewing identity as a strategic, positional concept. To Hall, cultural identities are not fixed but fluid, and "like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation… they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power"…"a result of a long and discontinuous series of transformations."[19] Such transformations happen with the help of "mediations"[20], historical developments (civic or political) which alter public perceptions and the way we think of ourselves. Hall proposes the concept of "identification"[21] as more appropriate to capture the fluidity of identity as opposed to static notions of identity as something inherited or assigned:

> *"We have now to re-conceptualize identity as a process of identification… It is something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference." [22]*

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[15] Kabakchieva, Petya, p. 7.

[16] Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: *Verso*, 2006, online version through MPublishing, University of Michigan Library.

[17] Hobsbawm, Eric. "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds.). *The Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (first published in 1983), p. 1

[18] *ibid*, p. 2

[19] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Rutherford, Jonathan (ed.). *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: *Lawrence and Wishart*, 1990.

[20] *ibid;* Hall's "mediations*"* are similar to Hobsbawm and Ranger's "novel situations".

[21] Such a view of identity is also adopted by David Hollinger who talks about identity as an "affiliation by revocable consent" – see Hollinger, David. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

[22] Hall, Stuart. "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference." *Radical America*, 1991, 23 (4), p. 15.

Focusing on the linguistic dimension of identity, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas adopts an almost identical interpretation of personal identity as flexible and changeable, multiple and dynamic, meaning that it is constructed in communication, dependent on the situation and context, and "becoming rather than being".[23] The linguistic aspect of regional identification is indeed important, and is studied in detail in the chapter on regional political parties which analyses political party agendas and their leaders' rhetoric.

Definitions focused on identity as a process appear well suited for the studying of regional identities in Istria and Pirin Macedonia where both personal and collective identification has often been a matter of personal choice, or fluid. The current collective regional identity of the population in those regions was to a large extent formulated in the 20th century. Despite rhetoric referring to long-lasting traditions of regionalism and singularity, those two regions had not had a distinct independent identity prior to the 20th century. Wars and epidemics frequently led to major depopulation, with newcomers settling in from different parts of neighbouring empires and altering at least partially local culture. Tension and antagonism were not rare; however, they also constituted a natural zone of transition from one cultural realm to another, creating numerous ties across national communities.[24] The process is explained by Zygmunt Bauman who depicts identity as "the ontological status of a project and postulate."[25] On the one hand, it is a response to the social environment one exists in: if it is one of little change, then identities are cemented as well; if, however, one is caught in a changing world, one is forced to constitute new identities, changing them constantly.[26] Border regions are characterized by change dictated in the past by shifting state borders and population exchanges. With external change comes internal change, or the fluidity of identities mentioned above. On the other hand, old collective identities may become hardened or even produce newly-recycled, but strong, group identities, should a situation of cultural encounter with "otherness" occur, that is, if some form of "us" clashes with some form of "them".

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[23] Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. "The Right to Mother Tongue Medium Education - The Hot Potato in Human Rights Instruments," p. 10 in Opening plenary at the II Mercator International Symposium: Europe 2004: A new framework for all languages?, 2004, available online at http://www.ciemen.cat/mercator/pdf/simp-skuttnab.pdf as cited in Skelin Horvat, Anita and Vesna Muhvić-Dimanovski, p. 502.
[24] Thaler, Peter. "Fluid Identities in Central European Borderlands." *European History Quarterly,* 2001, 31 (4), pp. 519-548, at p. 542
[25] Bauman, Zygmunt. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1995 as quoted in Kabakchieva, p. 7.
[26] *ibid*

In both Pirin Macedonia and Istria, change was regular and frequent. It was not necessarily rapid in the sense that empires, states and political regimes were stable enough and existed for sufficient time to influence and alter local identities. Change was, however, certain and local populations accepted it as normal and anticipated it. For that reason, whatever local identities existed or were formulated, they were always open to change with the alteration of political regimes, and shaped by material and security concerns. Resistance to change of course existed, and the rigidity of specific groups' national or local identities had brought bloodshed to both regions, which were traditionally perceived as unstable and prone to conflict. Function/occupation, religion, status (newcomer/indigenous population), class and nationality were used in different historical periods as a basis for segregation. The mingling of cultures and the openness of physical and symbolic frontiers have become desirable elements of political and social life only recently. Initially in the communist period, ethnic boundaries, distinctions and identity all became a function of social class and the workers of the world were at least theoretically called to unite.[27] The distinction between the different nationalities was thus predominantly based on class, rather than on cultural differences. Despite this relative tolerance of ethnic identification, it was more relevant for the domain of international relations. Within state borders, culture and identity were increasingly standardized, and cultural and regional differences were gradually erased[28]. The fall of the communist regimes in Bulgaria and ex-Yugoslavia increased the influence of the European Union and the United States of America, and led to the spreading of the (tolerance, diversity and multiculturalism) rhetoric and political models promoted by them. The current (idealistic) images of Istria and Pirin Macedonia as strongholds of diversity, ethnic tolerance and cross-border cooperation are thus new constructs popularized in the 1990s by national and/or regional political elites, again in reaction to changing political and economic domains. As such, they are on the one hand, leading to the consolidation of new regional identities, and on the other, particularly in the case of Istria, initiating a process of their politicization, i.e. turning a largely unconscious cultural affiliation into a conscious political project. The politicization of regional identities is typically carried out by political elites who instrumentalize selected traditional symbols in order to gain legitimacy for their political agenda. When the symbols of the past fail to support the political image they are trying to build, they are gradually replaced with new ones. Such a selective reading of the past can,

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[27] Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *Communist Manifesto* (1848).
[28] Through the standardization of language, folklore and customs.

however, only function if it is voluntary, i.e. if the local population sees an interest or recognizes its own perceived image in the image created by the political elites.

To study the politicization of regional identity, it is thus not sufficient to just analyse the legal statutes and the programmes of political parties, or the existence of enabling or curbing national legislatures. These are the "mediations" Hall talks about which enable and accompany the formation of new identities. In order to be adopted and endure, these new identities need to be reflected in or shaped by every-day popular practices. Popular participation is vital for the politicization of regionalism, and whether regionalist actors receive support within their region depends on the acceptance in the region of the sense of community proposed by political ideologies. Regions need to become "functional" in the sense that they need to serve some material purpose and some administrative role, but also to inculcate a feeling of cultural homogeneity among the region's inhabitants, i.e. make the region recognizable in the minds of people both within and outside it.[29] A region is thus fully institutionalized only when its inhabitants have a collective sense of belonging to it, that is, when they share a sense of regional identity.[30][31]

It is people's natural inclination to assume a social identity by identifying themselves with a certain group, be it national, ethnic, family or work-related. That social identity is defined, however, not only by bonding with the in-group members but also in contrast with those belonging to other groups. In case of regional identities where the co-habitation of a number of ethnicities has led to the formation of a pluri-ethnic identity, the outside other might be someone or something disapproving of pluri-ethnicity, a phenomenon that strives to limit it or denies the possibility of its existence. In cases where people feel threaten, their identity might come to stronger expression, i.e. the need to protect one's identity becomes more acute, and it appears indeed that in Pirin Macedonia and Istria regional identities were strongest in times of turmoil. In the case of Istria, that happened during the recent violent dissolution of Yugoslavia when the Istrian population felt threatened by the nationalist rhetoric and politics carried out by the central government. In Pirin Macedonia, the need to pursue regional identification was strongest in the periods of the Balkan wars and the inter-war period when the influx of Bulgarian refugees from neighbouring

[29] Neumann (1999), p. 73.

[30] Paasi, A. "The Institutionalization of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions and the Constitution of Regional Identity." *Fennia,* 1986, 164, pp. 105–146 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

[31] Paasi, A. "The Resurgence of the Region and Regional Identity: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Observation on Regional Dynamics in Europe." *Review of International Studies,* 2009, 35, pp. 121–146 cited in Semian and Chromý (2014), p. 264.

countries significantly increased and diversified the population of the region, increased the need for social solidarity on regional level, and led to the development of a strong regional political identity. In both regions the trigger for the strengthening of the regional identification of the population and the politicization of that identification was a violent conflict, where the parameters of the regional identity were defined by a classical separation of "us" verses "them," even though the "us" was a hybrid, multi-cultural construct and the "them" - the national government.

Since Istria had gone through such a violent conflict recently (in the early 1990s), the positive correlation between turmoil and regionalism holds ground, including in a comparative setting. When comparing Istria with Pirin Macedonia, the former is the region with more expressed collective regional identity, including more expressed political regional identity. [32] In Pirin Macedonia, no violent conflict has taken place since World War II, and even the collapse of the state-planned economy in the 1990s did not impact the region gravely. In contrast, because of its traditionally mixed population and its dependence on tourism and related industries as an export sector, Istria was affected twofold by the nationalism of the ruling political elites and the violent dissolution of ex-Yugoslavia. On the one hand, many Istrians found themselves as members of a minority group after half a century of ethnic Unitarianism. On the other hand, there was a sharp drop in the standard of living of the population due to reduced incomes from tourism and exports. Unlike in other regions in Croatia (Dalmatia and Slavonia), there was no large Serbian minority in Istria and no fighting took place on its territory. Quite oppositely, because of the integration of many Istrians in Yugoslav administrative structures and the economic boom it had experienced since the 1970s, the region was pro-Yugoslavian. In short, the local population felt that the ongoing conflict was not theirs to fight.[33] The conflict was impacting their well-being, and they had no influence over central state decision-making. All this raised dissatisfaction with the rest of the country, in particular with central government policy, and an "us versus them" juxtaposition emerged. In contrast, Bulgaria, which up until the 1990s had been governed by a more closed and suppressive regime, suddenly opened up ideologically, politically and economically. There was consensus in the 1990s and 2000s in Bulgaria regarding the establishment of an open

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[32] In more recent historical developments, the communist regimes in both Croatia and Bulgaria were successful in reducing conflict on the territory of Istria and Pirin Macedonia through forceful reallocations and economic development, and for that reason, regional identities in both regions did not take a political form during the communist period.

[33] Ashbrook, John. "The Politicization of Identity in a European Borderland: Istria, Croatia, and Authenticity, 1990–2003." *Nationalities Papers*, 2011, 39 (6), pp. 871-897.

economy and the integration of the country in the international community.[34] In the autumn of 2006, right before Bulgarian accession to the European Union, support for membership was overwhelming – 85%, with only 4% opposing it.[35] Croatian support for both EU and NATO membership was continuously among the lowest in member states. Support for the EU was typically slightly above 50%, and on the referendum which took place in January, 2012, prior to the country's accession to the EU, only 66.27% of the 43.51%[36] who voted supported membership, which meant that 71% of the voters either did not vote or rejected membership.

If an acute "us versus them" division catalyses regionalist aspirations, the question is raised of what features define regional collective identities, in particular their inclusivity and exclusivity. There are two main approached applied to the study of origin in general, and the different layers of collective identities, in particular. The first portrays collective identity as based on "common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions." Identity is seen as at least partially fluid, with individuals being able to adopt a different collective identity by accepting its essential features. The second approach views collective identities as a function of "common descent" where people are related through birth/blood.[37] Change is impossible as collective identities are pre-defined and out of their individual members' control. In the case of Istria and Pirin Macedonia, because of their past transformations and fluidity, both regional identities are better explained by theories emphasizing the socializing effect of communities rather than their historical origins. In comparative terms, the Istrian identity appears to be more inclusive and more tightly connected to territory than the Pirin Macedonian one. Firstly, in Pirin Macedonia, the Muslim population, although sharing common linguistic and cultural features with the rest of the population, and although in certain cases identifying with the same myths, events and historical figures, is somewhat excluded from being Macedonian since that identity has merged with the identity of the Bulgarian majority and thus with Orthodoxy. Secondly, because Macedonism in Bulgaria was strongest in the first half of the 20th century, the population which resided

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[34] In that period Bulgaria had one of the highest ratings of support for both the European Union and NATO from both organizations' member and candidate states.

[35] Standard Eurobarometer: Eurobarometer 66: Public Opinion in the European Union, autumn 2006, "National Report Bulgaria: Executive Summary." Sofia: European Commission's Delegation in Bulgaria, p. 2.

[36] "Complete Official Voting Results: State Referendum on Accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union." Zagreb: State Election Committee, 27 January, 2012, available online at http://www.izbori.hr/izbori/dip_ws.nsf/0/285B8CAADE86805FC12579920040C324/$file/Sluzbeni_potpuni_rezultati_glasovanja_referendum.pdf.

[37] Smith, Anthony D. National Identity. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991, p. 11

in Pirin Macedonia then is perceived until nowadays as autochthone, even though many were refugees from Aegean and Vardar Madeconia, and many were later relocated to other parts of Bulgaria. Thirdly, because of the cultural standardization which took place in Bulgaria during the communist period, the regional differences in customs and language (dialects) were significantly reduced. Newcomers in the region do not feel the need to accept the regional identity because the latter is expressed in linguistic and cultural specificities the practicing of which is not necessary for their success. In Istria, although all three of the above-made observations also hold ground, the politicization of the regional identity has turned it to a larger extent into a way of life, characterized by tolerance, practicality and economic well-being, characteristics easily adopted and accepted by newcomers, many of whom have decided to move to Istria exactly because of those regional features. In other words, the regional identity with its inclusivity and its positive impact on the regional economy, serves on the one hand, as a selection mechanism for newcomers to the region, and on the other hand, as a prerequisite for their successful integration. Such (informal) policy could have ironically, in the long term, a reversed effect on the region's population increasing its homogeneity and leading to more exclusivist approach to newcomers who do not share the characteristics and values of the promoted regional identity. In short, the current regional identity in Istria is not rooted in history, symbols or traditions, although such obviously exist, but in a form of life-philosophy which distinguishes it from the rest of Croatia. This is explaining why the number of those who give predominance to their regional identity in Istria is higher than those who give predominance to it in Pirin Macedonia despite the fact that most of the population in both regions is member of the national majority, and not of minority groups.[38] In Istria, the Croatian majority chooses more willingly to turn itself into a minority by claiming difference from the rest of the population based not on national criteria but on cultural traits. The adopted regional identity thus runs parallel to the national one, while in Pirin Macedonia, it is vested in it.

Those observations can be explained by field research by Petya Kabakchieva which indicates that the devaluation of the image of the home country can be a major reason for

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[38] Both in Pirin Macedonia and in Istria, the majority of the regional population identifies itself as Bulgarian and Croatian respectively (88.6% in Pirin Macedonia declare a Bulgarian identity[38] and 68.33% in Istria declare a Croatian one[38]). 12.11% of the population in Istria declares a regional identity as a primary one.

emigration.[39] The move away from one's birth place is not justified by economic or security rational but by an unwillingness to associate with a devalued entity. Emigration is perceived as a move to a higher status regardless of the fact that most people Kabakchieva interviewed worked jobs under their education and qualifications.[40] To quote her, "the movement towards the (perceived)[41] Center is part of the status itself. Spatial mobility becomes part of the vertical mobility, especially when social hierarchies have been dislodged."[42] Such rationale for migration can be applied to the subnational level as well, and it can explain migration both away and towards a region. For example, since the 1970s and 1980s, because of the relatively good economic situation in Istria County, and its positive public image built around tourism (in order to attract higher tourist flows) and politics (IDS' agenda and its leaders' rhetoric), it has become relatively prestigious to be Istrian. This has in return strengthened regional identification[43] and has led to the easier assimilation of migrants. According to Emil Jurcan, integration has been limited, though, because of the perceived higher status of Istrian autochthonous populations as opposed to newcomers, and has been often conditional on one's economic status.[44] In other words, there is a price tag attached to becoming Istrian, which is not only financial (the ability to purchase property and land), but also cultural (acceptance and promotion of the regional lifestyle). The situation in Pirin Macedonia is both identical and different. The region's economic prosperity makes it attractive for migration and boosts its public image. Nevertheless, since the Pirin Macedonian regional identity is tightly vested in the Bulgarian nationality (Pirin Macedonians are frequently depicted as the purest and truest Bulgarians), the devaluation of the national image has by association led to the devaluation of the regional one.

Similar processes could be observed in the past in both Pirin Macedonia and Istria. The conflict between autochthonous populations and newcomers was frequently dominant in those border regions, which were regularly depleted population-wise by wars and epidemics. There were plenty of examples of people who chose the identity of the predominant (and thus more attractive) nation in the state in which they found

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[39] Kabakchieva's research is focused on Bulgaria as a whole, but its conclusions can be also applied to the study of internal migration.

[40] Kabakchieva, p. 13.

[41] author's insertion

[42] *ibid*

[43] Regional identification is perceived as more prestigious than national one.

[44] Author's interview with Emil Jurcan, Istrian civil society activist and member of Praksa, an engineering cooperative for design, urbanism and architecture based in Istria, carried out online on 22 May, 2015.

themselves, or changed their nationality in order to be able to climb up the social hierarchy or gain an economic benefit. Sometimes such fluidity was voluntary; sometimes it was assisted, even violent. Since neighbouring cultures shared similar cultural traits, change of identities was, however, in many aspects easy, natural. Frequent change and insecurity made stable identities and roles senseless. The ability to switch from one type of institutional/political culture to another, from one identity to another – in other words, to be both adaptable and resilient - was what was appreciated in those regions. Kabakchieva's conclusion that border inhabitants are so flexible that the only centre that could hold them is they themselves, the reinvention of their "real" autonomous self, holds ground in both Pirin Macedonia and Istria.[45] Such an approach to regional identity is not necessarily in contrast to theories emphasizing the importance of political leaders in the formation of collective identities. It explains the relative ease with which populations accept such "new" identities. If the "self" is the focus of one's identity, then self-interest justifies the fluidity of personal and collective identities, and explains the different concepts of regional identity adopted by Pirin Macedonians and Istrians. In the 1990s, Istrians saw an opportunity to recover the economic well-being of the county by distancing themselves from the dominating on national level identity and rhetoric. For the purpose, and since opportunities for development were associated with their wealthy western neighbours, they adopted regional identity features (tolerance, multi-culturalism, multi-ethnicity) in opposition to the nationalism of the rest of Croatia. In contrast, Pirin Macedonia's relative prosperity was tied to its integration in the Bulgarian administrative structures since the 1960s and the subduing of its aspirations for increased political autonomy on regional level, so it adopted regional identity features which identified Macedonians as "pure" Bulgarians, more so than the rest of the country's population. Their reaction to the diminishing of the status of being Bulgarian in the 1990s was one of hardening of the national identification rather than the adoption of a new identity. That process has been additionally facilitated by the perceived lower image of neighbouring countries (FYROM, and lately, Greece) and the alternative identities associated with them.

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[45] Kabakchieva, p. 24

2. Pirin Macedonia

The Pirin Macedonian identity is difficult to describe categorically because of the region's troubled history of being under the control of different empires and nations,[46] and because of its association with Aegean Macedonia in Greece and Vardar Macedonia in FYROM. That means that it was subjected to numerous subjective and objective interpretations and political agendas, and that the local population was frequently and violently pressured to identify in a specific way. However, it was precisely those diverse political interests and voices which provided the parameters of the regional identity as fluid, multicultural and resilient. Despite the diversity of most Bulgarian regions, Pirin Macedonia stands out today as the one with the most vibrant and expressed cultural specificity (expressed in unique dialect, customs and folklore), which has survived the uniformity of the communist period and the unbridled freedom of identification of the democratizing process in the last two and a half decades. The following section will provide an overview of the historical developments which have shaped the regional identity since the early 20th century, and will outline its essential characteristics. The former will be founded on historical and survey analyses, while the foundation for the latter will be detailed, semi-structured interviews with 60 Pirin Macedonians[47] who reminisce on their regional identity and on their experiences in the region since World War II. Although undoubtedly biased, the interviews provide numerous intersecting points, and are very indicative of regional culture, from the dialect(s) in which the interviewees respond to the overwhelming agreement that the articulation of the every-day regional culture was never carried out from outside or from above.

Broadly speaking, there exist nowadays at least three separate types of Macedonian identity: Macedonian political identity, Macedonian national (ethnic) identity, and Macedonian regional identity.[48] As already said, in this chapter, I will focus on the third, or the regional identity of the population in Pirin Macedonia which runs parallel to its Bulgarian nationality, and is distinguished by the cultural and linguistic specificity of the population in the region and by its territorial cohesion.

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[46] Only in the 20th century, the region was involved in the two Balkan wars and the two World Wars.
[47] The interviews were carried out by a team of researchers from Sofia University, led by Mihail Gruev.
[48] Ivanov, Mihail. "On the Macedonian Authenticity." *New Balkans Politics*, 2003 (6), available online at www.newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/On%20the%20Macedonian%20Authenticity#.VTpCkvmUeBl

2.1. The Ottoman period

The following section would trace the origins of Macedonian supranationalism to the Ottoman Empire. Without providing much historical detail or elaborating on the political organization of the Empire, it will describe the specific features of the historical and political environment in the late 19th-early 20th centuries which influenced the emergence of the Macedonian identity with all its current variations.

The identity of the population living on the territory of the region of Macedonia (including the Pirin, Aegean and Vardar regions) at the end of the 19th century, and in general during the time the region had been part of the Ottoman Empire, is often depicted as ambiguous and fluid, i.e. lacking a defined ethnicity and attached to the local territory. Unifying and respectively dividing factors, apart from territory, were social status, Orthodoxy (modes of self-identification were shaped by neighbouring churches, the Constantinople Patriarchate rivalling with the Bulgarian Exarchate), school affiliation, and control by armed bands (the largest groups being Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek).[49] "Ethnic" categories were blurred, or represented just a function of social or professional status: the "Greeks" and "Jews" being the urban people who were typically in trade, the "Bulgarians" or "Slavs" were peasants living from agriculture, the "Vlachs" were shepherds, and the middle and higher-class "Turks" were mostly in army and administrative work. Higher ranks were strictly preserved for Muslims who occupied most administrative positions, starting from regional authorities (*pashas*) and military personnel, and ending with postmen and customs officials.[50] The changing of religious affiliation was allowed and frequent. It implied a change in social classification, and not so much a passing from one ethnic group to another.[51] The conversion from one religious affiliation to another was mostly dictated by general living conditions, in particular opportunities to enjoy certain privileges, economic pressure, or fears of becoming a victim of terror. Examples of massive church-affiliation changes within the Macedonian population were especially registered during critical historic periods: for example, during the Greek–Ottoman War in 1897, or after the Ilinden Uprising in 1903,

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[49] Danforth, Loring. *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 59 / Brailsford, Henry Noel. *Macedonia; Its Races and Their Future.* London: Methuen & Co., 1906, Bulgarian edition: Sofia: Bulgaria-Macedonia Institute, 2013.
[50] Danforth, p. 49; Brailsford, p. 97
[51] Pandevska, Maria (2012), p. 759.

when entire villages transferred from one church jurisdiction to another to ensure survival and escape terror.[52]

According to Tchavdar Marinov, analyses explaining the exceptionality and variety of contemporary Macedonian identities by the lack of fixed national identification of the Macedonian population in the Ottoman period have two shortcomings. Firstly, national identities up until the 19th century were not fixed or universal anywhere in Europe or in the Ottoman Empire. As Marinov puts it, the concept is overloaded with "the essentialism of the 'genuine national identity' as well as with a certain balkanist vision which deems that 'Balkan nationalism' is a priori belated, 'artificial'". [53] The Macedonian peasants' lack of concern for any national commitment was widespread in other parts of Europe, and in particular, could be ascribed to the population in Istria as well. In terms of diversity, the region was not that different from other regions in East and Southeast Europe, like the Banat and Vojvodina, Transylvania, Dobroudja, and again Istria. Secondly, Marinov claims that the population in Macedonia was not necessarily a-national but more supra-national, with the supposed "a-nationality" of Macedonian Slavs being primarily used as an argument to present them as victims of their neighbours' nationalism. [54] This observation about the supra-nationalism of the population fits well with the classifying of the population in the Ottoman Empire according to religious affiliation, and the five centuries of cohabitation and migration had certainly led to the blurring of identity traits. It also explains better the fluidity of identification of the local population. It was not unusual for both individuals and whole Christian villages in Macedonia to switch between diverse - national allegiances, in particular in the late 19th–early 20th century, as a result of a clash between several nationalisms (Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian) or the growing influence of nationally-funded churches or schools.[55]

The politicization of Macedonian supra-nationalism can be traced precisely to this period, when Macedonian revolutionaries developed an ideology intended to bring together – under the common denominator of "Macedonian people" – members of different ethnic, confessional and national groups.[56] The formulation of such an ideology or political identity was typical for the Ottoman Empire at the time, but also for liberation movements, and

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[52] Pandevska, Maria (2012), p. 760.
[53] Marinov, Tchavdar. "We, the Macedonian - The Paths of Macedonian Supra-Nationalism (1878-1912)." CAS Sofia Working Paper Series, issue 3, 2011, pp. 1-29, at p. 6.
[54] Marinov, pp. 4-5.
[55] Marinov, p. 6
[56] Marinov, p. 7

was influenced by the promotion of "Ottomanism" and Ottomanist rhetoric as state policy in the Empire, which targeted the unification of all its subjects through the spread of a common Ottoman identity regardless of "religion or sect (nation)".[57] Similarly, the Bulgarian liberation revolutionary Vassil Levski wrote about "brotherhood with everybody" regardless of "faith and nationality,"[58] and Macedonian autonomists talked about "the appeal for brotherly cohabitation of different 'peoples' and 'faiths' for the sake of the common 'prosperity' and 'progress'".[59] The Ottomanist discourse's "regardless of religion and sect" is very similar to VMORO's[60] statute's mention of "regardless of sex, religion, nationality and conviction".[61]

Rather than seeing it as an internal reflection of broader historical processes, Brailsford describes the supra- nationalism of the population of the Macedonian region as the outcome of a deliberate Ottoman policy. In the beginning of the 20th century, no single administrative county existed which comprised all lands known as Macedonia. Those lands were split between three Ottoman vilayets, which did not correspond to any natural divisions – be they national or geographic. Brailsford saw such a division as a reflection of the principle *Divide et Impera,* where the demographic predominance of the Bulgarians in all three vilayets was counterweighted by the inclusion of other major national groups, Serbs and Albanians in the northeast, Greeks in the Vilayet of Salonica, and Greeks and Albanians in the Vilayet of Monastir.[62] The result was that no nationality gained advantage and no province had expressed national character. This policy placed the foundations of the ensued Balkan wars, and continues to pose identity problems until present times.[63] Furthermore, economic and security rationale frequently motivated personal identification, with people changing identities according to the policy *de jeur*. Different nationalities were played against each other, with for example, Bulgarians acquiring the right to create new eparchies after Greek declaration of war on Turkey in 1897, and vice versa, Serbs, Vlachs and Greeks obtaining official support during the Bulgarian uprising in 1903.[64]

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[57] Vezenkov, Aleksander. "Reconciliation of the Spirit and Fusion of the Interests: 'Ottomanism' as an Identity Politics." CAS Sofia Working Paper Series, 2011 (3), pp. 1-28.
[58] Levski, Vassil. Letter to Ljuben Karavelov of July 25, 1872 as cited in Vezenkov, p. 25.
[59] Marinov, p. 22
[60] Internal Macedono-Adrianopolitan Revolutionary Organization (VMORO), the predecessor of VMRO.
[61] Marinov, p. 22
[62] *ibid*, p. 30
[63] *ibid*
[64] *ibid*

Ironically, Ottoman policies turned out to be of benefit to the rising neighbouring nationalist movements. Since the 19th century, a priest or a teacher from Sofia or Belgrade could influence a village to such an extent as to change its dialect and identity over one generation.[65] It was not unusual for "Greek" fathers to raise "Greek", "Serbian", "Bulgarian" or "Romanian" children.[66] The opportunity to acquire better education was a strong motivator, and more often than not influenced one's identity, with families enrolling their children in local schools without concern for their nationality. In such a way, siblings could be enrolled in different schools, and thus acquire different identities through the acquisition of different languages and national self-consciousness. Brailsford concludes that any Slavic group which also belonged to the Orthodox religion could at that period win over the entire Macedonia if it had sufficient tact and funding.[67] The history, ethnology and comparative philology could be interpreted to back the claims of any involved party.

As already mentioned in the beginning of this section, the identity of the population in other parts of the Ottoman Empire was equally unstable. According to Dessislava Lilova, starting in the late 18th century and concluding with their liberation from Ottoman rule (1878), Bulgarians developed a collective territorial identity which resisted notions of "pure race" and "pure territory"; the presence of other ethnic groups was recognized as an acceptable condition of territorial belonging.[68] Lilova emphasizes that such a perception of collective identity was not triggered by an "inborn tolerance", but rather the legacy of the life of several generations of Bulgarians in a homeland of alternative names. The specificities of the Bulgarian system of mass education, in particular the lack of bureaucratic supervision either by the church or by the state and the diversity of educational models,[69] also led to the fluidity of personal and collective identities. [70]

At the end of the 19th century, the region of Macedonia represented in itself a microcosm of the Ottoman Empire. It was not a single cohesive administrative or political unit, and the composition of its population reflected all the characteristics and shortcomings of 5-

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[65] Brailsford, p. 115.

[66] *ibid*

[67] *ibid*, p. 116

[68] Lilova, Dessislava. "The Balkans as Homeland? Versions of the Territorial Identify of Bulgarians Under Ottoman Rule." Sofia: CAS Sofia Working Paper Series, 2007 (1), pp. 1-17, available online at www.ceeol.com.

[69] People employed in this system studied at lyceums and universities in different foreign countries and introduced elements from the respective country's educational standards in Bulgarian schools. None of the foreign countries controlled the transfer of textbooks and programs; it was rather a matter of personal choice by the returnee teachers.

[70] Lilova (2007)

century long traditions of mingling and mobility between different ethnic and religious groups. The emergence of young nation states subjected Macedonia, which remained part of the Ottoman Empire, to different internal and external influences and aspirations. As a result, its population, which had not traditionally thought of itself in rigid ethnic terms, was additionally "confused" and its supra-nationalism strengthened, with ethnic and religious affiliations remaining fluid and hybrid, in particular in times of increased uncertainty.

2.2. The interwar period (1918-1939)

The foundations of the various contemporary Macedonian identities can be traced to the interwar period, during which the region was again split into smaller parts, each acquiring a distinct yet related identity. Macedonia had been shaped as a single cohesive region only 40 years earlier, with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, and although it had begun to acquire a mental construction as an inseparable whole,[71] the process had never been completed. That made the population highly susceptible to neighbouring nationalist movements, in particular since the first half of the 20th century was characterized by continuous warfare and instability.

According to Gruev, in order to understand the essence and the diversity of the identities existent in Macedonia, one needs to understand what is meant by *Macedonism*. The term has numerous meanings, and is used by different actors to signal something entirely different.[72] Firstly, the term can be used as a synonym of Macedonian nationalism as used to demonstrate the difference of the Orthodox, Slav-speaking population of Macedonia from the Bulgarian ethnos. More broadly, such a meaning implies sensitivity for the specificity of the regional language and culture, as opposed to the official Bulgarian linguistic and cultural norm.[73] Secondly, Macedonism can be used to emphasize the predominantly Bulgarian ethnic character of the region's population, although the cultural specificity of the region is not denied. Such an understanding of Macedonian identity portrays it as vested in and complementary to the Bulgarian one. That second form of Macedonism, according to Gruev , can have a *latent version* in that it can switch from "Bulgarian nationalism" to conscious feeling of difference from the mother ethnos.[74]

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[71] Gruev, p. 46.
[72] Gruev, p. 46.
[73] Gruev, p. 45.
[74] Gruev, p. 47.

Thirdly, the Bulgarian left formulated in the 1920s another form of Macedonism, termed by Gruev *Comintern Macedonism,* propagating the creation of "a free and independent Macedonia…, and its shaping as an independent political unit, joining as an equal member the future Balkan federation".[75]

In the interwar period, Pirin Macedonia received a significant inflow of refugees from neighbouring countries, which exceeded the count of the local Orthodox population. A massive expulsion of the Muslim population residing in valley villages in the region also took place, and the empty villages were repopulated by refugees and local residents descending from mountain villages with less fertile land. This massive population movement was paralleled by a delayed collapse of the traditional culture and a slower adoption of modernity. Being "Macedonian" became the common characteristic of the two groups – the refugees and the locals, and eliminated the negative attitude towards the newcomers. [76] This led to a surge in the creation of a number of regional civil institutions, and strengthened significantly the regional identity in Pirin Macedonia. Nevertheless, the existence of an abundance of activist organizations, civil and political, led to further confusion, even among the regional population, as to what "Macedonism" really meant. Because of the low level of education of the local population, personal hostilities and conflicts frequently took political expression, and the region became the scene of the violent conflict between latent Macedonism, i.e. a form of expression of Bulgarian patriotism, and Comintern Macedonism, i.e. a concept rising above ethnicity for the achievement of higher values.[77] To make things even more confusing, in the years before World War II, a new form of Macedonism appeared, Yugomacedonism, which separated completely the Macedonian ethnicity from the Bulgarian (and Serbian) one. [78]This type of Macedonism is the one most widely spread nowadays in Vardar Macedonia (FYROM).

Apart from the internal conflict between the opposing visions of Macedonism, the region was also ironically in a conflict with the central Bulgarian government. In the interwar period, Pirin Macedonia was ruled by a regionalist party, VMRO, which sought to fully

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[75] Todorovski, Z. "The Idea of Balkan Federation in the Political Programs, Memorandums and Declarations of the Macedonian Emigrant and Revolutionary Organizations after World War I" in Grebenarov, A., Milachkov V. & V. Debochichki (eds.). *Congress and Programme Documents after 1878 on the History and Culture of Bulgarian Lands under Foreign Rule*. Sofia, 2008, p. 169 as quoted in Gruev, p.49.
[76] Gruev, p. 50.
[77] Gruev, p. 50.
[78] Gruev, p. 51.

control political and economic power on regional level.[79] To quote one of Gruev's interviewees from the region, "There, no one had the right to interfere with the Macedonian organization. It was local governance; they were given the right to command.[80]" VMRO's leaders, who were simultaneously Bulgarian nationalists and Macedonian regionalists, frequently accused the central Bulgarian government of not being resolute enough in protecting the Bulgarian nation, and in particular the country's interests in the parts of Macedonia which remained outside of its territory. On national level, the entire region of Pirin Macedonia acquired a negative connotation due to a number of criminal and blackmail affairs and public assassinations.[81] The central government had acquiesced to provide VMRO with a free hand to govern Pirin Macedonia because of the party's control of the refugees and because of the support it received from high-ranking Macedonian officials in Sofia. Nevertheless, this submission of power was more often than not an act of necessity, or even of prioritization, rather than an agreement with VMRO's policies and its (violent) mode of governing.

VMRO leaders were mostly uneducated and very traditional. The party was well-structured and relatively disciplined, but its functionaries were described as "professional revolutionaries" who were financed by the local population through imposed by VMRO taxes. As a result, the established regional form of governance was less progressive than the national one – sentences, passed and carried out by VMRO, frequently involved physical punishment or even death,[82] and social hierarchies based on kindred and personal relationships transformed into political ones. VMRO sought to have full control of both the public and private lives of the regional population. While the rest of the country was modernizing, the region remained lagging behind politically and economically. This mixture of social traditionalism and political militarism, rather than the specific cultural traits of the local population, were the discerning characteristics of the regional identity in the interwar period. Since they were associated with the mode of governance rather than with the local culture, they were easily manipulated by political regimes.

VMRO's tight control of all spheres of life in the region and its easy use of violence imposed a mixture of respect and fear in the ordinary person, but with time, also led to a loss of

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[79] Gruev, p. 59
[80] Interview with Kiril Kostadinov as quoted in Gruev, p. 63, author's translation from Bulgarian.
[81] Gruev, p. 59
[82] An example of the traditional approach adopted by VMRO was that the organization had a model of moral behaviour, and punished people who deviated from it. According to the stories recorded by the Sofia University team, adultery was punished by beatings, even death.

public support. Thus, although VMRO was responsible for the politicization of the Macedonian regional identity in Bulgaria in the period until World War II, and established a form of self-rule non-existent in other parts of the country, it did not modernize together with its electorate and alienated the local population, which gave up its newly-acquired political identity for the safety of the national one. When the central government dismantled VMRO in 1934, the organization was left without major local support, and gave up control over the region almost without resistance. VMRO's quick demise was indicative of how the populations in regions with strong collective identity might choose to forego self-governance if the latter reduces their immediate utility (be it economic – higher taxes, or political – stricter laws), and if the source of immediate local authority is eliminated[83].

2.3. The communist period

The communist regime relied on planning and control of all spheres of life, including of processes related to regional development and cultural standardization. The following section will elaborate on both the form of Macedonism adopted by the Communist Party, and on the methods used to spread that form in Pirin Macedonia.

Despite the Bulgarian Communist Party's later obsession with planning and control, its coming into power in 1944 enabled its members and leaders, many of whom had been persecuted by VMRO in the inter-war period and during World War II, to seek personal revenge in a rather discriminatory and even impulsive manner. One round of violence was replaced by another, and personal attitudes based on past experiences were what defined individuals' attitudes towards Macedonianism, and also towards their own identity. Gradually, however, the central state took full control over the formation and implementation of cultural, political and economic policy in Pirin Macedonia. The official party stances differed throughout the years, but every decision of the communist leadership was rigorously applied in the region, and any opposition was curbed through peer pressure, fear and violence.

In the years after World War II, Stalin, Tito and the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Georgi Dimitrov, were working on a plan for the merging of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria into a federation, within which Vardar and Pirin Macedonia would appear as a single

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[83] VMRO's leaders were arrested and its local structures were disabled, so the source of immediate threat for retribution, should the local population choose to support the actions of the central state, was eliminated.

entity.[84] As a first step towards the unification of the region, Stalin called for Sofia to provide "Pirin Macedonia with cultural-national autonomy".[85] The Bulgarian Communist Party's response was to design and implement a policy for the provision of Pirin Macedonia with cultural autonomy, which meant that a number of civil and public institutions were founded with the objective to promote the uniqueness of the Macedonian nation in the region, an array of supporting publications were prepared and printed, and even teachers were brought in from Vardar Macedonia to teach the Pirin Macedonian population the official language created in Skopje. This was done under the complete control of the Communist Party and state; any remaining members of the old elites were subdued, and administrative staff completely replaced with people loyal to the regime. The official policy was to instil in the local population a newly-constructed ethnic identity which it did not always share.[86] The new identity incorporated such tenets of the communist ideology as working class unity, solidarity and internationalism. The objective was, ironically, not to give up control over the population of Pirin Macedonia, but to gain full control in order to steer the region's future according to the Comintern's designs.[87] In order to reconfirm its policy, the Communist Party sent instructions[88] to all its functionaries in the region that in the first post-war census carried out in 1946, 2/3 of the population needs to declare itself "Macedonian".[89] In the words of the Party Secretary in Petrich, taken from a speech delivered at a special session of the Central Committee taking place on April 21st, 1948, "After the 10th Plenum Declaration, I and the rest of the comrades we all became Macedonians... During the census we implied pressure (*natisk*). The Regional Committee required that we register 60-70% of the population as Macedonians. We intensified our

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[84] Gruev, p. 71

[85] Biljarski, Ts. and I. Burilkova (eds.). *Bulgarian Communist Party, The Comintern and the Macedonian Question* (1919-1946). Sofia, 1999 as quoted in Gruev, p. 71.

[86] Goldhagen, Erich (ed.). *Ethnic Minorities in the Soviet Union*. New York: Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1968, pp. 67-68 as cited in Gruev, p. 73.

[87] Gruev, p. 73

[88] Population censuses in the communist period (and in general any statistics, elections and data), if at all taking place, were staged and orchestrated by the Communist Party, which, in the event there existed official party policy on the matter, planned in advance what the outcome of the census should be, and forwarded instructions to its local party apparatchiks to work for its achievement whether through fabricating of the results or through the application of violence and pressure on the population. To quote an interview with one of the residents of Pirin Macedonia who participated in this first post-war census, "They did not ask us for anything…they tell you 'You are Macedonian'…Later, they put you down as a Bulgarian, and we obey, what else are we to do. In the passport, they put me down as a 'Macedonian' … Now we are all 'Bulgarian' in the passport." – Interview with Todor Todorov, quoted in Gruev, p. 76, author's translation from Bulgarian.

[89] Gruev, p. 75, Marinov, p. 237.

work (*pozasilihme rabotata*) and got 90% Macedonians."[90] The instructions sent to the mayors of five municipalities were that all of the population should be registered as "Macedonian apart from the Jews, the Gypsies, the Turks and the Bulgarians coming from (the interior of) Bulgaria. Bulgarian Muslims had to be also registered as Macedonian."[91] Correspondingly, for the first time in Bulgaria, a Macedonian ethnic group was included in the census options,[92] and 160 641 "Macedonians" were counted in Pirin Macedonia in the 1946 census, or 63.6% of the population.[93] Indicative of the haste with which the census was organized and manipulated was the fact that the majority (more than 82%) of the same people who declared Macedonian nationality also declared Bulgarian as their mother tongue.[94] No instructions regarding the filling of this question were sent from the Central Committee of the Communist Party.[95] The next census, taking place in 1956, indicated an increase in the absolute number of Macedonians in the Pirin region to 178 862 people, however, because of the rise of the regional population in the after-war period, the overall percentage of Macedonians went down.[96] Nevertheless, a majority of the population declared a Macedonian identity in a census which was as free as it could possibly be in the communist period. No pressure was applied on the population to declare a certain identity, and the instructions from the Central Committee were to allow the population to declare itself "as it feels".[97] Whether the Macedonian identity declared by the majority of the population was regional or ethnic in essence is impossible to say, however, this period of free expression lasted relatively briefly. With the deterioration of the relations of Stalin and Tito, the Comintern Macedonism described in the previous section took precedence and provided the leading interpretation of regional identity from around 1948 until the 1960s. The Interpretation was that there was indeed a Macedonian nation, and that it

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[90] Central Party Archive (*Centralen partien arhiv*), F. 1, OP. 5, A.E. 21, L. 1 as quoted in Marinov, Tchavdar (2004), p. 237 and Nikolov, Stephan. "The Bulgarian Obsession: Macedonia in the 20th Century." *New Balkan Politics*, 1, 2001/2002, author's translation from Bulgarian and French.
[91] Angelov, Vesselin. *Chronicles of a National Betrayal*. Blagoevgrad: University Press, 1999, p. 134 as cited in Marinov, p. 237, author's translation from French.
[92] According to Tchavdar Marinov (2004, p. 237), a review of the Central State Archive indicates that in the original census forms, the option "Macedonian" did not exist but was added manually. Most 1946 census documents did not make a distinction between the categories "Bulgarians" and "Macedonians". This is indicative of a change in official policy, which took place relatively suddenly and recently, and required quick and manual adjustment of census documents.
[93] Marinov, Tchavdar. "La Macedoine du Pirin en Bulgarie Communiste: Politiques d'Etat et Ethnicite." *Balkanologie*, June 2004, VIII (1), p. 236, available online at balkanologie.revues.org/530?file=1; the same numbers are also cited in Gruev, p. 76.
[94] Marinov (2004), p. 237.
[95] Gruev, p. 75, Marinov, p. 238.
[96] "Population Census, 1 December, 1956: General Results*,"* Vol. II. Sofia: CSU, 1960, p. 106, p. 110, pp. 214-230 as cited in Marinov, pp. 238-239.
[97] Central Party Archives, F. 1, OP. 6, A.E. 3023, L. 53-54, 57-59 as quoted in Marinov, p. 240.

comprised only those who wanted to belong to it.[98] By the time the third census took place in 1965, the official position was reversed for a third time, and maintained that neither the Communist party nor the Bulgarian state recognized the existence of a Macedonian language or nationality.[99] Consequently, the number of Macedonians in Pirin Macedonia fell down brusquely to 1 437 persons, or less than 0.5% of the region's population.[100] This policy change reflected the coming into power of a new Communist Party leadership led by Todor Zhivkov. It began to neglect the old internationalism and to adopt Bulgarian ethnonationalism, or the application of national discourse dressed in Marxist-Leninist jargon, propagating a strong policy of assimilation vis-à-vis national minorities. A broad process of nation-building was initiated which relied on the fostering of a common national identity with all available means – state money, civil and military service, the development of culture, the press, and educational systems. [101] Those who disagreed with the official state policy, or voiced an opinion against it, were relocated to other parts of the country in order to minimize their influence and to ensure the conformity of the majority of the population.

Overall, the communist period was characterized by a high level of conformism and inertia[102] among the population of Pirin Macedonia, which was exhausted by the incessant rounds of violence and migration. The region had experienced relentless struggles and bloodshed in the 20th century which had impacted thousands of innocent victims – first, from the Ottomans, who held these lands until 1912, then, from the beginning of the 20th century until the mid-1930s, from the cruel rivalries of VMRO (under the dictum "God forgives, VMRO – not"), and lastly, during World War II, from the anti-communist gendarmerie.[103] Multiple generations in the border areas had learned to develop and cultivate double and even triple loyalties as a result of frequently moving state borders and governing ideologies and regimes.[104] Faced with the prospect of another round of violence,

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[98] Gruev, p. 52
[99] Marinov, p. 241.
[100] *Population Census Results from 1 December, 1965. Blagoevgrad County*, Vol. I, 1, Sofia: CSU, 1967,
pp. 11-12, p. 118, p. 125 as cited in Marinov, p. 241
[101] As an indication that peer and societal pressure existed during censuses in Pirin Macedonia, Marinov cites the fact that in the rest of the country, during all three population censuses, the number of those declaring Macedonian identity was approximately the same (between 8 and 9 thousand people), see Marinov, p. 243.
[102] Gruev, p. 75, Marinov, p. 238.
[103] Nikolov. "The Bulgarian Obsession: Macedonia in the 20th Century." *New Balkan Politics*, 1, 2001/2002.
[104] To identify the extent of ambiguity of personal identities, Nikolov quotes French journalist and writer Albert Londres (*Comitajies*. *The Terrorism on the Balkans.* Skopje: *Kultura*, 1996, p. 43) who

this time by the highly sophisticated and effective communist secret service, many chose to adapt and do as told, especially on matters they found of marginal importance. The large majority of the population in the post-World War II period and since then did not see any difference between the categories "Macedonian" and "Bulgarian"[105]. Additionally, most refugees from neighbouring areas were chased from their homes precisely because of their Bulgarian identity, so their Macedonian regional identification coincided with their Bulgarian national one. To quote a person from the region:

> *"They said that my grandfather was Macedonian, and that was that…And we are indeed Macedonian…But there was no problem because we are Bulgarians – the same people."*[106]

The process of cultural and ethnic homogenization which took place in Bulgaria (and Yugoslavia) during the communist regime increased the overlap between the Bulgarian and Macedonian identities in Pirin Macedonia. It was orchestrated and carried out by the state through the provision of universal free education for all citizens. Prior to the establishment of communist regimes in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, majority of the population in those countries, and in the two studied regions, was illiterate. The advent of universal education and its implementation by central bodies raised educational levels significantly, but also led to a process of cultural homogenisation on both individual and society level. It turned culture and identity into a function of the state, where they predictably transformed from a marker of difference to a marker of similarity.[107] Gellner's theory on the practicality of the acceptance of the state-sponsored high culture holds ground in Pirin Macedonia and Istria: the newly-standardized high-cultures provided people with the opportunity to participate in all spheres of life. They constituted a pre-condition of access to both employment and social inclusion, and their acceptance was seen by majority of the population as a practical and reasonable choice. [108]

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says "We knew many families, where one of the brothers did identify himself to be a Serb, another - a Bulgarian, and if there was a third one, then the third one leaned to the Greeks". Londres' portrait is not an exception. Most contemporary analysts agree on the ambivalence and fluidity of the Macedonian population's identity and loyalties; see also Brailsford, Henry N. (*1906),* and Poulton, Hugh (2000).

[105] Gruev, p. 76

[106] Interview with Georgi Ivanov, born in 1935 in Damjanitsa, Pirin Macedonia. Interview carried out by Georgi Zahariev and quoted by Gruev, p. 76, author's translation from Bulgarian.

[107] Gellner, Ernest. "Nationalism and Politics in Eastern Europe." *European Review*, October 1993, 1 (4), pp. 341-345.

[108] Gellner, Ernest. *Thought and Change*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.

That is not to say that all residents of Pirin Macedonia accepted the state-sponsored culture and reading of history imposed on them. As a matter of fact, the largest opposition to the communist regime took place exactly in Pirin Macedonia from armed anti-communist groups which opposed the Communist Party's "Macedonisation" policy in the 1940s, and which existed in Pirin Macedonia all the way until the end of the 1950s.[109] The region was particularly prone to guerrilla warfare due to the mountain relief, the proximity of the Greek border and the possibility to find safety by crossing it, and the remainders of VMRO *cetnik* traditions[110] and structures. According to a report by G. Bogdanov, inspector in the municipal State Security Service Office, the difficulties encountered by his office in fighting the *cetnik* groups were due to the fact that:

> *…Because of its past, the people from this region do not trust anyone and serve, by the force of fear, to the one who is the strongest and closest to them.[111]*

Regardless of the resilience of this opposition, it was doomed from the beginning due to the strong oppressive power the Communist Party had over the country. Those who refused to accept the political and cultural confines of the new regime were dealt with through dead sentences, imprisonment or relocation to other parts of the country. Individuals who dared to oppose the regime, or disagree politically with it, were quickly and efficiently disposed of in the above mentioned manner, and the rest of their families, supporters and the general population were left to live in fear that the same destiny awaited them. The collaboration of a lot of ordinary citizens with the Secret Service Agency created an atmosphere of insecurity and conviction that the authorities were omnipresent and knew everything about everyone. Peer pressure was also strong, so that one wrong word could throw a person in social isolation. Thus the threat of violence or of social isolation, combined with the relatively good economic situation which ensured that the basic physical needs of the population were satisfied in a region which had until then lived in dire poverty, made the system stable and difficult to change from inside. They also ensured the widespread acceptance of an identity founded on Bulgarian nationalism and Macedonian regional specificity. Because of this, the Yugomacedonism adopted across the border in Vardar Macedonia, and based on an ethnic and genealogical understanding of

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[109] Gruev, pp. 80-81.

[110] The terms *cetnik* and *cetnicestvo* do not have such a negative connotation in Bulgarian as in Serbo-Croatian. They mostly refer to armed groups which were residing in the mountains running away from the Ottoman authorities, and in this form, they have a positive image in the public, and later in Pirin Macedonia to the VMRO groups and structures which controlled the region.

[111] Angelov, Veselin (ed.). *Outstanding Bulgarian Bearing the Name Gerasim*. Documentary Collection. Sofia, 2001, pp. 85-86 as quoted in Gruev, p. 81.

identity rather than a political or territorial one, was never understood in Pirin Macedonia. Refugees arriving in Bulgaria from other parts of Macedonia had to undergo "patriotic" education which was entrusted to state institutions dealing with the national policy, like the so-called "Union of Macedonian Cultural-Educative Associations".[112] This minimized conflict between the indigenous population and newcomers, and ensured the latter's integration in social life. It also curbed the appearance of alternative interpretations of the Macedonian regional culture.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Yugomacedonism in Yugoslavia began to take the shape of a civil (non-communist) movement. In Pirin Macedonia, the movement found support mostly among groups opposing the communist regime.[113] However, because of its oppositional character, support for it remained marginal due to the dangers it entailed, and consequently, to the fact that it attracted a number of anarchists and outright eccentrics.[114] Nowadays, according to Gruev, the notion of a separate Macedonian nation is even more "distanced from the routine of everyday living"[115] in Pirin Macedonia, and therefore, insignificant politically or culturally. The same Yugomacedonism elements which distinguished the Macedonian from the Bulgarian cultural identity (language, traditions and history), in Pirin Macedonia strengthened the population's regional identity, but within the framework of the Bulgarian nation. So, the features which are nowadays interpreted in FYROM as a proof of the uniqueness of a nation, in Pirin Macedonia are viewed as the milestones of the regional culture. In both Pirin and Vardar Macedonia, those milestones have been presented as historical or traditional, i.e. inborn in the Macedonian region and people, but in reality have been ever-changing. If one is to take, for example, the regional language, in Pirin Macedonia it is considered a traditional dialect of the Bulgarian language. In reality, we are talking about more than one dialect as people in different parts of the region speak different dialects. Overall, however, those are dying out and a new more modern form of informal verbal expression is emerging, incorporating vocabulary and phonetics from neighbouring countries (Greece, FYROM, Serbia and Turkey). It is used by members of all ethnic groups residing in the region, and also serves as an element of internal cultural differentiation from the rest of the country. While newcomers from other parts of the country do not find it natural to adopt the use of traditional dialects,

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[112] Marinov, Tchavdar. "Augean Macedonians and the Bulgarian Identity Politics."
CAS Sofia Working Paper Series, 1 / 2007, pp. 1-17, p. 6.
[113] Gruev, pp. 54-55
[114] Gruev, p. 55
[115] Gruev, p. 58

identification with the Macedonian culture takes place over time. The modern alterations in the official language are also more easily accepted since they are of practical use, i.e. communication with Greeks and Vardar Macedonians visiting the region. The situation is very similar in Istria where the local population has traditions of speaking a number of different dialects, but where the mainstream linguistic marker is the incorporation of vocabulary and phonetics from Italian, and to a much lesser extent, Slovenian in casual communication. Since there is no significant immigration from Greece to Pirin Macedonia and from Italy to Istria, the contemporary cultural influence of those countries on the region is advanced through the economic sphere. In both regions, the erection of physical borders between their composite parts has led to the aggregation of different collective experiences across the border, and to the "mutation" of regional identities, so that effectively new and diverging entities have been formed. The people living in Greece, Macedonia and Bulgaria (just as those living in Italy, Slovenia and Croatia) speak different languages, have different identities, and even believe in different interpretations of the past.

The burden of the past, in particular one's subjective vision of the past featuring collective and family experiences, is carried from generation to generation in Pirin Macedonia, and is a strong collective cultural marker. Because of the frequent changing of borders in the period after the Treaty of Berlin (1878) was signed, with which the Bulgarian state was reinstated, there was hardly anyone residing in Macedonia who had not lived through a personal tragedy impacting significantly and negatively his life. In the Ottoman Empire, the Slavs were suppressed by the Muslims, then in revenge, Muslims residing in Macedonia were expelled on a number of occasions southward, and those who were left behind were pressured to accept more secularized cultural forms. The Greeks chased the Bulgarian populations from the lands under their control; the Bulgarians tried to establish control of parts of Macedonia which remained in Greece and Yugoslavia; the Serbians persecuted pro-Bulgarian Macedonians. The fascists killed left-oriented activists and partisans; then, once the communists came into power, they killed and relocated in their turn people tagged as fascists, tsarists or VMRO activists. The numerous interviews with Pirin Macedonians who have lived through the inter-war, WWII, and the communist periods, carried out by Gruev and a University of Sofia team after the fall of communism (in the period 2009-2010) indicate a general mistrust of the population towards politics, and a

tendency to put all political ideologies under a common denominator.[116] They are also revealing a strong and rational detachment from the political realm, with majority of the interviewees portraying themselves as wronged by at least one of the political regimes in power. Martyrdom, and on a smaller scale, the feeling that one is wronged by political regimes, is a strong element of Pirin Macedonian culture, and it is not only a prism for interpreting history but also a marker of the Macedonian identity. The communist regime has succeeded to incorporate that regional marker in the wider Bulgarian identity, relying on the VMRO-promoted presentation of the Macedonians as the purest and most sacrifice-ready Bulgarians. Ironically, the region's turbulent history has been used as a unifying rather than a dividing factor, which has led to a higher level of cultural homogenization among the population. The region's traditions, public holidays and folklore are full of images and stories of heroes and martyrs who fought and died for its liberation, and even the Turkish minority celebrates and identifies with many of those. In short, the communist regime successfully eliminated visions of Macedonism as anything else but a regional identity complementary to the Bulgarian one.[117] Its policies of rigid borders and tight political control made the majority of the population perceive change as impossible, and placed it in a situation in which it had to either accept the regime's version of reality, or jeopardize its future.

Although successful in strengthening Bulgarian nationalism and pushing for a civic form of statehood, the Communist Party did not propagate an active nationalist line of politics towards neighbouring states, accepting the borders of the Cold War as fixed and final. For the first time since the emergence of the Macedonian question in the 19th century, geopolitical stability was established on the Balkans. A challenge to the European territorial status could start a new world war, a risk no country was willing to take. The limited foreign policy Bulgaria was engaged in was to a large extent dictated by the Comintern and the Soviet Union, so the focus of the Bulgarian Communist Party was placed on domestic

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[116] Gruev, Michail, Tepavicharov, Vesselin, Vassileva-Grueva, Petya, Kotzeva-Popova, Violeta & Maria Kostadinova (eds.). *Violence, Politics and Memory: The Communist Regime in Pirin Macedonia – the Reflections of the Contemporary and the Researcher (Nasilie, politika i pamet: Komunisticheskiyat rezhim v Pirinska Makedoniya – refleksii na savremennika i izsledovatelya)*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2011. The collection includes 60 complete interviews with Pirin Macedonians (published in Bulgarian), and represents the basis for my analysis of the individual and collective identity of the population in Pirin Macedonia.

[117] The communist regime in Bulgaria was suppressive and violent, and a number of dissidents lost their lives literally or symbolically by being forced to move to other parts of the country living behind all their property, and sometimes even their families. This violence, however, was targeted at specific individuals, and the conformity sought and achieved by the regime also brought peace to the majority of the population.

policy, where it held strong grasp on cultural expression and organizations. Any organized opposition to the ruling party was negligible and nothing more but a scattered clandestine expression. In Pirin Macedonia, this policy led to the strengthening of the Bulgarian national consciousness of the majority of the population, founded on the incorporation of strong regional cultural elements, and to the severing of its links with Vardar and Aegean Macedonia.

2.4. Identification of the Muslim minority

A possible exception to the relative universality of the regional identification of the population in Pirin Macedonia as a cultural variation of the Bulgarian nationality is the identity of the region's Muslim population. The following section will follow the developments in this group's identification since the beginning of the 20th century, trying to establish its impact on and status in the region.

The Muslim population of Pirin Macedonia was and continues to be a significant factor in the shaping of the region's collective identity. In the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim, in particular the Turkish, population had formed the regional elite, being the only one allowed to hold high positions in the military and in the administration. Similarly, in Istria, the Italian population had formed the region's economic and political elite. The Slavs had been in both regions peasants residing primarily in villages and on farms. Thus, prior to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the (Macedonian) region's elite had been for centuries coming from the Muslim population, which had left its political, economic and cultural stamp on Macedonian identity.

The 20th century brought significant change to the Balkans, with newly-educated and emboldened national elites taking control over young nation states. That naturally left the Muslim population significantly reduced in number and with diminished status. Yet, in the interwar period, members of the Muslim population actively participated in VMRO activities or supported the organization's activists through the provision of food, shelter and information.[118] The whole Macedonian region was by that time no longer part of the Ottoman Empire, and the relations between Bulgaria and Turkey were greatly improved due to Bulgarian support for Atatürk's revolutionary Turkish Republic in 1920. This eased

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[118] Gruev, Michail. "Violence and Identity: Pirin Macedonia in Ethno-national Policy of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria" in Gruev et al., p. 30

tensions between Bulgarian Christians and Muslims as well, and in Pirin Macedonia enabled the population to unite around a common local political platform (VMRO).[119] A similar process took place in Istria in the 1970s and 1980s, when after the signing of the Treaty of Osimo in 1975, outstanding border and property issues between Italy and Yugoslavia were resolved, and the Italian and Slav populations in Yugoslav Istria intensified cooperation and conceived a collective identity combining Latin and Slav elements.

The communist regime, as already said, led to the standardization of culture and the attempted eradication of ethnic and religious diversity. The Todor Zhivkov government initiated an assimilation policy towards most minority groups, emphasizing their Bulgarianness as a civic rather than an ethnic concept. A campaign for the changing of the Muslim population's names and cultural habits left many Muslim villages in Pirin Macedonia in self-imposed isolation. Since elite positions in both the political and economic sectors were occupied by functionaries of the Communist Party, secularity and (working) class were the values defining status. Minority group members[120] were allowed to rise up the hierarchy and were not discriminated as long as they adopted the universality of the communist ideology and of the Bulgarian civic identity. The cultural contribution of the region's Muslim population in the communist period was thus limited to non-religious, non-ethnic traits. This limited diversity led to the formulation of a "standard" high Bulgarian culture which did not attempt to fully eliminate regional differences, but rather to control and "cultivate" them. On local and informal level, people preserved their customs, traditions, dialects and collective regional identities, and continued to practice them in a semi-clandestine way. Those two cultures (the standard and the spontaneous) existed parallelly, and despite periods of increased tension, the regional population in general accepted the duality of its collective identification.

Nowadays, mostly because of its concentration in villages and small towns which are territorially isolated from the main cities, the contribution of the Muslim minority to the regional identity of Pirin Macedonia is negligible. Politically, however, this minority has a strong voice in local governance through the work of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, a political party representing the interests of (mostly Muslim) ethnic minority groups. Although the Muslim population in the region is predominantly rural and

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[119] One of the myths retold by Pomaks from the region relates to Gotse Delchev, and a conversation he had with his mother who told him that her garden is beautiful precisely because of the diversity of its flowers, and that the same is valid for people – Bulgarians, Pomaks and Turks, see Gruev, p. 41
[120] With the exception of the Roma minority.

employed in the agricultural and textile sectors, opportunities to work in other EU countries and voting discipline during elections means that economically and politically it is not having lower status than the Bulgarian majority. Muslim villages, unlike Bulgarian ones, do not exhibit negative demographic trends,[121] but on the contrary are growing in size, which suggests that the Muslim community's influence over the region's culture and identity might increase in the future, under the condition that its self-imposed isolation is overcome.

In short, the communist regime tried to impose a civic Bulgarian identity on the population of Pirin Macedonia, including on the Muslim minority, and although unsuccessful, the attempt led to the population's increased secularity. It also increased people's identification with the region as the only tangible identification in times of disruption. The Muslim population in Pirin Macedonia nowadays has a strong physical connection with the land on which it resides, and that connection is the main foundation of its regional (Pirin Macedonian) identity. This is in contrast with the Bulgarian majority which identifies in cultural terms, expressed in the use of a specific language, the preservation of a historical lineage, and the following of specific customs and traditions.

2.5. Post-communism

Despite the political and demographic changes which took place in Bulgaria since the fall of communism, the regional identification of the local population in Pirin Macedonia did not undergo a dramatic transformation. It remained nested in the Bulgarian national one, with differentiation coming from such cultural markers as language, history and custom.

The fall of communism brought about regime liberalization and a rapidly growing freedom of expression which enabled a revival in the activities of Macedonian cultural associations; periodicals appeared that openly supported various versions of Macedonian identity. [122] The activities of a number of cultural organizations quickly acquired political overtones. Since its foundation in December 1990 IMRO-UMS (VMRO), a descendant in name, ideological-nationalist views, and in property of the old VMRO, has been a stable factor in

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[121] Gruev, p. 28, p. 34, p. 35, p. 40.

[122] Ilchev, Ivan. 1992. "The Macedonian Knot". *Political Research (Politicheski izsledvania)*, 1992 (2), pp. 70-81 in Bakalova, Maria. "Bulgarian Macedonian 'Nationalism' in the Post 1989 Decade." *New Balkan Politics*, 2003 (6).

Bulgarian politics.[123] Its main contribution to Pirin Macedonian regionalism has been the preservation of the developed by the communist regime version of the region's collective identity. VMRO has ensured the interpretation of Pirin Macedonian identity as a culturally specific version of Bulgarian nationality by eliminating alternative political messages and curbing other regionalist movements.

Another organization, UMO-Ilinden was established toward the end of 1989, and expressed the extreme opposite of VMRO's views on the Macedonian question. No less nationalistic, though far less influential in terms of membership and followers, it claimed to represent a Macedonian national minority in Bulgaria who spoke Macedonian language and had a distinct Macedonian culture. In its more moderate appearances, it claimed recognition and protection of minority rights; there was also an extreme separatist current calling for the liberation of Pirin Macedonia from "Bulgarian occupational armies" and its unification with Macedonia. The organization was dismantled as illegal[124], and after years-long legal struggle in Bulgarian courts and the European Court of Human Rights, the momentum was lost, and it never turned into a serious political project. Ironically, its most significant influence over Bulgarian politics was likely a temporary increase in support for VMRO, as (Bulgarian) nationalistic elements in society felt compelled to react to UMO-Ilinden leaders' rhetoric.

Neither of those two political projects has succeeded to politicize the identity of the Pirin Macedonians, and their influence on the region has only been marginal. The majority of the regional population has remained satisfied with the regional identity sculptured by the communist regime which is based on clear, inclusive and easily-identifiable characteristics: dialect, customs (cultural heritage), secularity and a specific reading of history. The new political parties have failed to provide a meaningful and appealing alternative to that identity. Focused on bickering about the interpretation of the past, they have failed to grasp the essence of the border region and to provide a uniting platform for the present. Since support for neither party has been associated with specific benefits or imposed any danger on the population, the latter has largely ignored their existence as irrelevant. This is reflective of the traditional way in which the regional population in Pirin Macedonia thinks about itself, and which is to a large extent influenced by the transfer of collective experiences/memory through the generations. In this transfer, the attitude towards the

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[123] VMRO's political agenda and participation in political life are analysed in the chapter on regional political parties.
[124] VMRO put significant effort to discredit it in the public.

(central) state and politics is one of distrust and conflict. [125] Unlike in Istria where politics is seen as a means to an end (i.e. increased autonomy), the population of Pirin Macedonia thinks of regional culture as a thing separate from politics, and maintains a deep mistrust towards politicians and political regimes. That is not to say that the regional population is apolitical. On the contrary, most people interviewed by Gruev and his team usually have strong support for a specific political party, however, that support is typically based on personal experiences rather than on political beliefs. It is justified by self-interest rather than ideology. Influences from outside and from above have tried to impose on the local population their notion of what the regional identification should be, and although successful to a certain extent, because of the historical memory of the region which evokes the failures of past political projects, the population has learned to adopt the politicization of its identity in a half-hearted manner. The regional culture is something experienced every day; it is a way of life, while its politicization has been typically carried out in periods of public hysteria. The local population has learned to accept the changes in political regimes in a rational and philosophical way, typically choosing the option which brings most benefit on personal level.

This way of thinking about one's identity is also exhibited in census results. In them a Macedonian ethnic identity is not listed as a separate category but is rather an object of self-identification (needs to be listed specifically by the surveyed person). The results from the 1992 population census, the first carried out after the fall of communism, although not officially published, were disclosed by an advisor to the Bulgarian President. In that census 10 803 people declared Macedonian identity and 3 109 declared Macedonian as their mother tongue.[126] In the next census carried out in 2001, 5 071 persons in Bulgaria declared Macedonian ethnicity, of which the majority were from Pirin Macedonia (3 117 persons).[127] The numbers were even lower in the 2011 census, with only 1 654 people declaring Macedonian identity in the entire country. [128] If one is to draw conclusions regarding the number of people with ethnic Macedonian identification residing in Bulgaria

[125] Gruev, p. 24.
[126] Ivanov, Mihail. "On the Macedonian Authenticity", *New Balkans Politics*, 2003 (6) available online at www.newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/On%20the%20Macedonian%20Authenticity#.VTpCkvm UeBI, as cited in Marinov, p. 245.
[127] 2001 Population Census of the Republic of Bulgaria, Final Results: "Population by county and ethnic group." Sofia: National Statistical Institute, 2001, available online at http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Census.htm
[128] "2011 Population Census of the Republic of Bulgaria - Main Results." Sofia: National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2011, available online at http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/Census2011final_en.pdf

based on census results only, the trend is visibly negative. The number of people who declare a separate Macedonian ethnicity in the country nowadays is less than 0,02 % of the country's population. That can be explained by the aging of the population with Macedonian ethnic identification, and its failure to transfer this identification to younger generations. However, this trend should have been at least partially reversed by the stable inflow of immigrants from FYROM triggered by the better living conditions and the Bulgarian membership in the EU.[129] Since this has not been the case, the only possible explanation is that the newcomers choose to voluntary embrace the identity of the majority rather than profess a minority status. Furthermore, the number of ethnic Macedonians according to the 1992 census was low to begin with, which is suggesting that the more likely explanation is the regional character of the Pirin Macedonian identity. Regional identification is not measured by Bulgarian national censuses and thus remains officially unrecorded. Analysts' estimates are that between 15 000 and 200 000 Macedonians reside in Bulgaria, however, they are all missing the point that the regional Macedonian identity is defined by geography as much as by culture. The division of the broader region of Macedonia among three different states, and the process of forced or voluntary migration of the population of Pirin Macedonia to other parts of Bulgaria during the communist period, might suggest that in the case of the Pirin Macedonian identity, territory has become a largely symbolic rather than a physical form of identification. That has not been the case, however. "Autochthone" Macedonians living in other parts of the country have preserved their Macedonian culture but the region which they had left behind with its economic, cultural and social links to neighbouring countries has not disappeared either. As a matter of fact, for the first time in the past one and a half centuries, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Turks and Macedonians from FYROM have so much freedom of movement and communication. Exchange is frequent and normal, in particular in the economic sector, and is leaving its imprint on the Pirin Macedonian culture, which is increasingly outward oriented and multicultural in composition. In this respect, population censuses are not a reliable source of information. The Pirin Macedonian population's identification remains fluid and multidimensional, features which enable it to easily choose between fixedly-provided categories, even if those present but one facet of its identity.

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[129] Macedonians from FYROM who declare Bulgarian ethnicity, and can prove that they have ancestors who were Bulgarian, are enabled to get Bulgarian citizenship in a simplified procedure, which has led to a significant number of them acquiring Bulgarian passports. While many have applied because of the visa-free travel and opportunities to work within the EU, some of them have also moved to live and work in Bulgaria. In the 2011 census, 1 091 people declared dual Bulgarian-FYROM citizenship, but the number is much higher in reality as the disclosure of information in the census is voluntary, and many citizens prefer to withhold personal information.

On regional level, three recent trends reinforce the consolidation of this "new" form of the Pirin Macedonian regional identity. Firstly, there is significant emigration from the region to larger Bulgarian cities or to other EU states. Migration in the period 2001-2011 was almost 5% of the region's population.[130] Secondly, there is a stable trend of inward migration from FYROM to Bulgaria. According to the Bulgarian ex-minister of foreign affairs Nikolay Mladenov, by 2012 some 50 000 citizens of FYROM have obtained Bulgarian passports.[131] Although there is no indication that this population settles largely in Pirin Macedonia, or at all in Bulgaria, some percentage of it does so due to the cultural similarities and the proximity to their mother state, so it is likely in the longer run, stronger alternatives to the regional identity might emerge. Since, however, the number of people professing Macedonian identity is not increasing in population censuses, it is clear that they prefer not to declare or see themselves as a minority. That means that those who have chosen to move to Bulgaria in the least do not feel any hostility towards the country, and in the best, have a Bulgarian national consciousness. The multiculturalism of the Pirin Macedonian identity certainly accommodates their own complex identities. And thirdly, because of the prolonged economic crisis and austerity measures in Greece, there is also a new trend for both businesses and people to reallocate across the border to Pirin Macedonia, a trend which is for now insignificant but might intensify in the future. Overall, the three trends indicate an outward migration of people with Bulgarian national consciousness and an inward migration of people with alternative national identities. That is suggesting that further diversification is taking place in the region, and that political projects which succeed to foresee that trend, might become successful, in their turn politicizing and transforming the regional identity.

In short, the contemporary identity of the population in Pirin Macedonia is dual. On the one hand, both in Pirin Macedonia and in the rest of the country, a significant part of the population is descendant from the part of Macedonia which remained in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century when Bulgaria was established as an independent country, or of refugees from Vardar and Aegean Macedonia moving to Pirin Macedonia in the period of the Balkan and World Wars. Many of those refugees were chased away exactly because of their Bulgarian national identity, and for that reason, they were prone to

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[130] 2011 National Census of the Republic of Bulgaria. Final Results: "Migration in the period 2001-2011by gender and age, Blagoevgrad County". Sofia: Bulgarian Statistical Institute, 2011, available online at http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R12.aspx?OBL=BLG

[131] Blazevska, K. and A. Andreev. "Why Macedonians Become Bulgarians." *Deutsche Welle*, 6 December, 2012, author's translation from Bulgarian.

support nationalist projects in their new homeland. Despite the Bulgarian consciousness of the population, however, people in Pirin Macedonia have retained strong territorial/regional awareness and connectivity with the rest of the Macedonian region.[132] The opening of the borders and the increased economic, cultural and political exchange between the neighbouring countries is thus emphasizing a new spontaneous, dynamic and inclusive version of the regional identity, which is also well suited to the region's past, and thus easier to popularize. It is based on multiculturalism, inclusivity and economic advancement, features shared with the contemporary Istrian regional identity.

3. Istria

Istrian identity nowadays is relatively easy to describe because of the process of its politicization which took place in the 1990s. The political party behind that politicization (IDS) was simultaneously savvy enough to capture the population's natural identification and to advance a simple and consistent collective image. As a result, the basic features of the regional identity, i.e. multiculturalism, multilingualism, inclusivity, tolerance towards minorities, and economic wellbeing, are both widely-accepted and well known in the region and outside of it. That does not mean, however, that on grassroots level the identity does not have its complexities and contradictions. The following section will provide detailed analysis of the contemporary Istrian identity, and the process which led to its formation since the 20th century.

Although it is not the objective of this research to study the history of Istria and Pirin Macedonia prior to the 20th century, a basic overview is needed to understand the foundations of the regions' culture and its fluidity. The peninsula of Istria, in particular, has served as a border and mixing space for three major population groups: Romans and later Italians, south central Germans and Magyars, and Slavs. Located on the frontier between Eastern and Western Europe, and open to the Mediterranean and to the movement of people across the mountains to its north, Istria was frequently subjected to invasion and population flows. The Istrian peninsula additionally attracted the attention of great powers owing to its strategically important position for Eastern Mediterranean sea trade.[133] Imperial Rome held the area for five centuries, and left behind a legacy of "high" culture

[132] Zhelyazkova, A., Kosseva, M.& Marko Hajdinjak, p.191.
[133] Bell, Rudolph M. "The Transformation of a Rural Village: Istria, 1870 -1972." *Journal of Social History*, spring 1974, 7 (3), pp. 243-270.

which added strongly to Italy's claims to the region after the First World War and to the tradition of separateness and distinction felt by Istrians toward Slavs to the east.[134] Similarly, Austrian Germans saw themselves as representatives of high culture and civilization,[135] and together with Italian-speakers from Istria and Dalmatia, they imagined themselves as belonging to the so-called *Sprachinsel*, linguistic and civilizational islands marooned in a hostile Slavic sea.[136] As a result, any internal frictions in Istria were traditionally taking place along class lines expressed in a rural/interior and urban/coastal divide, which also coincided with (initially unconscious) ethnic identification: the Italian population was predominantly urban and well-off, while the Slav one lived in villages and was involved in agriculture. Unlike in the Ottoman Empire, religion was not the main discerning criteria between different groups. Catholicism was the uncontested predominant religion in Istria, and together with the low level of education of the Slav population and its isolation from political life, served as a means for the preservation of the status quo. Similar to Pirin Macedonia, social mobility, however, was allowed and frequent, with people changing their ethnic identity to reap benefits provided by the economic, political and social environment.

The division between Italian burghers and Slav peasants lasted for more than eight centuries: according to Ballinger, until the end of the 18th century, when Venice lost control of Istria; and according to Bertoša, until even later, the mid-19th century. From 1814 to 1918, Istria was under Austro-Hungarian control, however, despite the increased ethnic identification of the population which led to increased conflict, the division between Italian burghers and Slav peasants persisted, with Slavs/peasants given very limited political power and participation rights. [137] Similar to Pirin Macedonia, the division reinforced traditionalism in Istria, and made the process of modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries particularly violent.[138] The demise of the Hapsburg monarchy led to the first dramatic reconfiguration in the 20th century of the demographics and regional identity of Istria.[139] The majority of the German population abandoned the region shortly after its annexation to Italy, and many members of the "diasporic" populations (Greeks, Armenians

[134] Cons, Henri. *La Province Romaine de Dalmatie*. Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1881 in Bell, p. 244.
[135] Even at the zenith of Venetian power, Germanic influence remained significant in Istria, particularly in Trieste and Rijeka.
[136] Ballinger (2004), p. 35.
[137] Bell, p. 248 / Dukovski, Darko. "The Istrian Cultural Mosaic (1922-1955)." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2006 (3), pp. 835-862.
[138] Ballinger (2004), p. 34
[139] Bell, p. 250.

and Dalmatians) that had prospered also left. Italians from less developed parts of Italy were brought in to compensate for the loss of work force and population, and to stabilize the new regime's political influence. This initiated a half-century long violent fight for Istria with interchanging Slavic and Latin influence, which made the regional identity unstable and subject to internal conflicts.

3.1. Interwar period and World War II

After World War I, the whole of Istria was annexed by Italy. The fascist regime's discrimination and mistreatment of the Slovene and Croat population prompted thousands of Slavs to immigrate to Yugoslavia. Those who remained were subjected to a process of assimilation which required the politicization of the largely apolitical population residing in villages. Ironically, the process achieved the opposite results. Both the Italian language and culture, with which the Slavic population had felt relatively comfortable, and the Roman Catholic Church had until that moment served as a force of unification of the Istrian population. The citizen-peasant conflict had existed for so many centuries that it persisted without causing constant and disruptive friction, and the Istrian Slavs had allowed Italians to represent them in legislative assemblies under Austria.[140] The fascist regime, however, attempted to significantly limit expressions of local identity among the peasant population. Schools were established for the first time in villages, but the teachers sent by Rome could not speak Croatian and punished children who did.[141] All legal documents, business transactions and newspapers had to be written solely in Italian. Although only a handful of villagers were literate, the symbolic denial of the expression of their local culture triggered opposition. Religious expression was also affected with the introduction of Italian in churches. By 1930, individual name changes were also demanded.[142] Perhaps as important to the peasant as forced Italianization was the fascist demand for participation and active support. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had never asked for more than taxes, and these had not been oppressive. In contrast, Rome demanded membership in new political clubs or "after work" associations.[143] A ballot box appeared for the first time in villages, but the slots for all but one party had been sealed shut. [144] "Outsiders" were brought in to handle

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[140] Bell, p. 250.
[141] Bell, p. 250.
[142] Bell, p. 250.
[143] Bell, p. 251.
[144] Bell, p. 251.

requests for emigration permits, road repairs and land sales, and overtook the entire administrative control of the region. Last but not least, the economic situation in Istria worsened significantly due to the loss of the Austro-Hungarian markets and the overlap in production of the Italian and Istrian agricultural and maritime sectors. As a result, the dissatisfaction with the regime reached a boiling point.

An Italian-led anti-fascist movement existed in Istria prior to the fall of Italy in 1943. It was, however, primarily urban and led largely by dissident elements within the Italian burgher class. These dissidents employed the rhetoric of communism and associated with urban-centred anti-fascist groups elsewhere in northern Italy. As they had always done in the past, Italian burghers ignored the Slavic peasants who surrounded them, and were unprepared for the Yugoslav partisan movement which swept across Istria late in 1943. Anti-fascist Italians moved quickly to secure positions of leadership, citing their years of opposition to Mussolini and their commitment to communism, however, their efforts failed decisively. [145] According to Bell, the reasons for this failure could be found in the increased knowledge of "politics" which peasants had gained under fascism, and in the ethnic-cultural nature of the partisan struggle in Istria (the rural Slavs had turned against the urban and well-off Italians).[146] It was also reflective of the traditional overlap between ethno-national identity and economic class and political power in the region.[147]Although the Habsburg era had witnessed the growth of a Slovenian and Croatian rural bourgeoisie centred in towns like Kastav and Pazin, and the Kvarner Islands, this nascent Slavic middle class was subjected to intense assimilation pressures during the period of fascist control over Istria.[148] Many of these Slovene and Croat elites immigrated to neighbouring Yugoslavia. As a result, a significant percentage (though certainly not all) of the "class enemies" targeted by the socialist regime were identified as "Italians" or seen as connected with an Italian political class.[149]

Overall, the period was characterized by intensive conflict between different ethnic and class groups, and no stable common regional identity seemed to exist, particularly as migration to and from the region was significant and continuous, changing cultural habits and ways of living. The strengthening and politicization of the Slav collective identity in the

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[145] Bell, p. 251.
[146] Bell, p. 251.
[147] Ballinger, p. 269.
[148] Ivetić, Egidio. "On Croatian Nation-Building in Istria (1900–1914)." JGKS, 8, pp. 61–71, p. 65 as cited in Ballinger, p. 269.
[149] *ibid*

region during this period confirms the stipulation that collective identities grow stronger in times of conflict and under pressure from outside.

3.2. The communist period

The communist period, in particular the 1970s and 1980s, were a period of relative stability and consolidation of regional expressions of cultural identification. With conflict between the two major autochthonous groups in Istria settled, and with the significant inflow of migrants from other parts of Yugoslavia changing the region's demographics, a uniting collective regional identity emerged to ensure social accord and economic prosperity. The stimuli and funding for the accelerated cultural production in the region was provided initially by the central government and later, by the tourist sector.

After World War II, Istria remained contested by both Italy and Yugoslavia, [150] which "met" along the western border of the newly-established Iron Curtain.[151] Building onto historically rooted cultural symbolisms dating back to the 19th century, the 1918 state border between Italy and Yugoslavia had been constructed as a cultural divide between "Latins" and "Slavs", i.e. Italian and Slav/Yugoslav nationalists. The new political order left it as a divide between the Democratic West and the Communist East.[152] As a result, a new large-scale migration, this time from the region westward, took place in two waves: immediately after World War II, and again after 1954 when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Italy and Yugoslavia giving the cities of Trieste and Gorizia to Italy and the rest of Istria to Yugoslavia. The estimated number of people who left Istria, Rijeka and Dalmatia from 1945 to 1956 numbered from 200 000 to 380 000, according to Thomassen.[153] Ballinger's estimates are more precise and lower, placing the number at 220 000 people, including emigrants from the cities of Pula, Rijeka and Zadar.[154]

To receive an exile status (*esule*) after World War II, one needed to apply for the option in Yugoslavia during one of the periods agreed upon in bilateral agreements between Italy and Yugoslavia. The process involved the proving of one's Italianness, which led to families being split in cases where some family members were recognized as "Italian" and others –

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[150] From 1945 to 1990 the entire peninsula except Trieste was part of Yugoslavia.
[151] *ibid*, p. 157
[152] *ibid*, author's italics.
[153] Thomassen, Bjørn. "Italy From Below and From Outside-In: An Istrian Life Story across the Italo-Yugoslav Border." *Acta Histriae*, 2006, 14 (1), pp. 155-178, at p. 156.
[154] Ballinger, p. 268.

not.[155] The memories of the Istrian exiles were often painful and bitter. The bitterness was directed at both sides (Italy and Yugoslavia) as immigrants felt unwelcome and ignored in their new motherland as well. In the words of an Istrian who left during the population exchange between Yugoslavia and Italy at the end of World War II:

> "Nobody here in Italy has ever understood who we are and what has happened to us….Our stories were always boycotted."[156]

The sentiments towards Yugoslavia were just as negative with people feeling bitter over lost property and bad treatment.[157] Italians witnessed arrests, executions, the *foibe*,[158] and generally perceived the partisan rule as a total taking-over of power that made them feel like strangers in their own town. "We were afraid, day and night...fear, we lived in fear." [159] When asked why they had opted to leave for Italy after the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, leaving everything they had owned behind, the interviewees provided two main reasons. On the one hand, they had felt unsafe and feared imprisonment or even death. The violence of the *foibe* in Istria and Trieste in 1945 represented a programmatic effort to eliminate all that was left behind from the Italian state. The apparent indiscriminateness of violence and deportations, according to Valdevit, was designed to send a chilling message to the Italians that they must assume a subaltern position in the projected "Seventh Republic" of Yugoslavia.[160] On the other hand, the newly-formed state with its emphasis on public property and atheism also challenged the value system shared by many Italians. They felt like they did not belong in it. Most Italians did not speak Croatian, attended church/ were religious, and felt they were not of the "right" ethnicity. Many had taken the side of Italy during the war. Also, they expressed frustration with the fact that the "people who decided (held decision-making positions in the region) were not even from Istria. They

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[155] According to Thomassen, the number of those who were refused exile status was around 30 000 people, also see p. 158, footnote 3. Macedonians from FYROM are undergoing a similar process of proving their Bulgarianness.
[156] Bianca Visintin as quoted in Thomassen, p. 160
[157] Thomassen, p. 159-160.
[158] The foibe killings or foibe massacres refer to the killings that took place mainly in Venezia Giulia, Istria and Dalmatia during and after World War II from 1943 to 1949, perpetrated mainly by Yugoslav Partisans against the local Italian population.
[159] *ibid*, p. 162
[160] Valdevit Giampaolo. "Foibe: l'eredita` della sconfitta," in Valdevit, Giampaolo (ed.). *Foibe: Il peso del passato*, Venice, 1997 as quoted in Ballinger, Pamela. "At the Borders of Force: Violence, Refugees, and the Reconfiguration of the Yugoslav and Italian States." Past and Present, 2011, 210 (6), pp. 158-176, p. 167.

were Slavs from somewhere else. Not even the local Slavs understood their language! …the way things were...it was impossible to stay, the Slavs did everything to make us go."[161]

In the beginning of the communist period, indeed, even Italians with solid anti-fascist credentials sometimes became the objects of persecution, suggesting that in Istria as in other parts of Yugoslavia the new socialist authorities sought to neutralize any potential political rivals.[162] As already said, the historical specificities of class and political position in the Istrian peninsula meant that those targeted as "enemies of the people" were often identified (through either self-ascription or external ascription) with the former ethno-national elite (Italians).[163]

Migration out of the region was so massive, however, that it soon presented a problem leading to a shortage of human force in all spheres of life. This led to a reversal in policy and motivated Yugoslav authorities to refuse numerous applications for immigration to Italy. At first glance, the re-opening of the option process in 1952 to accommodate unmet demands to emigrate suggested that the socialist authorities used this as a means to rid themselves of restless local population which could challenge their authority. However, local People's Committees overseeing the option process from the Yugoslav side also frequently rejected requests to opt, on the grounds that the applicants were not "genuine" Italians as judged either by linguistic use[164] or their ethnic surnames. This reflected the regime's pressing need for skilled labour and the desire to prevent the departure of such workers (who tended to identify as Italian) en masse.[165]

The newly erected border between Yugoslavia and Italy (cutting Trieste from the rest of Istria) thus changed many life courses. People left behind their homes and property, but were also forced to quit their studies, and in a number of cases were separated from family and friends. Similar events took place in Pirin Macedonia where, however, the largest movement of people at the end of World War II was into the region, not away from it. In both regions, most of those who did not support the communist regime left, opening opportunities for the ethnic and ideological homogenization of the population there. The features around which the regions' identities were built after World War II were a common civil identity and worker solidarity viewed within the framework of communist ideology. To

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[161] Bianca Visintin as quoted in Thomassen, p. 163
[162] Ballinger, p. 270.
[163] Ballinger, p. 275.
[164] A prerequisite for opting for Italian citizenship, according to the 1947 Peace Treaty that had ceded southern Istria to Yugoslavia, was the use of Italian in every-day communication.
[165] Ballinger, p. 272.

establish and maintain control over the population, positions of leadership, both in work-related groups and in purely political organizations, on local and regional level, were reserved for people who had played a major role in the partisan movement, and were supporters of the communist party.[166] Frequently, those people were not locals, but were brought from all parts of Yugoslavia or Bulgaria.

The inclusion of Istria in Yugoslavia brought new opportunities and altered completely the region's economy and demographics. The industrialization of the region increased the demand for skilled labour and triggered a massive reorganization of every-day life. On the one hand, as already said, migration towards the region from other parts of Yugoslavia took place, but also migration from villages to larger towns, as agriculture was abandoned for industry and tourism. Young villagers from the Istrian interior overwhelmingly started to work for the government or the (public) industry. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in the level of education of the local population as free and universal public education was introduced. In a study carried out in two villages in rural Istria in the late 1960s-early 1970s, Rudolph Bell found out that more than half the known workers born after 1940 had acquired work skills (most residents had no skills outside of farming and mariculture/seafaring until the 1940s) with a trend towards holding jobs of increasing complexity. None had turned to the farms of their parents and grandparents.[167]

In the cultural sector, the period after World War II was characterized by a vacuum in cultural activity. Many Italian artists and musicians had left for Italy, and the new migrants from Croatia and the other republics were not yet able to rebuild the region's cultural scene. According to Dukovski, the cultural life of Pula during the 1950s and 1960s was at its lowest in the 20th century, despite the existence of a significant material infrastructure. [168] The communist system tried to reverse this trend by adopting a very conservative and political approach to culture. Since it was not possible to fully block radio reception, young people in Istria regularly and secretly listened to "Western" music. To address this gap in control of the cultural and art sectors, the authorities set to influence the tastes of the young population by introducing numerous music classes and courses for young musicians.[169] On federal level, efforts for the standardization of language in all republics were aimed at eliminating cultural differences and their preservation and expression in

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[166] Bell, p. 251.
[167] Bell, p. 253.
[168] Dukovski, p. 848.
[169] Dukovski, p. 847.

national languages and dialects. Similar to Pirin Macedonia, those efforts were successful on "high" level where the standardization of the literary Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian languages was completed, however, in informal communication, the local population in Istria preserved at least partially its linguistic and cultural specificity.

Furthermore, despite the attempts of the communist party to control public tastes and cultural production, the cultural sector in Istria was gaining independence, and the quality of cultural production was increasingly high.[170] The growth of the tourist sector, which attracted many short-term visitors from Italy and Austria, assisted this process. In the 1980s, the prolonged economic growth in Istria led to a boom in cultural production, with tourist companies sponsoring directly an array of cultural events and publications.[171] According to Jurcan, the notion of Istrian "specificity" gained legitimacy precisely in this period, leading to a radical change in regional discourse.[172] Up until the 1980s the Italian and Croatian cultural circles in the region had functioned parallelly, with cultural production being segregated on national basis. During the 1980s, for the needs of the tourist sector, the two main cultural influences (the Latin and the Slavic) in the region started to mingle and to produce a more hybrid cultural content.[173] By that time, the Slav population's bitterness against Italy had abated considerably; all legal conflicts following World War II around borders and property between the two countries had been resolved in the mid-1970s.[174] Unlike in Pirin Macedonia where cross-border communication with both Aegean and Vardar Macedonia was interrupted, commercial exchange across the border with Trieste continued and was extensive, and radio communications were allowed. In some schools children were enabled to choose Italian as a foreign language. The Italian heritage of the region was thus at least to a certain extent preserved.

The success of this multicultural approach to cultural production led to further cooperation between ethnic groups, and ultimately, to the formation of a new vision of the region's cultural identity. Jurcan lists three books as the foundation of the hybrid discourse in Istria,

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[170] Dukovski, p. 861.
[171] Information from author's interview with Emil Jurcan, Istrian activist, carried out on 22 May, 2015
[172] Jurcan, Emil. "Istrian Consent: Forms of Repression in a Multicultural Society." *Zarez*, 373-74, 19 December, 2013.
[173] Dukovski, p. 861 / Jurcan (author's interview carried out on May 22, 2015).
[174] Jurcan, Emil, 2013. Prior to the Treaty of Osimo, signed by Italy and Yugoslavia in 1975, demands by the Italian minority in Istria for more autonomy or additional rights were viewed as a form of irredentism. Jurcan cites few example of conflict between the Italian and Croatian community in the early 1970s. In Žminja in 1971 the Slavic population protested against the installation of bilingual signs in Croatian and Italian, and in 1973 the leadership of the Italian Union (*Unione Italiana*) was replaced because of demands for increased autonomy of the organization and the introduction of Italian in schools.

all of which were published in 1985, and which according to him coined the contemporary Istrian identity. These books provided three major pillars around which the region's cultural, and later political, identity was erected: _convivenza_ (cohabitation), introduced by Miroslav Bertoša in his book *Ethos and Ethnos of the Homeland* as a description of life in Istria in the past and a simultaneous model for the future[175][176]; bilingualism mentioned for the first time by Nelida Milani-Kruljac in her doctorate thesis, "La comunita italiana in Istria e a Fiume fra diglossia e bilinguismo"[177]; and autochthony which was associated with the publishing of the book *Surnames and Settlements in Istria* by Josip Bratulić and Petar Šimunović,[178] listing autochthonous Istrian names and nationalities. The first term, convivenza, was introduced by Bertoša in the 1980s and carried the traits of Yugoslav multiculturalism. Bertoša himself placed it in the context of the communist premise of "brotherhood and unity":

> *"Respect for this diversity is not an obstacle to the harmonious international convivenza, nor to the functional integration in the socio-political, economic and cultural structures of self-governing communities of equal nations and nationalities. The main idea of these reflections is that diversity does not threaten but enriches unity, and that it does not prevent but encourages and refines the categories of co-existence we call 'brotherhood and unity'."[179]*

By that time, as already said, the Italian minority was no longer perceived as a major threat to the communist regime. The number of people in Istria who declared themselves Italian was going down, and so was the number of those who spoke Italian. Jurcan quotes Franco Juri who at the end of the 1980s talked about an ethnocide of the Italians in Yugoslavia.[180] In order to stimulate the use of Italian in every day communication, a number of

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[175] Bertoša, Miroslav. *Ethos and Ethnos of the Homeland*. Pula: Čakavski sabor, 1985. In the book, Bertoša introduces the term *akulturacija* which he uses to identify that societies do not live isolated in space and time, but rather in contact with one another. His research is thus founded on the co-relation between diffirent social groups. Bertoša also lists all of the outcomes of such co-relation or *convivenza*: the two extreme variants being isolation and assimilation, with hybrid identities and cultural dualism, or living parallelly in two different cultures, falling in between.

[176] Jurcan, Emil. "Istrian Consent: Forms of Repression in a Multicultural Society." Zarez, 373-74, 19 December, 2013.

[177] The dissertation was published as a book in 1990. Milani-Kruljac, Nelida. *La comunità italiana in Istria e a Fiume: fra diglossia e bilinguismo*. Trieste: Università popolare di Trieste; Rovigno: Centro di ricerche storiche, 1990, as referred to in Jurcan (2013).

[178] Bratulić, Josip & Petar Šimunović. *Prezimena i naselja u Istri ľ narodnosna statistika u godini oslobođenja I, II I III. Istra kroz stoljeća*, Pula – Rijeka, 1985-86, as referred to in Jurcan (2013).

[179] Bertoša (1985), p. 297.

[180] Juri. Franco. "Parlarne fa bene tacere un po` meno." *Panorama*, 1988 (2), p.5, as referred to in Jurcan (2013).

intellectuals from the region, including Nelida Milani-Kruljac, called for the socialization of the language in a wider social context, meaning that non-ethnic Italian residents of Istria had to be also encouraged to use the language. This placed the foundation for the formal use of both Serbo-Croatian and Italian in the institutions of Istria County.[181] Regional and local language varieties were also increasingly leaving the privacy of home and family and moving to the public sphere.[182] Lastly, the defining of autochthonous names and nationalities limited the incessant alteration of the regional identity with the inflow of new migrants. Figuratively speaking, it froze identity in a specific point in time thus providing the framework within which it could be depicted and understood. The duality of the regional identity was limited to movement between two specific cultural spheres: the Italian and the Croatian one. Both Jurcan and Ballinger talk about the recent formations of ethnic minority groups in Istria which feel excluded from the region's social structure finding it more bi-cultural than multi-cultural.[183]

The contemporary regional identity of Istria was, similar to that of Pirin Macedonia, constructed during the communist regime. Unlike Pirin Macedonia, though, Istrian identity was coined not exclusively by communist party technocrats, but also by local academics. For that reason, it had clearer and more coherent parameters and features. Since academic publishing and employment at academic institutions were controlled by the communist apparatus, the academic version of the regional identity was not necessarily unaligned with communist ideology. On the contrary, it relied heavily on such principles as brotherhood and unity, atheism and antifascism. In addition, the region's increasing dependence on revenues generated from tourism commercialized cultural production, meaning that the influence of the Italian culture was frequently exaggerated while that of other minority groups was downplayed. All of this led to the creation of a surface culture which "connected well the dots," yet was somewhat exclusive and elitist. Beneath it, a more natural, undeliberate and chaotic version of the regional identity did not seize to exist. This more "authentic" Istrian identity was a reflection of everyday life on the border between different cultures and political regimes, and shared the main features of the Pirin Macedonian identity (inclusivity, fluidity of personal identification, and focus on economic advancement).

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[181] Jurcan (2013).

[182] Skelin Horvat, Anita and Vesna Muhvić-Dimanovski, "My Mother Tongue…Croatian, Istrian, Local, …Depends Where I am – The Perception of Mother Tongue in Multilingual Settings." *Jezikoslovlje*, XIII/2, 2012, pp. 493-511, at p. 504.

[183] Author's interview with Istrian activist Emil Jurcan, carried out on June 22, 2015 / Ballinger (2004), pp. 43-44.

3.3. Post-communism

In the post-communist period, the Istrian identity, which had undergone a process of commercialization in the 1970s and 1980s, was also successfully politicized. Both processes separated the region in symbolic terms from the rest of the newly-founded Croatian state. Although the process of politicization was at least to a certain extent initiated from below, with grass-roots organizations and activists participating actively in the formulation of the regional identity in the late 1980s-early 1990s, with time it was overtaken by politicians. The politicization of the Istrian identity was thus primarily carried out from above, with regional political party IDS being largely in charge of the process. The following section will present the theories which were used by IDS in the politicization of the regional identity, and the role the cultural sector played in the latter process.

Traditionally, political debates about Istria's "original" ethnicity hinge on two competing interpretations: one sees the area as having been either essentially Italian or Slavic (i.e. Slovene and Croatian), the other - as characterized by cultural and linguistic hybridity.[184] The former was adopted as the official stance of the Yugoslav and Croatian governments, depicting the region as predominantly Slav in character, where the expression of the Slav identity was for centuries suppressed by a ruling Italian elite. The homogeneity of regional identity is also supported by Italian-Istrian exiles in Trieste who contend that Italianness (*italianit*) has historically characterized and shaped Istria, which in their view was stolen by nonindigenous Slavs after World War II.[185] In contrast, the hybridity theory is supported mostly by the population of the very region, both by members of minority groups as well as by the Croatian majority. They advocate a vision of Istrian identity as multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual. According to Ballinger, the most widely used terms by Istrians describing their identity are: mixture (*mescolanza*), mosaic (*mosaico*), bilingualism or di/trilingualism and cohabitation (*convivenza*).[186] In respect to its positioning against the rest of Croatia (and other southern Slavs), the Istrian population largely perceives itself as more economically, culturally and civilizationally advanced, interestingly because of its Latin heritage.

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[184] Ballinger, Pamela. "'Authentic Hybrids' in the Balkan Borderlands." *Current Anthropology*, 45/1, 2004, pp. 31-60.
[185] Ballinger (2004), p. 40.
[186] *ibid*

Istrian exceptionality is not an entirely contemporary construction. For example, the region has limited autonomist traditions promoted by socialists like Vivante at the close of the Austrian period, and stressing a regional unity made up of a unique cultural mix.[187] Various autonomist schemes giving expression to local identities born out of intermixture— such as those establishing Rijeka as a free port after World War I and Trieste as an "international free territory" after World War II—failed because of nationalist opposition, as well as Great Power politics. [188] Istrian regionalism builds to some degree upon these older ideas of autonomous or supranational entities at the same time that it partakes of a diffuse nostalgia for the multi-culturalism of the Hapsburg Empire, now interpreted in the region to have equitably balanced the rights of competing ethnic groups.[189]

Furio Radin, Istrian and representative of the Italian minority in the Croatian National Parliament, summarizes well the course of development of the contemporary Istrian identity as portrayed in Istrian politicians' discourse. According to him, Istrian regional identity was formed in the Austro-Hungarian period when the entire region was administratively united. Prior to that, the region had been depopulated due to regular epidemics and immigration, and had not experienced sufficiently long periods of peace and stability to strengthen the population's regional belonging. Yugoslav-led nationalization of the regional identity of Istria enforced its Croatian character, mostly due to the massive emigration of minority groups until the mid-1970s. The effect of the nationalistic and centralized policy of the Croatian government in the 1990s, however, reinforced Istrian regional identity and the need to distance it from nationalism, thus ironically serving as the catalysis for Istrian regionalism. In other words, the emergence in the early 1990s in Istria of a political movement celebrating hybridity was to a large extent as a response to the nationalism and the homogenizing policies of the central Croatian state. Regardless of whether (regional party) IDS shaped the contemporary vision of regional identity, or simply captured successfully popular sentiments, the party was the main factor for its politicization. Its agenda was founded on the works of a number of Istrian intellectuals.

Those Istrian intellectuals have focused on defining Istrianity as multi-ethnic, hybrid pluri-identity which is more strongly expressed in the region than any national one. According to

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[187] *ibid*
[188] *ibid*
[189] *ibid*

Fulvio Suran, the autochthonous population in Istria has never felt strong national attachment to a specific nation-state, hence the crystallization of Istrianity as a hidden, nationally impure identity. He cites the large number of mixed marriages between Latins and Slavs and the social mobility between national groups as a proof of Istrian specificity.[190] Suran adds that this pluri-ethnic Istrian identity, although a reality, was not widely accepted in the early 1990s, neither by the local population nor by the population in the rest of the country. At that time, the average Istrian was provided with limited opportunity to express his true identity because of the political pressure in the country to declare a "pure" Croatian identity, and secondly, because of the widespread at the time rhetoric of either-or type of identification (either Croat or Italian, but not both or a combination of both). [191] Suran thus concludes that in Istria, the identity and identification of the population has always been interpreted by the politically strong of the day:

> *"Istrian reality was always interpreted to the benefit of the ruling nationality, and at the expense of the minority nationality of the day which was always threatened with assimilation by the ruling nationalistic ideology." [192]*

Another "proof" of the relatively recent formulation of Istrian regional identity is a research by Pamela Ballinger on ethnic Italians who left Istria during and after World War II and on those who remained. Ballinger discovered a huge difference in the self-identification of the two groups. Members of the first group, the emigrants, claim a pure Italian identity, while members of the second group see Istrianity, and their own identity, as a hybrid mix of Italian and Slavic cultures. Interestingly, however, this latter group describes itself also against the Slavs from the rest of Croatia who are seen as an outside other. The identification is thus very complex with Croats from Istria being contrasted to Croats from outside of Istria, much like Italians from the region are juxtaposed against the Italians from outside of it. The outside others in this case might serve simultaneously as an internal and external element of identity formation.[193]

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[190] Suran, Fulvio. "Istrianity as the Weaker (And Stronger) Identity." Zagreb: *Društvena Istraživanja,* 1993, 6-7 (2), pp. 769-782, at p. 773.
[191] *ibid*
[192] *ibid*
[193] Ballinger, Pamela. *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.

This fluidity of Istrian identity is also depicted in the work of Horvat and Muhvić-Dimanovski[194] who have carried out a qualitative study on mother tongues in Istria relying on sociolinguistic interviews and (auto)biographical accounts:

> *"in different situations, places, contexts, and under the influence of different political and social circumstances in society, the speakers identify themselves with one or another language/dialect and use them according to their own self-image and for creating certain identity. Language, of course, is not only the marker of identity, but also the place of creating, negotiating and expressing identity/identities. So, we can also say that different settings, contexts, collocutors, themes of conversation and other elements of the communication act can influence which identity will be created or negotiated in a certain situation."[195]*

Conversely, Pamela Ballinger argues that certain practices of inter-cultural communication are in sharp decline in Istria, even as regionalist discourse intensifies, and that the territorial dimension of contemporary Istrian regionalism constrains its structure and scope. She applies a cross-border approach to her work, focusing on the cultural and social exchange between the parts of Istria in Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. Because of the different pace of integration in the European Union of Slovenia and Croatia (and prior to that, Italy), Ballinger sees the EU integration process as increasing the differences and symbolic distance between the three parts of Istria. The erection of a physical border between Croatia, Slovenia and Italy has disrupted the sense of common Istrian identity on the different sides of the border.[196] She refers to the work of anthropologist Lidija Nikočević in two villages on the Croatian-Slovenian border. Nikočević's conclusion is that there is an increasing tendency among the population residing in the Slovenian part of the border to identify as Slovenian rather than Istrian. The Croatian population is in contrast more hesitant to identify with a strict ethnic group (Croat), which Nikočević atrributes to "the deep dissatisfaction with the inferior economic status of the individuals and villages as a whole, which constantly compare themselves with examples across the border, and the general frustration with the border in all its aspects."[197] Because of Istria's focus on economic development, and because of its status as one of the richest regions in Croatia,

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[194] "No. Then that was … it wasn't what it is today. Well, I was born in 1971, and then there was no Istrianity, nothing." – interview with anonymous Istrian interviewee carried out by Skelin Horvat and Muhvić-Dimanovski, quoted at p. 504.

[195] Skelin Horvat, Anita and Vesna Muhvić-Dimanovski, p. 509.

[196] Ballinger (2007), p. 71.

[197] Nikočević, Lidija. "Negotiating Borders: Myth, Rhetoric, and National Relations." *Focaal*, 2003 (41), pp. 95-105 at p. 102 in Ballinger (2007), p. 71.

the Croatian identity has a somewhat negative connotation among the region's population. The Slovenes and Italians across the border maintain better standards of living which means that association with them is viewed as desirable by Croatian Istrians. The proximity of those two countries in terms of geography and culture enable such association, and make it not only possible but also natural. The diverging visions of Istrianity in Italy, Slovenia and Croatia confirm the theoretical assumption that regional characteristics, including both symbolic features and physical boundaries, are subject to change. Istria in its latest contemporary reinvention is a region in Croatia, just as Macedonia within the borders of Bulgaria is a complete region. It is indeed highly plausible that the different historical trajectories followed by the different parts of the larger Istrian and Macedonian regions have split them indefinitely into smaller yet complete parts. It is, however, also likely that a potential membership in the Schengen Area might yet again align and alter territorial and cultural boundaries.

On a more administrative level, symbolic collective identities are at least in theory shaped by formal strategies for the development and preservation of culture passed and implemented by the central state and, when possible, by regional and local authorities. Both Bulgaria and Croatia carry out multi-annual strategic planning on national level. In Croatia, because of the fragmentation of the legal framework, which has led to a diffusion of ideas and a lack of funding focus, the Ministry of Culture, as the main state body responsible for cultural production and for the preservation of cultural heritage, has not had a great impact on cultural development in Istria.[198] On the other hand, the Department of Culture of Istria County appears as a very powerful actor. In 2014, the planned budget for culture of Istria County was more than 600 thousand euros (4.78 million kunas), distributed for financing of literature and publishing, music and stage events, protection of material and non-material cultural heritage, visual and new media art, festivals and manifestations. The planned budget for 2015 is slightly lower, but still significant (4.3 million kunas). An Istrian cultural parliament has also been established which brings together cultural institutions and professionals from the region and the Museum Network of Istria. In addition, Istria County has 7 Cultural Councils which generate excellent information flows, and contribute to the building of a comprehensive and consistent approach to cultural production in the county. The structure of existing entities and development plans in different sectors enable the creation of an Istrian cultural space with

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[198] Pavičić Kaselj, Ana. "Decentralisation, Power of Local Self-Government and Multi-Level Dynamics in Istria Region." SeeNet Programme, May 2011, p. 11

heritage as a key resource around which various activities can be developed. Istrian heritage and identity are thus incorporated in the development of the tourist, agricultural, SME, contemporary art, and educational sectors. Cultural heritage, in this manner, becomes a resource for contemporary arts/culture production, but also a factor for economic development.[199] There are exceptional examples in Istria of cultural organizations using cultural heritage not only to enable its preservation but also to contribute to its further development as well as to the development of a micro economy around it.[200] This valorisation of culture and heritage in Istria has been, as in the 1970s and 1980s in Yugoslavia, due to a certain extent to undeliberate external pressure. The huge flow of tourists, many coming from Italy, Slovenia and Austria, has made it profitable for the tourist sector to explore and exploit the multicultural heritage of the region. In Pirin Macedonia, tourism, although much more modest in numbers and revenues than in Istria, is still significant, but it has focused on natural resources as its primary asset. Ski and spa tourism are the most developed sub-sectors, and as such they have not utilized to a large extent the cultural heritage of Pirin Macedonia. As discussed in the economic chapter of this research, collaboration between the three parts of Macedonia has been very limited, and their common cultural heritage has not been valorised.

In short, the relatively secure source of funding for culture in Istria County, the advance and strategic planning of activities, and the distribution of available resources have enabled the establishment of a consistent approach to culture on a county level. However, because of the overdependence on public funding, and the overlap of political and public functions in Istria, this raises questions about the independence of cultural actors in Istria, and about the genuineness or existence of grass-roots cultural expression. Donors are frequently in a position to select projects to their liking, i.e. projects which correspond to their interpretation of reality and to their needs, and to influence cultural expression and content. In Istria, all public institutions are controlled by IDS with mayors and governors being in most cases IDS members, so funding for the cultural sector can easily be used to extend the party's political message to the cultural sphere. Put simply, if IDS' political agenda is founded on an interpretation of the region's history as one of multi-culturalism and peaceful co-habitation, those aspects of the region's identity might be given more publicity in cultural events, while other, less convenient ones, be left unexplored, or placed

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[199] For example, the Croatian Musical Youth and the Centre for Drama Art in Grožnjan have attracted a number of professionals from different sectors to participate in their activities – musicians, artists, cultural managers etc, and have positively influenced the economy of this little town.
[200] Pavičić Kaselj, p. 12

on a second plan. In Pirin Macedonia, the county does not have a significant budget for culture, so both planning and funding is carried out on city or municipality level. However, because of the lack of many large cities in the region, cultural activities are centred around the largest city and main administrative centre, Blagoevgrad. Blagoevgrad's administration thus serves as a hub but also as a strategic planner of most significant cultural activities in the county. Therefore, one can talk in Pirin Macedonia as well about the existence of a unified approach to culture, as opposed to fragmented and opposing patchwork on local level. Since mayors are elected and not appointed like county governors, they have more independence from the central government, and thus significant control over cultural activities taking place in their municipality. The interpretation of the regional culture in Pirin Macedonia, however, coincides to a large extent with that on national level, i.e. the regional identity is seen as part of and parallel to the national one, so no evidence of fundamental conflict between the levels of government and self-government can be found in Bulgaria in the cultural sector. In Istria such a conflict has existed throughout the 1990s, which to a certain extent explains the overlap between political and administrative functions on county level – in a situation of scarce central funding, regional resources had to be utilized to the maximum to ensure success on local and county elections.

Unlike in Pirin Macedonia, contemporary Istrian regional culture has been both politicized and commercialized. The former process has distanced it from the mainstream Croatian culture, while the latter has provided the funding and the rationale for this distancing. The sustainability of the process has been involuntarily supported by the nationalism of the Croatian central state in the 1990s, which has made the Istrian identity attractive by differentiation, and provided a convenient "outside other" against the values of which to build up Istrian exceptionalism. As long as the mainstream national identity is viewed by Istrians as backwards and unattractive, they are willing to back up the IDS-constructed version of their regional identity, even if it is used for political reasons and not fully authentic. In other words, Istrian multiculturalism and exceptionality are more attractive than Croatian nationalism, even if the former might be just as unnatural to Istrians as the latter. This said, it must be emphasized that IDS has been very consistent and persistent in the spreading of its version of the regional identity, and it has been largely successful in influencing Istrians' self-perception. Evidence for its success can be provided by the different images Istrians living across the border in Italy and Croatia cultivate of themselves and the region as a whole. IDS's influence over the regional identity is studied in detail in the following chapter.

3.4. Newcomers

Pamela Ballinger draws attention to another process taking place in Istria in the 1990s as a result of the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia. Istria, as a relatively prosperous region without any fighting taking place on its territory attracted a new wave of emigration. This wave was not significant in numbers but is impacting the region nevertheless in that the newly-come, "non-Istrians," as Ballinger terms them, particularly the Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovar Albanians, often exhibit cultural differences from the authentic Istrians. Those differences are reinforced by the use of Istrian dialects in both formal and informal situations which leave the newcomers at loss, and lead to self-imposed isolation, not that different from the isolation of the Muslim minority in Pirin Macedonia. In short, Ballinger argues that the Istrian political and social environment and value system may be fostering "reductive multiculturalism" inclusive of Croats, Slovenes and Italians, and exclusive of other minority groups.[201] Ballinger was writing in the context of the war in ex-Yugoslavia, and at that time migration to Istria was more significant and more novel as an event. Currently, statistics of the migration within Croatia do not show any significant flows of people moving to Istria. As a matter of fact, the county population is slowly decreasing. Also, there appears to be no conflict between the "old" and "new" Istrians. The region's history of assimilation, fluidity and hybridity holds ground especially given the fact that a majority of the "autochthonous" population actually settled in the county after World War II, as already explained. Ballinger's observation, however, draws parallels with Pirin Macedonia where the Muslim population also appears to be excluded from interpretations and expressions of regional collective identity. There remains thus a significant portion of the population in both regions, in particular among Muslim minority groups, which is isolated (whether by its own choice or by the majority) from participating actively in social life and the shaping of collective identities. Although not necessarily a potential source of regional conflict, in particular in Istria, the occurrence is questioning the inclusivity of the regional collective identity but also the genuineness of the values on which it is founded (multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity). On the other hand, it is possible to interpret *convivenza* as a mere co-existence and tolerance to difference, rather than acceptance and mingling.

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[201] Ballinger (2007), p. 70.

4. Conclusion

Europe, and in particular the countries covered by this research, have undergone constant and often violent and sudden changes in the last century and a half, including wars, regime changes, formal redrawing of borders, exchanges of populations and voluntary migration. Border regions have naturally been the most impacted by those processes, shifting from belonging to one state to another, and seeing significant replacements of indigenous populations, sometimes over a period of a few years. In addition to such drastic changes, in times of peace, border regions have also experienced more incremental developments triggered by cross-border trade and personal relationships. This has led to the formation of hybrid and fluid identities existing between different cultures and nationalities, with border regions' populations frequently identifying themselves simultaneously as members of more than one ethnic group, or even changing identification. In many cases such change has reflected one's perception of where one's self-interest lies, however, frequently, it has presented an honest evaluation of oneself as a "hybrid" individual with a plural identity.

Symbolic collective identities are in general, like all other concepts dealing with persons' identification and perceptions of themselves, difficult to place into clear-cut definitions and theories. In border regions, in particular, they can be at the same time fluid and rigid, dynamic and past-oriented, utility-seeking and irrational. All of those terms describe past or contemporary identities in Pirin Macedonia and Istria, and it appears that rather than depicting contrasting phenomena, they represent different aspects of the same identities which become dominant in different circumstances. This multifacetedness of regional identities is perhaps enabled by the fact that unlike ethnic and national ones, they are more easily described in cultural terms, and thus less dependent on origin. One can become Istrian or Pirin Macedonian more easily and fully than one can become a Croat or a Bulgarian. That also means that the parameters of the Istrian and Pirin Macedonian identities can change more easily and more rapidly, if a majority of the population or its leaders support such a change. There are plenty of examples to this end in the history of both regions. Such alterations are particularly likely and rapid in times of reality-shattering conflict which necessitates change on the regional level. In the case of Istria, such a conflict was provided by the dissolution of ex-Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. It led to the strengthening of the regional identity, and its distancing from the national Croatian one. In the case of Pirin Macedonia, despite the transformation of the Bulgarian political life and economy in the early 1990s, the impact on the region was not so profound, and no

juxtapositions arose, neither internally, with the central government, nor externally, with neighbouring countries. The regional identity remained, if not subdued, at east latent, which did not provide much room for its deepening and politicization.

Overall, in both regions, regional identities and their political expressions have been the strongest in periods of violent change, when the presence of an "outside other" has intensified regional affiliation and solidarity. In the case of Pirin Macedonia that period was at the end of World War I, when large parts of Macedonia were left outside of Bulgarian control and territory, leaving a significant portion of the population in Pirin Macedonia unsatisfied with both the Bulgarian central government and neighbouring states. The central Bulgarian government, exhausted by the warfare, was unable to effectively establish rule of law and central control over Pirin Macedonia, where the fresh and significant inflow of migrants from Aegean Macedonia increased the region's population and boosted its Bulgarian national consciousness but also strengthened the demand for strong governance and common identification. The regional political and social movement led by VMRO provided such a strong, if not progressive, governance, and an interpretation of the regional identification as specific but composite of the Bulgarian one. In the case of Istria, regionalism was the strongest in the 1990s when the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia and the nationalism which swept the country triggered the formation of an independent political project on regional level building on the uniqueness (language, customs and economy) of the regional identity. In both instances, central governments lacked the resources and focus (both were occupied with warfare, and later, with post-war nation-building) to address the political challenge posed by the regionalists. They were thus used as the "outside" other against the image and policy of which the regional identity was politicized. In both instances, the biggest advantage of the regional political movements over central governments and national political parties was their physical proximity to their electorates and their ability to capture popular sentiments, thus adopting political agendas with regional importance. As regional identities in cross-border regions are predominantly defined by location, proximity to electorates is an important factor for the political success of regionalist movements, a correlation which will be analysed in more detail in the chapter on political parties.

Because of population replacements and exchanges taking place until the end of World War II, the current demographic composition and identification of the populations in Pirin Macedonia and Istria have been to a large extent defined immediately prior to and during

the communist period. World War II led to a wave of migration from Aegean to Pirin Macedonia of people with Bulgarian consciousness, and from Istria to Italy of ethnic Italians, and to a lesser extent, of Croats and Slovenes. To compensate for the lack of a work force and the depopulation of Istrian towns, the communist regime populated Istria with people from all parts of Yugoslavia, many of whom constituted the region's new military and administrative elite. In Pirin Macedonia, large parts of the newly-arrived settlers soon moved to larger cities, in which living and working conditions were better. Those who did not agree with the policy of national homogenization carried out by the Zhivkov regime were either relocated to other parts of the country or tightly monitored and controlled. The removal of political opponents and old elites allowed the communist regimes to not only establish control over the regions but to also influence their culture and regional identity. The new regional elites were composed of members of the Communist Party which followed and implemented central government decisions. In Bulgaria a civic interpretation of nationality was adopted where all minority identities, be they regional or ethnic, had to be subjected to the main (Bulgarian) identity; in Yugoslavia, federalism necessitated at least the limited acceptance of multinationalism. Both the Communist Republic of Bulgaria and the Yugoslav Federation tried to establish secular *class nations*, or political nations constructed ideologically around a class identity. Alternative forms of ethnic and cultural awareness of citizens, and possible ethnocultural continuities beyond the existing political borders, were either aggressively suppressed or subdued by peer pressure.[202] This left portions of the Muslim population which resisted secularization outside of mainstream life, and thus as non-factors in identity formation. That process seems to have been intensified in the last two and half decades where the regional identity of both regions is defined along the religious lines of Christianity whereby Muslim minorities are not considered autochthonous groups and thus their contribution to regional identities is limited or denied.

The contemporary regional identities of Pirin Macedonia and Istria constructed in the 1990s after the fall of the communist regimes continue to be the product of political ambitions. The features of those identities are mostly "rewritten" by regional and national

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[202] A possible exception is the early proactive support by the Communist Party of Bulgaria for the unification of Pirin Macedonia with Vardar Macedonia, and the decision of the Party to propagate the declaring of the population in Pirin Macedonia as Macedonian, rather than Bulgarian. The rationale behind this act, however, was ideologically-based rather than ethnically, and was a result of tripartite talks between Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union for a potential merging of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. The talks failed after the schism between Tito and Stalin, and in the next elections, the population was again instructed to declare itself as Bulgarian.

political parties, relying heavily on the cultural and symbolic premises placed during the communist regime. They are thus not coined in opposition to previously existing identities but rather their continuation. Both are built on the premise that the regional identity is not an ethnic one but a specific layer, a subcategory of the predominant ethnicity in the two nation states. While in Pirin Macedonia, however, there appears not to be a conflict between the population's regional and national identification, in Istria, such a conflict exists both in the political realm and in personal spaces. In Bulgaria, Macedonian regionalism developed in the interwar period parallelly with Bulgarian nationalism because of the predominance of refugees who were expelled from their birthplaces precisely because of their Bulgarian identity. In Croatia, Istrianness developed as a byproduct of Yugoslavism, and has not been strongly related to Croatian nationalism since the 1970s. Prior to that, in the aftermath of both world wars, Istrianism, if at all concretized as a cultural or political movement, had a strong Croatian undertone, with the inclusion of most of Istria in Yugoslavia seen as a victory of a century-long struggle for Croatian (and Slovenian) self-identification and political self-rule. In the 1990s, Istrians felt threated by the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia which devastated the region's economy, and looked for protection in regionalism. The population associated culturally with neighbouring western cultures (Italian and Austrian), and hoped in vain that because of this cultural and historical association the West would not seize to invest in the region's tourist sector. By distancing itself from the mainstream Croatian nationalism, the region wanted to send a message that it was safe and predicable.

Overall, the association with a wider whole is a factor in the formation of both the Pirin Macedonian and Istrian identities. The regions are parts of larger territories, split among a few countries. Because of the establishment of state and administrative borders which have created independent functional units (the County of Istria and Blagoevgrad County), they have been formally and symbolically separated from the rest of their historical regions, and have established independent identities. Nevertheless, people in Pirin Macedonia and Istria have retained strong territorial and regional awareness and connectivity with the rest of the Macedonian/Istrian regions. The two regions are also comparable in the way the local community perceives and changes the symbolic dimensions of the territory it inhabits, demonstrating the fluidity of the regions as both administrative and cultural entities. Because of that fluidity, any analysis of the regional identities in Pirin Macedonia and Istria, when placed in a historical perspective, should establish internal cultural characteristics through the prism of fixed external ones. The

border status of those regions has been a constant, and has influenced regional identities by necessitating the fluidity of local affiliation. As ruling empires and nations changed, identities also altered. Such change was not always dramatic in that one did not necessarily discard old identities in favour of new ones, although there were plenty of examples of such fluidity. It was also incremental – cultural habits and ways of living were altered gradually because of new political, economic and social circumstances.

The border regions of Istria and Pirin Macedonia are primarily communities of territory rather than of descent, their fluidity limiting rigid identification with anything else but location, and leading to selective reading of that location's history by different political systems and movements. Parallelly with the politicized regional identities, there exist nevertheless "natural" internal ones which define the regions from within. Those internal identities are often coined in opposition to not only one political option but to any political influence. Just like an Istrian or Pirin Macedonian can adopt a few political or national identities at the same time, they can also simultaneously resist the adoption of any, choosing to hide in the safety of their everyday customs and ways of living. "Old" collective identities thus tend to linger longer in border regions, and are never fully discarded. More often than not, their elements are interwoven into the building of new personal and collective identities. This stronger mingling of the contemporary with the traditional, of the political with the quotidian is what distinguishes Pirin Macedonia and Istria from the rest of their countries.

Because regional identities are difficult to subdue, political regimes have traditionally tried to control them. In the past, it was authoritative regimes and violence which restricted one's self-identification and demanded expressions of one's loyalty to the strong of the day. In the Balkan Wars and in both World Wars, the population was forced to take sides and declare a concrete identity. That identity changed as borders were redrawn and Bulgarians became Greeks, Turks or Macedonians (and vice versa), just as Slavs became Italians, Croats or Austrians in Istria. The fear or benefits associated with expressing a concrete identity sufficed to challenge the concept of multiculturalism. Nowadays, multiculturalism is still limited by the reality of physical borders and national states. That is to say that multiculturalist and pluri-culturalism are limited as concepts - by the existence of physical borders which hinder their universalism and thus their credibility, and as civil movements - by the prevalence of national identifications over regional ones on occasions of practical significance. This latter observation is not contradictory, however, with the

open character of border populations' identities. Multiculturalism and hybridity are themselves founded on practical rather than ideological foundations. When reviewing identity formation as a social process on individual and collective level, my research suggests that utility maximization is the prevailing cause for the fluidity of regional identification, but also for regionalism[203]. The particularly unprivileged situation of border populations in times of conflict, be it openly violent or "cold", and the economic benefits associated with identifying with the strong of the day, are likely the reasons behind such a practical view on identity. This is leading to three observations. Firstly, border regions which are nowadays economically more developed than the rest of their countries were in the not so distant past economically underdeveloped. The historical foundations of regionalism in economic underdevelopment and political instability seem to support a more traditional view on regionalism, as a form of juxtaposition of the (underdeveloped) periphery against the centre. Secondly, a practical/fluid identification seems to lead to economic prosperity but also to increased interethnic tolerance and inclusion, which is refuting realist theories that utility maximization is sought and achieved through conflict. In contrast, in Istria and Pirin Macedonia, utility maximization has been achieved through hybridity, malleability, and along the line of least resistance, all the while local customs, traditions and dialects have persevered providing the foundations for parallel identifications. And thirdly, the politicization of regional identity appears to be more a function of rationality, or a perception of what constitutes a rational choice in specific circumstances, than of cultural specificity. Regional identities are mobilized to address external events, rather than to merely satisfy internal needs. This last observation is concurrent with research by Dahl Fitjar on regions in Western Europe whereby (political) regionalism is found to be to a large extent justified and initiated after a rational (if not necessarily, conscious) cost-benefit analysis.[204] According to Dahl Fitjar, culture is much less of a factor in the politicization of identities than the economic circumstances of a region, which also explains why political regionalism varies across time, and why Pirin Macedonian regionalism has remained latent in the post-communist period. The external political events strengthening Istrian regionalism in the 1990s will be studied in the next chapter, while the co-relation between economic prosperity and the politicization of regional identities in Istria and Pirin Macedonia will be covered in detail in Chapter 7.

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[203] This conclusion is similar to Ernest Gellner's findings about the practical acceptance of nationalism as a genuine and clear means to both social inclusion and professional advancement.
[204] Dahl Fitjar (2009), p. 11-12.

Chapter 6

Political parties as shapers of regional identities and carriers of regionalism[1]

Even in the instances when regionalism is initiated spontaneously as an expression of the regional populations' need to seek a new form of identification and political expression, it needs the support of political leaders and parties in order to endure and grow. As already discussed in Chapter 2, the political factor found to be the most enabling for regionalism by Dahl Fitjar refers to vote and party distinctiveness on regional and national level, i.e. to what extent are regional political entities and actors seeking divergent policies from national ones.[2] The important feature is not the existence of regionalist political parties but the existence of incentives to pursue independence from central actors. Those incentives frequently come in the form of regional populations' dissatisfaction with central government's policies. Furthermore, as established in the previous chapter, the existence of a distinct (regional) history and culture does not necessarily relate positively to the politicization of regional identities.[3] It is rather the inhabitants' subjective perception and attitudes towards their region and the sense of community which lead to higher levels of politicization, and those are shaped actively by political leaders and agendas.

As already discussed, the inhabitants of border regions have fluid identities and are particularly prone to frequent changes in their perception of themselves and their communities. This chapter will explore the role political parties have played on influencing public opinion, and on the politicizing of regional identities in Istria and Pirin Macedonia since the early 1990s. In particular, the two largest regionalist political parties in those two regions will be studied, the Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS) in Istria and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) in Pirin

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[1] The official full name of IDS is IDS-DDI which stands for *Istarski demokratski sabor* (Istrian Democratic Assembly) and the party's name in Italian, *Dieta Democratica Istriana.* The official full name of VMRO is *VMRO-BND (*in Bulgarian, *Вътрешна македонска революционна организация - Българско национално движение,* and in English, *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Bulgarian National Movement).* The author has adopted for use the abbreviated IDS and VMRO throughout the entire text. In the case of VMRO, as a number of movements and parties under the same name have existed in the past, and exist now in Bulgaria and FYROM, a specific distinction would be made when the name is used to indicate another organization.

[2] Dahl Fitjar, Rune. *The Rise of Regionalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

[3] See Schrijver's research on the performance of regionalist parties in France, Schrijver, Frans J. "Electoral Performance of Regionalist Parties and Perspectives on Regional Identity in France." Regional and Federal Studies. 2004, 14 (2), pp. 187-210.

Macedonia, and to what extent their political agendas and policies have differed between themselves and from the ones carried out on central level.

1. The political "imagining" of regions

Geopolitical identities alter over time, and both the emotions and the rational choice of individuals can be captured and used, or even manipulated, by political leaders who grasp well the changes which are taking place. "Regions" are not an exception. According to Iver Neumann, they can be spoken into existence suggesting that they can be actively shaped by political parties' agenda.[4] Within such a perspective of region-building in Europe, it is primarily seen as a means of devolving certain powers from the central state to the regional level.[5] To quote Neumann, "regions are invented by political actors as a political programme, they are not simply lying around waiting to be discovered. But when they are invented… - history is shorn of all alternative stories which could have been told, and the story of the particular region is allowed to reign supreme."[6] Bechev agrees, stating that "cultural, historical and geographical arguments are inextricably linked. They are also contested and politicized. What ultimately matters is how space and belonging are interpreted by the relevant political actors."[7] Within this context, the regional identities of Pirin Macedonia and Istria have been shaped by two regional parties, VMRO and IDS respectively, which have chosen to tell two opposing stories about those regions, thus building different political realities in them.[8] IDS built a story about a pluri-national, pluri-linguistic region with a long tradition of cohabitation, tolerance and prosperity, a region which is more European, more civilized, more peaceful and, therefore, economically better developed than the rest of the country. All past conflicts on the territory of the region, and there is an abundance of examples of conflict in Istria, have been attributed to external forces – an "outside other" (conflicts between European powers, emigration and population exchanges, and central government decisions) -- while internally, the different ethnic groups have been presented to have lived in peace and harmony. VMRO, in contrast, built a story of a region which, although again a victim of international politics (the

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[4] Neumann, Iver B. "Regionalization and Democratic Consolidation," p. 60 in Zielonka, Jan & Alex Pravda (eds.). *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe Volume 2: International and Transnational Factors*. Published to Oxford Scholarship Online, November 2003.

[5] *ibid*

[6] *ibid*

[7] Bechev, Dimitar. "Contested Borders, Contested Identity: The Case of Regionalism in Southeast Europe." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* 2004 (4), pp 77–95.

[8] *Ibid,* p. 71

interests and whims of the Great Powers, Serbianism, Communism), is characterized by an

almost militant Bulgarian identity, the last stronghold of Bulgarianism. In both instances,

the political storytelling continues to rely on the existence of outside others against whose

policies the agenda of VMRO and IDS are built. In the case of IDS, that outside other was

and continues to be the central Croatian government. IDS dismissed the nationalism of the

central Croatian government in the 1990s, and returns to anti-nationalist rhetoric on a

regular basis, regardless of which political party holds central power. In the case of VMRO,

the threats from outside vary from elections to elections, and can be the governments of

neighbouring countries (FYROM, Serbia, Turkey or Greece), the national government, or

minority groups (ethnic, religious or sexual). It has criticized the lack of patriotism of central

governments expressed in the allegedly soft line of politics against neighbouring countries,

in particular FYROM, the provision of extensive rights to minority groups, or the lack of an

active demographic policy. In the defining of regional identities, both parties have applied

an approach used widely in the Balkans, and observed and documented by Maria Todorova

in *Imagining the Balkans*. According to Todorova, the stigma of being Balkan, i.e. un-

European, nationalistic and violent, is projected onto one's neighbours in order to emerge

as more "European" or "Western" by comparison. The negative Balkan image is politicized,

and steadily present in the political discourse on the Balkans.[9] HDZ, the party holding

political power on central level in Croatia throughout most of the 90s, used it widely on

national level, comparing the (more European) Croats with the "Balkan" Serbs. Croatian

president Tuđman consistently claimed that Croatia's struggle for independence was a

flight away from the Balkans and towards Europe.[10] Similarly, IDS shaped Istrian regional

identity in the 1990s by building the region's image as more "Western" and "European" in

comparison with the more "Balkan" eastern parts of the country.[11] It thus politicized the

region's identity in opposition to the negative image of the Balkans. VMRO is doing the

same thing à propos FYROM emphasizing the latter's unwillingness to officially recognize

the existence of a Bulgarian minority on its territory. It insists that the establishment of

cooperation with neighbouring countries and the resolving of bilateral issues is a step

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[9] Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 in Bechev, p. 87

[10] Bechev, p. 87; Bakic-Hayden, M. "Nesting Orientalism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia." *Slavic Review,* 1995, 54 (4), pp. 917-931.

[11] For example, IDS's party programme (erroneously) states that "IDS seeks that the internal organization of the countries on whose territories it operates is compatible with this of Western European countries, which are founded on regionalism, as the most appropriate form for organizing society," and there is frequent mentioning of Europe and Istria's European heritage in all official party documents.

towards FYROM's membership in the European Union, a step the former is unwilling to make and is thus cementing its position in the "Balkans". VMRO's Vice-President and MEP Angel Dzhambazki has adopted such a strategy in the European Parliament, identifying the "satisfaction of all European standards for the protection of the civil and political rights of national minorities" as a prerequisite for the EU membership of FYROM, Serbia and Kosovo, and sharing that he has received "worrisome information from Macedonia and Serbia for political persecution and repression that is nationally driven". [12] However, while in the case of Croatia in the 1990s, the central government's policy was having a really negative impact on Istria, FYROM has not been taken as a serious threat by a majority of the Pirin Macedonian electorate. As a result, the politicization of the Pirin Macedonian regional identity has been lagging behind the region's cultural association. That clearly indicates that in order for a political strategy based on an "outside other" factor to be successful, it cannot built a fully "imagined" reality, but has to refer to at least a partially plausible threat.

2.   General characteristics of regionalist parties

Given the diversity of regionalist projects, the political parties associated with them also differ significantly from one another. The most widely studied regionalist parties are ethno-regional in character reinforcing ethnic and regional identities and making strong demands on states for autonomy or independence.[13] Overall, culture and/or ethnicity frequently provide the foundation of regionalist political projects, however, those can be also triggered by purely economic or geographic factors. Since regionalist parties typically originate from social cleavages between a specific region and the centre, they have been shown to increase government instability and to encourage ethnic conflict and secessionism.[14] Their emergence is typically sudden, called for by the evolving of specific historic developments which create a rift between regional electorates and central governments. For the same reason, they are not stable entities themselves, and can

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[12] Interestingly, Dzhambazki uses the name Macedonia, not FYROM when referring to the country although his party denies the existence of a separate Macedonian nation; see Dzhambazki, Angel, speech in front of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Human Rights, December 3, 2014, available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXnfr_TzTdU&feature =youtu.be
[13] Brancati, Dawn. "The Origins and Strengths of Regional Parties." *British Journal of Political Science*, 2007, 38, pp. 135-159, at p. 135.
[14] *ibid*

transform over short periods of time from local and regional to national parties or vice versa. Their electorate may equally disperse as a result of political, social or economic instability, forcing regional parties to compete in national elections or to disappear altogether. Competition at national elections is particularly popular in centralized states, where the protection of regional interests can be carried out only on national level, in central state institutions such as legislative bodies and ministries. As a result, there are few regionalist parties which have persevered over the years and have had a continuous impact on regional level. Their life-span and their relatively small electorate (when compared with major national parties) should not diminish their impact on national politics and on regional governance. Regionalist parties are present in almost every country of the world and, in the most positive cases, have led to the democratization of national systems of governance and improved standards of living for regional populations.[15] In the other extreme, they have helped cement the political status quo by failing to address regional populations' needs, and deliver the accountability and democratization promised by proponents of decentralization.

Overall, there are no typical regionalist parties. Their political platforms can be equally based on extreme right or left ideology, and their objectives can vary from democratization and increased accountability to preservation of the status quo, and political profiteering. Because of this array of ideological platforms, regionalist parties cannot be identified by their political affiliation.[16] The pursuing of political regionalism is also not a discerning factor as many regionalist parties do not place importance on self-governance (eg. the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina in Serbia and the Valencian Union in Spain), and some are even nationalist in character (eg. VMRO in Pirin Macedonia, the Ulster Democratic Party in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland). That is to say, regionalism and regional affirmation do not imply *per se* a contradiction or opposition to nation-building either[17], although they typically emerge from regionally-based social cleavages[18]. The lowest common denominator among regionalist parties then appears to

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[15] Brancati (2007), p. 135.
[16] Raos, Višeslav. "The Electoral Success Of Regionalist Parties In Croatia And Serbia." *Političke perspective*, 2014, 10, pp. 57-82.
[17] Núñez, Xosé-Manoel. "Autonomist Regionalism within the Spanish State of the Autonomous Communities: An Interpretation." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2007, 5 (3-4), pp. 121-141, at p. 123.
[18] Brancati (2007), p. 135.

be the identification with and representation of a specific sub-national territory and social group.[19]

3. Political parties associated with Istria and Pirin Macedonia

3.1. Left-Right, Tan-Gal dimensions

As already established, the politicization of regional identities often depends on the support of political actors, sometimes new ones, which take ownership of the process. The political parties which are associated with the regions of Istria and Pirin Macedonia are IDS and VMRO respectively. The former is physically and ideologically centred on the County of Istria, represents Istrian interests on national level, and controls public institutions on regional level. The latter is traditionally tied to the vote of the Macedonians in Bulgaria, which is spread throughout the country but is crucial for its existence, follows right-wing Bulgarian nationalist ideology in particular in connection with the identification of the Pirin Macedonian population, and has been a permanent factor in local governance since the early 1990s. The following section will evaluate both parties' policies and political behaviour, using the popular Left-Right, Tan-Gal classification and quoting expert surveys.

An overview of IDS's and VMRO's political agendas reveals that not only are the two parties completely different in terms of the policies they pursue, but that VMRO is tied to the Pirin Macedonian region mostly in history. Despite its political platform which mentions the "Macedonian question" as one of its top priorities, and its electorate which consists to a large extent of descendants of migrants from all three parts of Macedonia, the focus of most of VMRO's policy is not on the Pirin Macedonian region, and decentralization is not on its political agenda. Instead of adopting a political agenda aiming at increasing the political independence and preserving the economic well-being of the region, VMRO has built its political platform on the foundation of (Bulgarian) nationalism. The party has simply continued the policies of its predecessor, which was dismantled during the communist period in Bulgaria, without considering that nationalism is not an ideology particularly suited for periods of peace, in particular in multi-national regions. Similarly, instead of working for the democratization and development of the region, it has focused on securing control over its public institutions. Its members have been well represented in local legislative councils and have been very vocal in relation to specific political issues. In

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[19] Rokkan Stein and Derek W. Urwin. *The Politics of Territorial Identity: Studies in European Regionalism*. London: ECPRSage Publications, 1982 (sponsored by the European Consortium for Political Research), p. 8.

short, VMRO nowadays is a party which maintains an increasingly nationalist agenda within which Pirin Macedonians have the special status of both fighters and martyrs for their Bulgarianness, and whose electorate consists of old supporters of VMRO and their descendants, most of whom are Macedonian, or young supporters of the extreme right. In contrast, IDS is a party which competes nationally, however, generates minimal support outside of Istria despite the existence of a significant number of Istrians (people with Istrian origins) living in the rest of the country. Support for it is thus geographically limited to people who reside on the territory of Istria County, which means that its popularity is above all a factor or proximity to electorates and their problems. It is a liberal party, as far as human rights are concerned, yet rather restrictive in its control of power on regional level with its members keeping tight grasp of all leading positions in regional institutions.

But how can the two parties be categorized on a more basic level? The left-right, conservative-liberal dimensions are typically used for structuring competition among political parties in Europe.[20] The first is an economic Left-Right dimension concerned with economic redistribution, welfare, and government regulation of the economy. The Left prioritizes economic equality; the Right prioritizes individual economic freedom. Contestation on this dimension is diagnosed as the main dimension of party competition in Central and Eastern Europe.[21] A second cultural dimension, which incorporates several noneconomic issues (ecological, lifestyle and communal) is used parallelly for categorization purposes.[22] Under this dimension parties are qualified as either Gal (green/alternative/libertarian) or Tan (traditionalism/authority/nationalism).[23] In the West, there are strong affinities between Left and Gal and between Right and Tan. Research carried out by academics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill of 98 political parties in the EU, indicates that 81 political parties in the 14 larger EU countries are located in the Left-Gal and Right-Tan quadrants.[24] This same division when tested on political parties in Central and Eastern Europe indicates an opposite association. 50 of the researched 73 parties in 9 "new" Member States are either Left-Tan or Right-Gal.[25] The authors of the research explain the findings with the fact than communism in Eastern

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[20] Marks, Gary, Hooghe, Liesbet, Nelson, Moira & Erica Edwards. "Party Competition and European Integration in the East and the West: Different Structure, Same Causality." *Comparative Political Studies*, March 2006, 39(2), pp. 155-175.
[21] *ibid*, p. 157
[22] *ibid*
[23] *ibid*
[24] *ibid*
[25] *ibid*, p. 158

Europe was a Left-Tan phenomenon.[26] Communist regimes delivered more economic equality than market economies, and suppressed public dissent and alternative lifestyles. In contrast, reform parties catered to the demand for free markets and democratic opening of the political process. As a result, political parties which have tried to attract transition "losers" have done so by emphasizing economic equality and traditional authority, while parties representing transition "winners," or people who have benefited from transition, have repudiated authoritarianism and state control over the economy.[27]

When measured on the Left-Right, Tan-Gal axes, IDS's and VMRO's policies conform more to the Western European model. VMRO is a right, conservative party, member of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the European Parliament whose agenda for Pirin Macedonia revolves around Bulgarian nationalism and the obstructing of minority rights. IDS is a left, liberal, human rights-focused member of the Alliance for Liberals and Democrats in Europe which calls for administrative and fiscal decentralization.

An expert survey carried out by Benoit and Laver in 2003-2004 confirms these political orientations. IDS is located in the left, very close to the largest left-oriented party in Croatia, SDP, which explains coalitions with the former on central level.[28] The three areas where IDS's political stances are seen as most rigid are decentralization (pro), nationalism (anti), and EU membership (pro). The party is also perceived as highly supportive of former communist party officials preserving their right to hold public offices, i.e. against lustration; and supportive of secular principles in politics.[29] Contradictorily, it is more sympathetic to the cutting of public services than to an increase in tax rates, but only moderately supportive of privatization and foreign land ownership. Lastly, it is perceived as supportive of liberal social policy on matters like abortion, homosexuality and euthanasia.[30] In short, IDS is a Left-Gal party, which is more typical, as already explained in the "old" EU Member States than in the "new" ones. That is likely due to the heritage of the relatively liberal ex-Yugoslav federation in comparison with the rigid TAN communism of neighbouring countries (including Bulgaria). IDS's supporters identify the party as a left one, and are

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[26] *ibid*, p. 159
[27] *ibid*, p. 159; For an explanation of the "winners"-"losers" divide, see Tucker, Joshua A., Pacek, Alexander C. and Adam J. Berinsky. "Transitional Winners and Losers: Attitudes toward EU Membership in Post-Communist Countries." *American Journal of Political Science*, July 2002, 46 (3), pp. 557–571.
[28] Benoit, Kenneth & Michael Laver. *Party Policy in Modern Democracies*. April 2006, p. 254, available online at http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/ppmd/PPMD_11apr2006.pdf
[29] *ibid*
[30] *ibid*

frequently ex-members or supporters of the Yugoslav communist party (League of Communists of Yugoslavia) or at least pro-Yugoslav. In addition, IDS stands for anti-fascism[31] which is, in the case of all ex-Yugoslav countries, associated with the left ideology. There is somewhat of a discrepancy between IDS's left orientation[32] and its emphasis on economic development.[33] In IDS's programme and in the speeches of its leaders, the economy is placed as a major issue, and the vision of how Istria's economy should look is more right than left in orientation (support for privatization and private property, active attraction of investment, support for sale of land to foreigners, even cuts in social services). Many Yugoslav citizens perceived Yugoslavia's economic policy as centrist (between the left East and right West, with widespread public ownership and economic equality, however, allowing forms of private ownership and entrepreneurship), which explains IDS's supporters' economic ambivalence or hybridity.

Regarding VMRO, the same expert survey carried out by Benoit and Laver places it to the right, and describes it as nationalist, supportive of EU membership and privatization, opposing foreign land ownership, and opposing abortion, homosexual rights and euthanasia. [34] The party is perceived as ambivalent as far as lustration is concerned and supportive of relative secularization of politics. The policy areas in which the party scores highest, that is, for which it shows the highest support, are nationalism, opposition to foreign-land ownership, and opposition to abortion, homosexual rights and euthanasia. In other words, VMRO is a Right-Tan party, in stark contrast to IDS's political stances. There are, however, some areas where the parties' policies overlap, namely preference for

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[31] "Our regional identity, antifascism and multiculturalism are the values which define us" quote by Boris Miletić in "Regional identity is a sacred to us and we would like to take decisions concerning Istria in Istria" (author's translation from Croatian). *HINA*. 14 February, 2014, as published at www.jutarnji.hr

[32] "Europe needs the single market and the Euro, but it also needs a strong social state…I call for a Pact on Investments… an investment programme worth EUR 315 bn, as announced by EC Chief Juncker, could stimulate youth employment, open new work places, and lead to growth of the EU economy" - Ivan Jakovčić, speech at the European Parliament's session in Strasbourg, as published in the official webpage of Grad Pula, "Jakovčić in the European Parliament: Savings and cuts will not stimulate the EU economy; we need a Pact on Investments" (author's translation from Croatian), www.gradpula.com on 16 December, 2014. According to Jakovčić, thus, investments are important as an instrument for the redistribution of wealth.

[33] "IDS considers that new investments and the opening of new work places are the only means through which the negative trends in the economy can be reversed. An increase in the VAT will additionally dissimulate the economy and tamper with potential new investments," press conference given by Boris Miletić (author's translation from Croatian). "Boris Miletić: IDS does not support an increase in the VAT rate," published online on October 24th, 2013 at http://www.borismiletic.com/novosti/boris-miletic-ids-nije-za-povecanje-pdv-a/

[34] Benoit, Kenneth & Michael Laver. "Party Policy in Modern Democracies." April 2006, p. 252, available online at http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/ppmd/PPMD_11apr2006.pdf

cutting of public services as opposed to an increase in taxes, and support for EU membership. Interestingly, VMRO is evaluated by experts as a party which does not support the decentralization of both administration and decision-making.[35] In other words, it is seen both against regionalization and regionalism, which indicates a lack of any objective to politicize the (regional) identity of Pirin Macedonia. Any politicization is carried out through the lens of nationalism, where the importance of the national Bulgarian identity is emphasized over the regional Macedonian one.

Overall, there is an ambivalence in both party's political stances and behaviour. In the case of IDS, this ambivalence is in its economic policy which is not aligned with left ideology's focus on the more equal redistribution of public resources. In the case of VMRO, support for the increasingly supranational European Union makes it stand out from other extreme-right parties in Europe. It appears that both parties' primary focus is the securing of positions of authority in local, regional and even supranational institutions for its members, not for the purpose of reforming governance but rather for the protection of their own political interests. This ambivalence questions the genuineness of both political parties' policies, and will be referred to later in the chapter.

3.2. Political environment and legacy

The emergence of political regionalism might be supported by regional political actors, but it is also conditioned by developments on national and international level. National structures and parties control and shape, whether formally or unintentionally, the form which regional and local units might take. Frequently, regional self-governance simply reproduces the existing on national level governing structures and practices. Furthermore, the behaviour of central governments and large national parties sets a framework for their relations with regional actors. Simply said, the lack of understanding for regional issues on national level leaves room for the emergence of more grass-roots solutions.

The early 1990s were tumultuous years for the ex-communist states. Although the transition from communism to democracy did not follow the same path in all countries, it did unleash a wave of political activism in all of them which led to the establishment of numerous new political parties and players. In the period 1990-1993 most countries from

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[35] *ibid*

the ex-communist bloc adopted new constitutions or revised radically the existing ones.[36] The legacy of communist policies towards national minorities however persisted in that most new constitutions defined statehood in national-cultural rather than civic-territorial terms.[37] The state's "symbolic" ownership continued to belong to the dominant ethnic group.[38] This form of constitutional nationalism confirmed the permanent second-class citizenship of minority groups.[39] In the case of Bulgaria and Croatia, a review of those countries' constitutions reveals a different treatment of citizenship. The Croatian Constitution directly identifies the state with the nationality of the majority. In particular, its long preamble (*Historical Foundations*) outlines the historical right of the Croatian nation to statehood. The term "Croatian nation" is widely present throughout the whole text, while national groups different from the Croatian one receive the status of minorities: "the Republic of Croatia is hereby established as the nation state of the Croatian nation and the state of the members of its national minorities" (*Historical Foundations*).[40] The Constitution of Bulgaria avoids the direct identification of the nation with the state, and overall, seems to embrace civic nationalism, or "the concept of the nation as a civic one, where the national community is perceived as consisting of all citizens of the state."[41] This civic view of nationality has been one of the factors which have ensured the ethnic peace in the country in the 1990s and 2000s amidst the violent conflicts taking place in its neighbourhood.

In Croatia, where the nationalism of the majority has ruled unbridled through most of the studied period, IDS's party programme has stood out from state-level trends. IDS's programme does not talk about minority groups but rather of a hybrid regional culture characterized by pluri-nationalism and pluri-linguism. Such an approach to community building, as Pamela Ballinger observes, is a continuation of the hybridity ideologies (imperial cosmopolitanism and autonomism, Yugoslavism) used in earlier state-building

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[36] Stein, Jonathan P. (ed). *The Politics of National Minority Participation in Post-Communist Europe: State-Building, Democracy and Ethnic Mobilization*. New York: EastWest Institute, 2000, p. 9.
[37] *ibid*
[38] Stein, p. 10
[39] *ibid*
[40] Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Preamble, *Official Journal of the Republic of Croatia (Narodne novine)*, No. 56/90, 135/97, 8/98 – consolidated text, 113/2000, 124/2000 – consolidated text, 28/2001, 41/2001 – consolidated text, 55/2001 – correction, and Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (NN 76/2010), available online at http://www.sabor.hr/Default.aspx?art=2405
[41] Rechel, p. 344

projects.[42] The 1963 and 1974 Constitutions of Yugoslavia established that "the citizens are equal in rights and duties regardless of their nationality, race, gender, language, religion, education and social status (Articles 33 and 154 respectively)… Each citizen is guaranteed the right to freely express one's belonging to a particular nation or nationality, the free expression of one's culture, and the free use of one's language and alphabet (Articles 41 and 70 respectively)."[43] Similarly, IDS's party programme states that "The party supports the national, religious and gender equality of all citizens residing on the territory of the region. … Human rights….are the same for all people regardless of their nationality, heritage, race, gender, language, religion, political or other belief system, education, social or material status."[44]

The Yugoslav state was a federation and the multiculturalism of its population was an inevitable reality.[45] As the different nations mingled through mixed marriages or cultural and social exchanges, forms of pluri-culturalism, within the framework of Yugoslavism, developed in part of the population. In between the population censuses carried out in ex-Yugoslavia in 1971 and 1981, the number of people who identified themselves as "Yugoslav" increased from 1.3% to 5.4% of the total population.[46] The largest number of those lived in Belgrade, Vojvodina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Istria, and in the most ethnically mixed areas in Croatia.[47] The newly-created Yugoslav identity was associated with the ideals of communist internationalism.[48] It was inclusivist, stressing the class and cultural similarities of the national groups, and civic, assuming primary loyalty to the state.[49] According to Rakovac, it became a popular form of identification in Istria, which had been frequently impoverished until the end of World War II and torn by the conflicts of

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[42] Ballinger, Pamela. "'Authentic Hybrids' in the Balkan Borderlands." *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 45 (1), February 2004, pp. 31-60, at p. 48.

[43] Constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, adopted by the Federal People's Assembly on April 7th, 1963, *Official Gazette of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia*, 1963, No. 14; Constitution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, adopted by the Assembly on February 21st, 1974, *Yugoslav Official Gazette*, 1974, No 9.

[44] Party Programme IDS, Medulin: 7 July, 1991, author's translation from Croatian, text available online at http://www.ids-ddi.com/ids/3/0/168/Files/Programska_deklaracija.pdf

[45] Hayden, Robert. "Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia." *American Ethnologist*, November 1996, 23 (4), pp. 783-801, at p. 787; Volcic, Zala, "Neither 'East' nor 'West': The Past and Present Life of Yugoslav Identity." Sofia: CAS Working Paper Series No. 2, 2009 (supported by the Volkswagen Foundation), p. 10.

[46] Burg, Steven and Michael Berbaum. "Community, Integration and Stability in Multinational Yugoslavia." *American Political Science Review,* 1989, 83, pp. 535-554 as cited in Hayden, p. 789.

[47] Petrović, Ruža. *Migracije u Jugoslaviji i Etnički Aspekt*. Belgrade: SSO Srbije, 1987 as cited in Hayden, p. 789.

[48] Pleše, Zdenko. "Tito u Istri, Hrvatskom Primorju i Gorskom Kotaru 1946–1979." *Dometi Izvanredni svezak,* 1980, pp. 49–58 as cited in Ashbrook (2011), p. 878.

[49] Ashbrook (2011), *ibid*

neighbouring super powers and different national groups.[50] The Tito period, with its relative political stability and booming economy, is thus remembered by many Istrians as a golden age. As Yugoslavia decentralized, Istria experienced remarkable economic prosperity, which was a substantial break from the region's history of chronic poverty. The tourist sector blossomed in the 1970s and 1980s, and industry grew, especially shipbuilding and power generation, bringing wealth and improving the population's standard of living.[51] Ethnic tensions also waned, as the open conflicts between Italy and Yugoslavia were resolved and the formulation of a more exotic and hybrid regional culture proved to be the differentiation element for attracting Western European tourists.[52] The passage of time in an economically growing region led some of the post-war newcomers and their children to adopt an Istrian identity.[53] Evidence for this can be seen in the 1981 and 1991 censuses. In comparison with all other areas in Croatia, Istrians self-identified disproportionally more as either Yugoslav or by region.

After Tito's death, nationalism once again became a more contentious issue in Yugoslavia, and the nationalists' message "one-nation-one-state" became the norm. The economic decline since the mid-1970s exacerbated the situation, but Istria's relative wealth and its dependence on open-border economic policies limited the spread of Croatian nationalism to the region.[54] A plurality of Istrian voters rejected the nationalist platform of the newly-created Croatian state and its ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and sought a more open, less nationalist government. They also rejected renewed centralization emanating from Zagreb, as Italians and Croats alike desired autonomy as the only solution to distance the region from the military conflict in the rest of Croatia.[55] As a result, in 1991, fully 18% of the Istrian population registered themselves as Istrian (Hayden[56]; Statistical Yearbook 1992[57]). A majority of those people had a Croatian ethnicity.[58]

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[50] Rakovac, Milan. "Istranin Tumpić i njegova hrvatska Istra" in Tumpić, Dušan (ed.). *Hrvatska Istra*. Zagreb: Alinea, 1993, pp. 7–11 as cited in Ashbrook, p. 878.
[51] Ashbrook (2011), p 878.
[52] Ashbrook, John. *Buying and Selling the Istrian Goat: Istrian Regionalism, Croatian Nationalism and EU Enlargement.* Brussels: Presses interuniversitaires europeennes Peter Lang, 2008 as cited in Ashbrook (2011), p. 879.
[53] Ashbrook (2011), p. 879.
[54] Ashbrook (2011), p. 879.
[55] *ibid*. As the region most distanced from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Istria was spared from any signifcant military action on its territory.
[56] Hayden, Robert. "Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia." *American Ethnologist,* 1996, 23 (4), pp. 783–801 as cited in Ashbrook (2011), p. 879.

There is thus continuity from Istria being a successful Yugoslav region, both economically and socially, to Istria being a successful Croatian region. The concept of Istrianism with its stress on *convivenza* or ethnic cohabitation is reminiscent of the failed "Yugoslav" identity which was built on "Brotherhood and Unity." This is perhaps explaining why Istrians vote predominantly for left parties dismissing almost entirely the Croatian right, which is associated by them with nationalism, and thus seen as an opposing ideology to the previous socialist system. This trend is in sharp contrast with the political situation on national level, where the right, with a few exceptions, has dominated the political system since the fall of Yugoslavia.

While IDS's regionalism is founded on the premises of Yugoslavism, VMRO's political roots lie deeper in the past, in the inter-War period when the party had complete political control over Pirin Macedonia and large influence on national level. VMRO's traditions and history bind it to the issue which defined it in the past and justified its reestablishment in the 1990s. The pursuing of a nationalist agenda is not breaking with traditions but rather their extension to modern politics. The old VMRO similarly combined a regionalist with a nationalist agenda. Although focused on the "Macedonian question" and region, it strongly propagated the Bulgarian ethnicity of the Slav population in Pirin Macedonia and the wider Macedonian region. Again, like VMRO nowadays, it participated in politics on both national and regional level, however, it was much stronger in Pirin Macedonia than the present VMRO would likely be, and was paradoxically for a nationalist party, frequently in conflict with the central government. Additionally, it was conservative and traditional, and served as an instrument for preserving the status quo rather than for modernization. Thus in the case of VMRO, we can talk about conservative regionalism, politicized as a form of nationalism. Such a form of regionalism cannot be limited to a separate territory, in particular if the predominant national identification in the region coincides with the predominant national identification on country level.

The different regionalist projects established in Istria and Pirin Macedonia were shaped by the different political situations in Croatia and Bulgaria. The violent conflict in ex-Yugoslavia and the nationalism which overtook Croatia stirred opposition in a region which was distanced geographically from the areas where the fighting took place, and which was

[57] *Statistički ljetopis* (*Statistical Yearbook*) 1992. Zagreb: Republic of Croatia, 1992 as cited in Ashbrook, p. 879.
[58] Zorko, Marta and Matija Fontana. "A Geopolitical Background of 'Istrianism': An Analysis of Istrian Regional Identification." *Contemporary Issues*, 2014, 7, pp. 78-95.

unsatisfied with the international isolation of the country. The politicization of the region's identity led by IDS was thus a spontaneous process capturing public sentiments. The opening of political processes in Bulgaria led to the emergence of various political projects, a wide majority of which were, however, led by previously suppressed groups in society. The majority of the newly-founded political parties in the early 1990s had existed prior to their banning by the communist regime, with VMRO being one of them. Because of that, its electorate, its initial funding, and its political agenda were all "taken" from its predecessor, which meant that the party did not emerge in reaction to a political need. Its initial agenda and activities were not thought over but rather "transferred" from a different time and circumstances. As such, they lacked authenticity and failed to address the needs of the Pirin Macedonian population.

3.3. Agendas and impact

3.3.1. VMRO: Foundations and history

VMRO has a long and violent history. Its influence over Bulgarian politics on national and regional level has been significant since the late 19th century due to the large percentage of Bulgarians who are with Macedonian origins and the party's aggressive pursuing of political objectives. Traditionally, Bulgarian Macedonians, a majority of whom still resides in Pirin Macedonia, profess Macedonian regional and Bulgarian national identity. That identity has experienced periods of politicization and depoliticization, with VMRO being the leading political force behind the former process, and national governments usually orchestrating the latter. There is thus a historical clash between VMRO and national governments, which are traditionally depicted by the party as weak and indecisive in progressing Bulgarian interests. VMRO's regionalism is unusual in the fact that, although ethnic in character, it promotes an ethnicity which is dominant on national level. It is furthermore less liberal in its treatment of ethnic and cultural minorities than central governments, and its influence on Pirin Macedonia has not had a noticeable democratizing effect.

The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO or IMRO)[59] was founded in 1893 in Salonica. Another wing of the organization, the Supreme Macedonian Committee of VMRO, or "the Supremacists," was established in Bulgaria two years later in 1895. The

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[59] VMRO is a descendant from the organization established at the end of the 19th century and becoming known with the name Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) after 1918.

main purpose of the organization was to lead the liberation movement in Macedonia (from the Ottoman Empire), but divisions between the two wings developed rapidly. VMRO stood for an independent Macedonia, whereas the Supremacists wanted the union of Macedonia with Bulgaria. Very soon, Bulgarian politicians became deeply involved in the rivalries between the two fractions, and the Macedonian question started to control Bulgarian politics. In the name of Macedonia, assassinations were regularly carried out on the streets of Sofia, and terror became part of everyday life in Pirin Macedonia.

While in Ottoman Macedonia VMRO had to operate as a secret organization, in Bulgaria it established itself as a political organization and played a key role in the history of the region and in the Bulgarian political system.[60] The overall Bulgarian population comprised many people of Macedonian origin. By 1934, more than 10 per cent of Sofia's population was made up of Macedonian and Thracian refugees. Macedonian activists caused much instability by continuing their feuds and violence within Bulgaria.[61] They also had direct control over Bulgarian political institutions since Macedonians in Bulgaria had been accepted in the higher ranks of the public sector.[62] That reconfirmed the overlap between Bulgarian nationalism and Macedonism among Bulgarian Macedonians, which had been strong to begin with as most refugees had been chased from their homes precisely because of their Bulgarian identification, and their understanding of Macedonism as a regional identity within a national Bulgarian one.

By the interwar period, VMRO had effectively seized political control of Pirin Macedonia, from where it launched numerous armed raids into the territory of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) and into Greece.[63] The Pirin Macedonian region continuously attracted Bulgarian refugees from Greece and from Vardar Macedonia, which meant that the region was torn by perpetual poverty. In the mid-1920s, the population of Pirin Macedonia numbered close to 700 000 people, which was twice the region's current population, and 12 to 13 per cent of the total Bulgarian population.[64] The size of VMRO's electorate provided it with significant leverage in front of other political

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[60] Brailsford, p. 132
[61] Poulton, Hugh. *Who Are the Macedonians?*. London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 1995, pp. 79-80, cited in Lenkova, Mariana. "Minorities in Sourtheast Europe: Macedonians of Bulgaria." Centre for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME-SE), report available online at http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/pdf/cedime-se-bulgaria-macedonians.PDF
[62] Gounaris, Basil, C. "Macedonian Questions." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2002, 2 (3), pp. 63-94, at p. 86.
[63] Poulton, p. 80
[64] Gounaris, p. 85

parties which frequently had no choice but to acquiesce to VMRO's violent activities. In particular in the interwar period, Pirin Macedonia was functioning like a "state within the state,[65]" with VMRO having significant autonomy in the region. That finally provoked the reaction of the central state, and in the 1920s the Agrarian party of Stamboliyski launched a campaign for the integration of the local and refugee population in Pirin Macedonia. This attempt, combined with a policy of compromise over Macedonia (culminating in the signing of the Treaty of Nis between Bulgaria and Serbia which denounced VMRO and undertook obligations to dismember the organization), in return provoked VMRO to assassinate Stamboliyski in 1923. Overall, the death toll of VMRO's activities in the ensuing years until 1934 was believed to be about 884.[66] This wave of violence triggered sharp public reaction and provided the central government with the incentive to dismantle the organization.

The Bulgarian Communist Party which was also gaining popularity in Bulgaria saw VMRO as its competitor in Pirin Macedonia. Being on the opposite ideological spectrum, it focused on reducing VMRO's power in the region by infiltrating and splitting the organization. At its January 1934 meeting, the Comintern recognized the existence of a separate Macedonian nation,[67] which created a new layer in Macedonians' already complex identity. The Party overtook control of the entire country after World War II and continued to advance the existence of a Macedonian ethnicity and to even promote cultural autonomy for Pirin Macedonians.[68] In the period 1946-1963, the population of Pirin Macedonia did what border region inhabitants excel at – it "listened" to political expectations and adjusted its identification accordingly. As a result, the number of people who declared themselves "Macedonian" varied from 178 862 in 1956[69] to 1 437 people[70] in 1965 (less than one percent of the region's population). The former census followed the Communist Party's decision to promote the existence of a separate Macedonian identity; the latter – reflected the increasing emphasis on the building of a "unified Bulgarian socialist nation" where the

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[65] VMRO declared Pirin Macedonia as its "state within the state" ("*държава в държавата*") with a special decree on 22 August, 1922.

[66] Vlasidis, Vlasis. "I Esoteriki Makedhoniki Epanastatiki Organosi kai I drasi tis stin elliniki Makedhonia ston mesopolemo (1919-1928)" (in English, "IMRO and its Inter-war Activity in Greek Macedonia"), PhD thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1996 as referred in Gounaris, p. 85.

[67] Vlahov, Dimitar. *Memoirs*. Skopje, 1970, p. 357 quoted in *ibid*, p. 98

[68] Poulton, pp. 107-108 in Lenkova, p. 7.

[69] Lenkova, p. 9; Mahon, p. 398; "Population Census, 1 December, 1956: General Results*,*" Vol. II. Sofia: CSU, 1960, p. 106, p. 110, pp. 214-230 as cited in Marinov, pp. 238-239.

[70] "Population Census Results from 1 December, 1965." *Blagoevgrad County*, Vol. I/1. Sofia: CSU, 1967, pp. 11-12, p. 118, p. 125 as cited in Marinov, p. 241.

concept of an ethnic minority was non-existent[71].[72] In 1963, the Bulgarian Communist Party's plenum had decreed that the population in Bulgaria was Bulgarian only and that Pirin Macedonia's population did not constitute a Macedonian minority. The results of the 1965 census thus reflected the Party's new policy of erasing the (national) Macedonian identity in Bulgaria. In the long run, the policy was successful; in the short run, it intensified the insecurities around the collective regional identity. The population feared and was uncertain as to how to identify its ethnic background (regardless of whether it thought it was Bulgarian or Macedonian) which kept changing according to some abstract, state-defined criteria, [73] as in the past it had changed under pressure from the Ottomans, Greeks or Bulgarians.

During the communist period thus the Macedonian question in Bulgaria was resolved by being forbidden. Almost no newspapers or other printed sources of information from Yugoslav or Greek Macedonia were available in the country. International travel was highly restricted and controlled by the authorities. Economically, some material improvements were introduced to the lives of Pirin Macedonians to diminish the attraction of the Macedonian Republic in Yugoslavia, which had a higher standard of living and less state control over cultural expression.[74] If ethnic problems existed on regional level, the regime did its best to make them structurally invisible.[75]Mostly, however, in the days of communism, in a one-party system, the exchange value of Macedonian identity was not treasured by many, and was easily suppressed.[76]

In December 1992, the first post-communist census was conducted in Bulgaria. It included a partly open question about ethnic identification, and about 11 000 people, mainly from the Pirin region, self-identified as Macedonians. [77] The census did not measure regional

[71] With the exception of the small Jewish and Armenian communities.

[72] Poulton, Hugh. *Who are the Macedonians?.* C. Hurst and Co. Publishers, 2000, p. 150 in Lenkova, p. 8.

[73] Mahon, p. 398, Gruev, Michail, Tepavicharov, Vesselin, Vassileva-Grueva, Petya, Kotzeva-Popova, Violeta and Maria Kostadinova (eds.), 2011.

[74] *ibid*

[75] *ibid and* Gruev, Michail, Tepavicharov, Vesselin, Vassileva-Grueva, Petya, Kotzeva-Popova, Violeta and Maria Kostadinova (eds.), 2011.

[76] Gounaris, p. 86

[77] Zhelyazkova, A., Kosseva, M.& Marko Hajdinjak. "Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Bulgaria: Bulgarian Ethnic Model – Parallel Cohabitation or Multicultural Recognition?", part of ACCEPT PLURALISM 7th Framework Programme Project, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies: 2010, p. 21 (available online at http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Diversity_Discourses_BG.pdf). / Ivanov, Mihail. "On the Macedonian Authenticity." *New Balkans Politics*, 2003 (6), available online at

identification, however, and since Macedonism in Bulgaria is a layer of the Bulgarian ethnicity, its results are not indicative of the strength of the regional identity.

More importantly, with the democratization of the political system, several Macedonian organisations were founded in Bulgaria. The most successful of them, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Union of the Macedonian Societies (referred to as VMRO further in the text) was registered in November, 1990. Initially, the organization was not a political party, but gradually transitioned into such, inheriting the restituted property of the original VMRO. It claimed to be reviving the old VMRO and its ideas about the national unity of the Bulgarian and the Macedonian people. Its supporters also believed that Yugoslav Macedonia was a pure creation of the Comintern, supported by the Bulgarian communists. The organisation published pamphlets denying the legitimacy of a separate Macedonian nation.[78] In December 1994, VMRO's candidates ran in the general elections and won two seats in the parliament.

Despite its vocal involvement in Bulgarian foreign policy, and its initial rigidity towards FYROM, VMRO has since the early 1990s accepted the existence of FYROM as a separate nation-state. Its leaders have showed understanding that history has evolved, and that Bulgaria has no interest in becoming involved in the broader Balkan conflicts (through territorial claims over Macedonia). The party's primary treatment of the issue has been the insistence that no Macedonian ethnic minority exists on the territory of Bulgaria, and in particular in Pirin Macedonia, and that in contrast, an unrecognized Bulgarian minority exists in FYROM. Its major accomplishment in Pirin Macedonia has been the prevention of alternative political projects, treating the Macedonian identity as an ethnic one, to emerge and grow.

The number of people with ethnic Macedonian identity who reside in Bulgaria, and in particular in Pirin Macedonia, is nowadays low. Krassimir Kanev from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee has estimated that number to be some 15 000 – 25 000 people on national level.[79] According to the latest population census carried out in 2011, the population of Blagoevgrad County totals 323 552 people. 88.6% of the population declare themselves Bulgarian, 6% Turkish, 3.4% Roma, and the remaining 2% declare themselves as either

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http://www.newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/On%20the%20Macedonian%20Authenticity#.VTpCkvm
UeBI, also as cited in Marinov, p. 245.
[78] Mahon, p. 403.
[79] data for 1998; Kanev as cited in Lenkova, Mariana.

"other" or "unstated." [80] The region is near the national average in terms of ethnic diversity. Despite the proximity to Greece, no sizeable Greek minority exists mostly due to the population exchanges which took place in the 20th century. Only 54 people in Blagoevgrad County declare themselves to be ethnic Greeks. Similarly, only 814 people in Blagoevgrad County (0.3% for the county's population) identify themselves as ethnic Macedonians. [81] With the exception of the Turkish minority, we cannot then conclude that on the territory of Pirin Macedonia exist competing ethnic identities. The situation is similar to that in Istria where the Italian and Slovenian minorities are not significantly large to associate Istrianism with them. In both regions thus, regional identities branch out of the identity of the majority. In both regions, that would not have been the case had alternative political projects won over the regional electorates. In the case of Istria, a right-oriented political party could have strengthened the nationalism of the Croatian majority, while in Pirin Macedonia, a separate identification founded on Macedonian ethnicity could have spread among the regional population making irredentism more plausible. A number of organizations which claimed to promote the rights of ethnic Macedonians in Bulgaria were active in Pirin Macedonia in the 1990s and attempted to register as political parties. [82] Had they been able to gain official status, or to gain popularity, it was likely that a new version of the regional identity could have emerged. VMRO, however, fought those on both regional and national level, and prevented them from becoming a political factor in Pirin Macedonia. According to the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the vast majority of the Slavic population in Pirin Macedonia nowadays has a national Bulgarian self-consciousness and a regional Macedonian identity [83], which is also the case with the regional identity in Istria. In both counties, it was IDS and VMRO which backed and promoted such visions of the collective identity.

Although Macedonian nationalism has not been successful in Bulgaria, Bulgarian nationalism has proven a winning strategy, both on national level and in Pirin Macedonia. Three nationalist parties were represented in the latest Bulgarian Parliament [84]: Ataka, NFSB and VMRO. The latter two had formed a political coalition, immediately prior to the

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[80] "2011 Population Census - Main Results." Sofia: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2011.
[81] 2011 Population Census. "Population by Ethnic Group and Mother Tongue, Blagoevgrad County." Sofia: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2011, available online in English at http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R9.aspx?OBL=BLG
[82] Independent Macedonian Organization Ilinden, Traditional Macedonian Organization TMO, United Macedonian Organization OMO – Ilinden, OMO Ilinden Pirin etc.
[83] Lenkova, p. 14.
[84] 2014-2016

parliamentary elections in 2014, called "Patriotic Front". The coalition received 239 101 votes, and together with the 148 262 people who voted for Ataka, the nationalist vote in Bulgaria came close to 400 thousand people, or 11.8% of those who voted, and 5 % of the entire population.[85] At the presidential elections which took place at the end of 2016 support for extreme right parties grew even further. All three parties united behind VMRO's presidential candidate, and received 14.97% of the cast votes on national level, or 573 016 votes altogether.[86] In Blagoevgrad County, the coalition received 15.8% of the cast votes which was slightly higher than the national average.[87] At the previous parliamentary elections (held in May 2013), VMRO had run independently, which was not typical for the party but had revealed its election capacity. It had collected 66 803 votes, or 1.9% of those who had voted, and had failed to enter the national parliament. In Blagoevgrad County, the party had received 2.9 % of all votes, or 4 239 votes. [88] In other words, VMRO's election capacity by itself is rather low, however, as a member of larger coalitions, the party has been able to continuously gain leverage and political representation on national level. As already explained in Chapter 4, no elections are carried out in Bulgaria on county level. On local level, mayors are elected in direct elections, and because of the diverse composition of Pirin Macedonia's population, there is significant variation between municipalities and election years. No single party has had distinct and continuous influence over the executive branch in Pirin Macedonia, and a large number of parties and coalitions have alternated in winning the local elections. There is thus no indication that single political interests have controlled the region. If anything, it is visible that the population is highly divided along ethnic and political (left-right) lines, and that no unifying regional identity is interwoven in the political system. The situation is indeed in sharp contrast with Istria where the same (regionalist) party has had control over the region's administrative and decision-making institutions for the past 22 years. This said, however, VMRO's influence over Pirin Macedonia has not been insignificant. Because of its traditional involvement with the region, the party has been adamant in controlling the way in which the population identifies itself. It has successfully obstructed any notion of the existence of an ethnic Macedonian identity, and has also fought the Muslim minority's representation in the region's institutions. This way it has blocked any public discussions on the multinational

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[85] Bulgarian Central Election Commission, official election results available at
https://results.cik.bg/pi2014/rezultati/index.html
[86] Bulgarian Central Election Commission, official election results available at
https://results.cik.bg/pvrnr2016/tur1/president/index.html
[87] *ibid*
[88] Parliamentary elections, 2014 and 2013: Election results. Bulgarian Central Election Commission,
www.cik.bg

character of the collective identity, and has served as a brake to any attempts of reinventing the region's identity. Given Pirin Macedonia's past support for the extreme right, and the growing popularity of nationalist political parties on regional level, it is likely that VMRO's influence over Pirin Macedonia would gradually increase. Unfortunately, there are no indications that this influence would lead to the region's further democratization and the reinvention of the collective identity into anything else but Bulgarian nationalism.

VMRO's influence over Bulgarian politics in general, and Pirin Macedonia in particular, does not come from generating high support on national and local elections, although the party does perform consistently well on both, but rather from the methods it uses for its own promotion, and for the advancement of its agenda. VMRO's leaders and activists frequently organize and participate in street protests: in 1996-1997 they participated in protests against the left government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, in 2013 - against the right government of GERB, and in the same year - against the election of an ethnic Turk from the Movement of Rights and Freedoms as governor of Blagoevgrad County. VMRO is also among the most vocal opponents of ethnic, sexual and religious minority rights, and at times had a rather militant stance towards FYROM. As the public's interest in Vardar and Aegean Macedonia decreased, support for Bulgarian nationalism and social conservatism grew. Being a populist party, and operating on a level close to the public (at public demonstrations and protests), VMRO "felt" those trends immediately, and adjusted its agenda in order to derive a political benefit from them. As a result, the "Macedonian question" lost its central position. According to Roudometof,[89] although VMRO's influence over Bulgaria's foreign policy towards FYROM had been significant in the 1990s, the party failed to mobilize significant support among the Bulgarian population on that topic. As a result, VMRO's interest in FYROM decreased, and with it, Pirin Macedonia, as the only part of the region where Bulgarian nationalism has prevailed, also lost its importance for the party's political activities.

VMRO's political legacy has overall served as much as a positive as a negative factor for the party's political performance. In the 1990s much of the funding which the party obtained came in the form of donations from old supporters and the restitution of property which had belonged to the old VMRO. Additionally, most of the people who voted for it were of Macedonian descent and supporters of VMRO from before the communist period, i.e. from

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[89] Roudometof, Victor. *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001.

the moment of its founding, the party already had an established electorate. Because of that, however, VMRO also inherited the agenda of its predecessor, and in order to keep its electorate satisfied, it had to focus its political activities on Pirin Macedonia and the broader Macedonian region. As a result, its leaders frequently talked about the Bulgarian nationality of the majority of the population in Vardar and Aegean Macedonia, and in domestic politics, focused on criticizing the Bulgarian left which had been instrumental for dismantling VMRO and displacing its leaders throughout the country during the communist period. With the aging of its initial electorate, and the diminishing of the importance of the "Macedonian" question among the Bulgarian public, the party had to reinvent itself. Nationalism emerged as a growing trend among a certain segment of the electorate (young, less educated Bulgarians), and VMRO was the first party to recognize that trend and adjust its agenda to address it. Focus thus shifted to Bulgarian nationalism, not vis-à-vis neighbouring countries but domestic minority groups, and social conservatism, as expressed in the undermining of the rights of sexual, ethnic and religious minorities. The party's political activities were increasingly carried out on the streets rather than in legislative and executive institutions, to which VMRO also had access.

3.3.2. VMRO: Current political agenda

To quote VMRO's political programme, the focus of the party's activities nowadays is on "contemporary Bulgarian nationalism"[90]. Priority election topics are the preservation of Bulgarian cultural identity and history, demographic growth, social protection of the Bulgarian family, development of Bulgarian entrepreneurship and manufacturing, improving the quality of education and the healthcare system, environmental protection, and national security.[91] That is not to say that the party has cut its ties to the Pirin Macedonian region. On the contrary, its history gives it both credibility and distinguishes it from other extreme right parties, which exist but for a short period of time. That also makes it a desirable coalition partner with a small but loyal and vocal electorate which associates emotionally and personally with the party's history. As far as FYROM is concerned, the party has softened its tone acknowledging the finality of the Macedonian state, and is now focused on the protection of Bulgarian history and culture in FYROM, and

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[90] Quote from "Ideological foundations" section of the official party website, www.vmro.bg
[91] Official webpage of VMRO, "About Us," "Ideological premises," www.vmro.bg.

the protection of the rights of the (unrecognized) Bulgarian minority there.[92] It is also very adamantly against the recognition of the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, and guards, through protests and the provoking of conflicts, historical monuments and public institutions on the territory of Pirin Macedonia from "falling under the control of" anyone its leaders find inappropriate.

To continue with the party's stance on foreign policy, the party is supportive of Bulgarian membership in the EU regarding it as a union of nation states where each country can protect its interests. [93] It also understands the opportunities available for Bulgaria as an EU Member State, and the political advantage the country gains à propos its neighbours (FYROM, Serbia and Turkey). Neighbouring countries are frequently treated as the outside "other" by VMRO politicians, and are presented as a threat to Bulgarian interests. VMRO's president Krassimir Karakachanov talks about interference by Turkey in internal Bulgarian affairs, and about Turkish attempts to restore its political and economic influence over the countries of the Ottoman Empire.[94] MEP Angel Dzhambazki has commented after his election as vice-chair of the European Parliament Delegation for FYROM that his priority topics are the protection of human rights, in particular those of different (ethnic) groups in FYROM, the elimination of hate language against Bulgaria in Macedonian media, and the protection of the Bulgarian historical heritage in Macedonia.[95] He also talks in the European Parliament about Serbia's disregard for the rights of the Bulgarian minority in the country.[96] Although such political rhetoric is appealing to certain parts of the Bulgarian electorate, it is not particularly suited to mixed cross-border regions where a large part of the population has at least certain ties with neighbouring countries. What VMRO lacks in formal political support, however, it compensates in rigour by applying political tactics which attract attention and often produce results despite being backed by a small minority of the population.

Unlike IDS, political consistency is not among VMRO's concerns, and its populism is the key to its political success. The party catches on popular fears and uses them in its political

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[92] Author's interview with historian and member of VMRO executive committee Ivan Stoyanov, carried out on 4 July, 2014.

[93] *ibid*

[94] Dimov, Ivan. "Krassimir Karakachanov: Turkey wants to restore its influence over the countries which were part of the Ottoman Empire." Interview for *Trud*, 20 March, 2014. Available online at http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=3740068 (author's translation from Bulgarian).

[95] "Angel Dzhambazki elected in the EU Delegation for Macedonia," 14 October, 2014, available online at www.bulgaria.utre.bg (author's translation from Bulgarian).

[96] "Serbia in the EU – only if it guarantees the rights of the Bulgarians," 29 October, 2014, available online at http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_1716432398 (author's translation from Bulgarian).

campaigns. While IDS does not shy from shaping public opinions, VMRO very often prefers to ride on the wave of the political issues of the day. For example, despite the formal support for and even participation in EU governance, VMRO does not hesitate to criticize the "European value system" and to collect political points doing so. In an interview for news.bg, Dzhambazki has commented that the legalization of gay relations, including the right to adopt "does exist in other countries, however, these countries do not serve as an example for anything…Differences are advanced in an irritating way just because of funding available from Western Europe for the establishment of a certain form of society… This issue is money-focused, as is the Gypsization (*циганизацията*), because a number of foundations, organizations and all kinds of euromaniacs jump out and insist on establishing such a norm of behaviour." [97]

In addition to those external "enemies" of the Bulgarian state, VMRO's political campaigns focus much more frequently on domestic issues, such as the (extensive) rights of ethnic minorities, in particular the Roma and Turkish ones, of immigrants, and of other minority groups. As already said, VMRO is a TAN party, and its views are sometimes even militantly traditional. VMRO activists frequently participate in street protests, and use language which could be easily interpreted as hate speech.[98] Their rhetoric, however, alters depending on the context in which party leaders find themselves. As a member of the European Parliament, Angel Dzhambazki, for example, uses very moderate language. Prior to that, in his campaign for the post, he openly attacked gay and ethnic minority rights:

> *"A very dangerous trend of the destruction of the value system grows in Europe. A bearded lady became a symbol of the old continent a few days ago…The resolution for the human rights of the third gender is absolutely an unacceptable targeting of humanity against nature. There are men and there are women in the normal world, everything else is a perverse liberty."[99]*

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[97] Kolchakova, Sonia. "VMRO jumps against Gay Pride," 7 June, 2013, available online at http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_62834330 (author's translation from Bulgarian).
[98] I have to mention, however, that during my interview with Ivan Stoyanov he was very moderate both in his language and in his assessments of political issues. That is, however, frequently not the case with political speeches and behaviour by other VMRO leaders.
[99] Kosharevska, Yuliya. "Interview with Angel Dzhambazki, MEP candidate: The resolution for the human rights of the third gender is absolutely an unacceptable targeting of humanity against nature," 23 May, 2014, available online at http://one-europe.info/interview-with-angel-dzhambazki-mep

Dzhambazki is a frequent protestor against Gay Pride in Sofia, and has openly stated on the Bulgarian National Radio that if he had the authority, he would have banned the parade from taking place.[100]

The largest political "enemy" of the party, however, appears to be the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), whose electorate comes predominantly from the Bulgarian Turkish and Roma minorities. In 2013, for example, VMRO protested vehemently against the appointment of a member of DPS as a county governor of Pirin Macedonia. The protest included about 100 people but was covered by all major media for weeks. In its attacks of DPS, VMRO identifies the party's leaders as traitors and representatives of the Turkish government in Bulgaria. At the same time, it also recalls the past, associating DPS with the Turkish dominance over the Slavic population in the Ottoman Empire. To quote Dzhambazki again, "By the appointment of county governors from the Movement, BSP[101] is committing a political suicide, handing over Pirin Macedonia 100 years after its liberation. Today Blagoevgrad County has a *vali*."[102] Dzhambazki's language is much more controlled when talking about DPS in a European setting, which is demonstrative of the above mentioned context-driven contrast in tone.

Regarding the Roma minority, the party's presidential and parliamentary campaigns seem to be to a large extent marked by a revolt against what VMRO calls the "gypsization" of the Bulgarian state. The party warns about the disappearance of the Bulgarian nation, or at least about its reduction to a minority status within the confines of its own state, which is to be overtaken by Roma, Turks and refugees. To put it in Krassimir Karakachanov's words: "In 20 years the nation has lost 2 million people, and at this rate of depopulation and gypsization, it is threatened by annihilation within a couple of decades."[103]

Overall, apart from the typical TAN orientation of VMRO, it has a relatively chaotic political platform and orientation. The party has been successful in preserving its access to power on national and local level exclusively through entering into coalitions with the strong(er)

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[100] Nedeva, Irina. Bulgarian National Radio, Programme "*Хоризонт до обед.*" Discussion with Angel Dzambazki, Aksinija Gencheva and Stanimir Panajotov, as published online at https://stalik.wordpress.com (author's translation from Bulgarian).

[101] The Socialist Party which led the governing coalition formed a government, and appointed the governors.

[102] Yankulova, Dessislava. "VMRO: We continue the battle against the *vali* of the Pirin region." *Darik News*, 17 June, 2013, available online at http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1101938 (author's translation from Bulgarian).

[103] "Karakachanov nominated as candidate for Presidency," 16 July, 2011, available online at http://infomreja.bg/izdignaha-karakachanov-za-kandidat-prezident-971.html (author's translation from Bulgarian).

right parties of the day. And it is exactly VMRO's coalition-making which is confusing and shifty. Jumping from coalition to coalition, the party has frequently turned its back to its previous partners. In 1994, VMRO gained two parliamentary seats as a member of the right SDS[104] coalition. In 1997, it repeated its success and election result entering parliament with two MPs, and as a member of the roughly same right coalition. In 2001, the party, again in a coalition, this time with a new partner, Movement Gergjovden, failed to enter the national parliament, but succeeded to restructure itself rapidly, join a new right coalition,[105] and elect 5 MPs at the parliamentary elections in 2005. The following period was characterized by the decreasing popularity of the political right which had led the transition process from communism to democracy and market economy, and by the growing disillusionment of electorates with the reform process. As VMRO's aging electorate decreased in size and the momentum brought about by the fall of communism faded away, VMRO searched for a new identity. Its leaders' rhetoric started to get increasingly nationalistic and conservative. The focus of its political programme shifted from democratization and Bulgarian expansionism to the protection of Bulgarian culture, the reversing of the negative demographic trends by a "reinstatement of the forgotten Bulgarian values,"[106] and the protection of the rights of Bulgarian minority groups abroad. Other programme priorities are the blocking of Turkish membership in the EU, environmental protection, the protection and revival of Bulgarianism (*българщината*) in FYROM, the establishment of Orthodoxy as an official state religion in Bulgaria, and the placing of Bulgarian culture as a foundation for the adoption/understanding of globalization.[107] This "reinvention" of the party brought results, and VMRO, running in a coalition with another newly-created (populist) political entity (Bulgaria without Censorship), won a seat in the European Parliament in the May 2014 European elections. Almost immediately after the elections, VMRO left the coalition, and joined forces with the newly-founded extreme right party, the National Front for the Liberation of Bulgaria.[108] The coalition called Patriotic Front[109] placed 18 members in the 43rd National Parliament,[110] 9 of whom were members of VMRO. The Front signed an agreement with a wider governing

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[104] Union of Democratic Forces (in Bulgarian, *Съюз на Демократичните Сили - СДС*).

[105] Bulgarian People's Union (in Bulgarian, *Български народен съюз - БНС*).

[106] Kostov, Kostadin. "The Decay of the Bulgarian Family." As published on VMRO's official webpage, www.vmro.bg, 23 November, 2014 (author's translation from Bulgarian).

[107] "VMRO Political Programme 2014," available online at www.vmro.bg (author's translation from Bulgarian).

[108] In Bulgarian, *Национален Фронт за Спасение на България, НФСБ.*

[109] In Bulgarian, *Патриотичен фронт.*

[110] The national elections took place on October 2014. The initial number of elected MPs from the Front was 19, but one of them, Velizar Enchev, left the parliamentary group.

right coalition led by GERB, supporting the latter's government in parliament, and acquiring certain political influence and responsibility over decision making on national level. At the latest elections which took place in the country at the end of 2016, VMRO joined an even wider nationalist coalition, which united the three largest extreme right parties – VMRO, Attaka and the National Front for the Liberation of Bulgaria. The coalition was very successful in the first round of the presidential elections, and came out third, with close to 15% of all votes. Political analysts expect that the same alliance will likely come out as the fourth largest political power in the country on the next parliamentary elections, and that it will likely participate in the next government as well.

It is clear that VMRO's influence over national politics is increasing. Despite generating insignificant electoral support on its own, the party's vocal style of politics and its long history, make it an attractive coalition partner, which has cemented its place in the legislative branch in the last two and a half decades. Because of the centralized nature of the country, and because of the party's interest in Pirin Macedonia, it is also likely that VMRO's political influence over that region will grow as well, at least in that it will have control over appointing county governors and thus in setting up regional development agendas. This said, Blagoevgrad County is specific in its residents' rather "random" voting on local elections. Firstly, there is no single political party which had dominated on local elections over the years and across municipalities. On the contrary, new elections have brought new political winners, and continuity has been minimal. Secondly, independent local candidates have typically performed better in that county than in the rest of the country, likely because of the region's experience with self-governance during the inter-war period. Proximity to electorates appears very important in the region, as is the case in Istria, and VMRO's physical distancing from the region[111] plays against it on local elections. It is very likely that in Blagoevgrad County an indigenous political project which is led by local leaders emerges and attracts local votes, and it appears that VMRO is aware of such a threat as it is vigorously fighting such political projects by exercising control through national institutions.[112] In this way, foregoing the opportunity to do so itself, the party has also effectively blocked the politicization of the Pirin Macedonian regional identity by other actors as well.

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[111] Most of the party's leaders are from other parts of the country.
[112] As was already mentioned, VMRO did everything possible for local political parties which were promoting an alternative reading of history from its own to be banned.

3.3.3. IDS: Foundations and history

At the time of its (re)establishment in the early 1990s, VMRO already had a long history and established electorate. In contrast, IDS was a brand-new political project without any material resources or backing on national level, which, however, attracted massive and rapid popular support in Istria. The party emerged as a spontaneous and genuine channel for the tackling of regional problems, which were so significant that required the politicization of the region's identity in order for its population's interests to be effectively protected. That politicization was carried out on the premises of a regional cultural specificity which had been elaborated by representatives of the academic milieu in the 1970s and 1980s with the primary objective to promote Istria as a tourist destination. The success of IDS can thus be contributed to its consistency with and support for existing collective identities, in particular such shaped during the communist regime, which provided protection from, and alternative to, the centrally-imposed nationalism. The following section will describe the combination of historical developments, outside threats and cultural setting which enabled the rise of regionalism in Istria in the early 1990s.

Unlike Pirin Macedonia, which was overpopulated in the first half of the 20th century due to population exchanges with neighbouring countries, Istria frequently lost significant portions of its population due to epidemics or changes in the political situation in Europe which saw troops and elites fleeing the region as its governance was handed over to a different European power. According to Žerjavić, in the period 1918-1943, around 53 000 Croats left Istria, including the islands of Cres and Lošinj, while 29 000 Italians moved in.[113] The situation was reversed after World War when in the period until 1971, 116 000 Italians, 30 000 Croats, 1 000 Slovenes and 5 000 others (a total of 152 thousand people) left the region, while 23 000 Croats, 9 000 Serbians and 11 000 others (a total of 43 thousand people) moved in.[114] Between the population censuses carried out in 1931 and 1948, the Istrian population decreased by around 18%, from 223 949 people down to 183 344.[115] Only in the town of Pula, which was the largest town in Croatian Istria, the population decreased from 44 219 in 1931 to 20 812 in 1948.[116] The exodus of native Italians, but also

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[113] Žerjavić, Vladimir. "*Emigration and Immigration in the areas of Istria, Rijeka and Zadar in the period 1910-1971*" (in Croatian, "Doseljavanja i Iseljavanja s Područja Istre, Rijeke i Zadra u Razdoblju 1910-1971"). *Društvena istraživanja Zagreb*, 1993, 6-7 (2), pp. 631-656.

[114] *ibid*

[115] "Population by county," database statistics, 1931-1948. Croatian Statistical Institute, www.dzs.hr

[116] "Istria County – population by town/municipality," database statistics, 1931-1941, Croatian Statistical Institute, www.dzs.hr. See also Goldstein, Ivo. *Croatia: a History*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999 as cited in Smith, Tammy. "Boundary Stories and the Development of

of members of other ethnic groups, particularly Croats and Slovenes, after World War II thus significantly reduced the pre-war population of Istrian urban areas,[117] and altered the composition of the region's population.[118] This depopulation created a shortage of workers, a fact heightened by Yugoslavia's industrialization campaign in the 1950s and 1960s which led to the concentration of economic resources in larger coastal towns such as Pula, Rovinj, Labin and Slovenian Koper. Recognizing the problem, the Yugoslav government implemented a population policy granting Yugoslav veterans land in Istria and bringing in new residents from the rest of the federation.[119] It also stimulated agricultural workers from Istria's central villages to relocate to the coast.[120] This significantly changed the ethnic composition of Istria as people were brought in from the Istrian countryside but also from the other Yugoslav republics. Since 1971, when the regional economy picked up, the population grew significantly recording an increase of 7.5% in the period 1971-1981, and 8.5% in the period 1981-1991.[121] For comparison purposes, the population of Pula increased threefold in the communist period (since 1948) to reach 62 378 people in 1991. The impact on Istrian demographics was thus significant as was the Yugoslav orientation of the population. The newcomers had a good standard of living due to the region's successful economy, and they associated their prosperity with the Yugoslav regime which had relocated them to Istria.[122]

The frequent and significant population changes had another more subtle influence on the region's culture – they led to the confirmation of the fluidity of the regional identity where

Narrative Differences," paper presented at 2004 Graduate Student Retreat of University of California. San Diego: May 2004.

[117] Manin, Mario et al. (eds.). "On the human losses of Istria in the Second World War" (in Croatian, "O ljudskim gubicima Istre u drugom svjetskom ratu i poraću"). *Identitet Istre: Ishodišta i perspective*. Zagreb: Ivo Pilar, 2006, pp. 233–52 as cited in Ashbrook, p. 878.

[118] According to Ashbrook's review of sources, around 150 thousand people left Istria after World War II, including a significant number of Slavs, p. 878.

[119] Ashbrook (2011), *ibid*.

[120] Pađem, Juraj. *Istria and its Connecting with the Inland* (in Croatian, *Istra i njeno povezivanje sa zaledem*). Zagreb, Yugoslavia: *Informator*, 1968 as referred to in Smith, Tammy. "Boundary Stories and the Development of Narrative Differences," paper presented 2004 Graduate Student Retreat of University of California, San Diego, May, 2004.

[121] Author's calculation based on statistics by the Croatian Statistical Institute, "Population by county," database statistics, 1971-1991.

[122] According to Petar Strčić, who researched in detail all primary academic sources on Istria in the period 19th century-beginning of 20th, communism had deep roots in Istria. The first proletariat groups were formed in the region at the end of the 19th century. At that time, proletariat organizations could not be found in the manufacturing centres of Zagreb, Osijek, Karlovac and Split but in the areas with high concentration of what was then modern industry, i.e. in the military naval port of Pula (in the proximity of Trieste and Rijeka, port-trade and maritime-industrial emporiums). See Strčić, Petar. "Istria and the Kvarner Islands in the 19th and beginning of 20th century." *Historijski zbornik*, XXXI-XXXII, Zagreb: Savjez povijesnih društava Hrvatske, 1980.

people adjusted their identities to fit in new political regimes. According to Žerjavić , in the 1921 census, some 15 thousand Croats declared Italian identity, while in 1948, 20 thousand Italians chose to declare themselves Croats.[123] This "voluntary" change of ethnicity was dictated by the desire to preserve one's social and economic status in a newly established political situation. As a result, nowadays, part of the regional population identifies itself as simultaneously Croat, Italian and Slovenian depending on the context in which it is placed.

The percentage of the population identifying itself as Croatian reached its peak in 1961.[124] Since then it was continuously decreasing until 1991, however, that decrease was not due to an increase in the Italian or Slovenian minorities which were stagnating but rather to a sharp increase in the number of non-autochthonous groups coming from other Yugoslav republics and attracted by the region's economic growth.[125] In the period 1953-1981, the percentage of those who declared 'other' nationality (different from Croatian, Slovene or Italian) increased from 7.4% (close to 15 thousand people) to 20.9% (or 45 510 people). As the population was becoming more heterogeneous, a parallel trend was emerging – that of regionalism, which appeared to be adopted mostly by the Croatian majority. While in 1981 only 1.7% of the population (less than 4 thousand people) had declared a regional identity, by 1991 that number had grown to 37 654 people, or 16.1% of the region's residents.[126] In the same period, the number of people identifying as Croats decreased from 72.2% to 57.7%.[127]

The first attempts to distinguish the region culturally from the rest of Yugoslavia took place in the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of the development of tourism and the enrichment of the local population. The Yugoslav strategy for the development of the region turned out to be perhaps too successful in that by shaping it as a single market product, it gradually

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[123] *ibid*, p. 639. It was frequent both in Pirin Macedonia and in Istria for the population to change its identity over night as a response to the changing political situation or economic conditions in the region. The reasons for such change were fear from physical prosecution, economic opportunism, undefined national or ethnic identification, and shifting political borders. This 'fluid' identity of the regional population is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 of this research.
[124] Klemenčić, Mladen, Kušar, Vesna and Žejka Richter. "Changes in the National Composition of Istria: Spatial Analysis of Census Data 1880-1991" (in Croatian, "Promjene narodnosnog sustava Istre: Prostorna analiza popisnih podataka 1880-1991)," author's translation from Croatian. Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 1993, p. 613-614.
[125] *ibid*
[126] Previous censuses did not feature a regional identity as one of the categories for identification.
[127] Klemenčić, Mladen, Kušar, Vesna and Žejka Richter (1993).

became a singular region with wealthy regional elite.[128] Emil Jurcan quotes a speech by Ivo Siljan from 1971 who distinguished the region from the rest of the country by saying that leading Croatian functionaries including those in Istria were unable to understand the region's specificity.[129] The economic development of the region led to an increase in the investments in culture and literature, which led to the formulating of the current vision of Istrian identity[130].

In the period after the collapse of communism, Istria was not involved in active military operations. It remained physically outside of the war zone, however, suffered economically due to loss of foreign markets and a reduction in the revenues generated from tourism. According to the 1991 population census, Istria's population was 204 346 people, of whom 57.7% declared themselves Croatian, 6.7% - Italian, 1.6% - Slovenian, and 16.1% declared a regional identity. Because of the sharp decline in those declaring a Croatian identity in comparison with the previous census, most analysts agree that a majority of those who professed regional identity were ethnic Croats. The remaining 17.9% belonged to different national groups or identified themselves as Yugoslav. Since the Istrian identity was indeed shaped significantly during the Yugoslav period, it was surprising that a larger portion of the population had not declared a Yugoslav identity. This fact again demonstrated the speed and ease with which collective identities altered in Istria. Yugoslavia was collapsing and in nationalism-torn Croatia, it was highly unpopular, even unsafe, to declare oneself Yugoslav. Declaring a regional identity was a much safer option to denounce nationalism, without being categorized as a member of the unprivileged Yugoslav minority. The local political leaders' message of a third way, that of regionalism, appealed to the Istrian population, and presented a safe haven within the regional majority. That explained the wide popular support which the newly-founded IDS generated on regional level - regionalists might have been a minority on national level, but in Istria they represented the majority. In 1993, as many as 72% of those who voted on the local elections, or a total of 85 247 people, supported IDS.[131] The party was not able to achieve such high election results consequently; however, it has convincingly won all regional elections since then. In the most recent local elections which took place in 2013, the party won 43.93% of the popular

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[128] Jurcan, Emil. "Istrian Consent: Forms of Repression in a Multicultural Society." *Zarez*, issues 373-74, 19 December, 2013, author's translation from Croatian.
[129] *ibid*
[130] For more detailed explanation, please refer to Chapter 5 on regional identity.
[131] "Election results in chronological order, 1990-2013." State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia. Available online at www.izbori.hr/ws/index.html?documentId=4AE1D0C19095C79AC125 7C840060612A

vote, or 35 969 votes.[132] It has thus lost close to 50 000 votes over the last two decades, but the low voter turn-out, and the party's ability to mobilize its electorate, have ensured its political success. The loss of votes was not due to a growing popularity of the political right in Istria (HDZ has a stable electorate in the region), but rather to increasing support for other left parties, in particular the inheritor of the previous communist party, SDP. The latter's election results increased from 2% in the 1993 elections to 26.38% in 2013.[133] Such a development supports the theory that Istrians identify with the Croatian left, and many of them still identify with Yugoslavism.

The regional identification of the population is fluctuating significantly due to the political instability in the country, going up at times when HDZ holds central power (and thus presents an external threat to Istrian regionalism), and going down when the Croatian left performs well on national elections. In 1991, 37 654 people, or 16.1% of the population of Istria, declared a regional identity; in 2001, that number was 8 865 people (95.3% of all Croatian citizens and permanent residents declaring a regional affiliation that year, and 4.3% of the region's population), and in 2011 it jumped again to 25 203 (92.6% of all people declaring a regional affiliation in Croatia and 12.11% of the population of Istria).[134] For comparison purposes, in 1991 HDZ had firm control over the country's executive and legislative branches; in 2001, a coalition led by the Croatian Social Democratic Party governed the country; and in 2011, HDZ was again in power. Overall, the large fluctuations in identification suggest a general political instability on both regional and national levels, and the adjustment of the regional population's identification according to the political situation. This confirms the fluidity of regional identification in Istria and its status as a dependent variable.[135] It also demonstrates the effectiveness of the use of an "outside other" as a scarecrow for the politicization of collective identities.

Since the beginning of the formation of IDS, the party's leadership established the practice to associate Istria with IDS, in such a way as to distinguish it from the rest of the country

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[132] *ibid*

[133] SDP did not run alone but led a coalition of left parties in the 2013 elections.

[134] Population Censuses 2001 and 2011 information by counties, Istria County, Croatian Statistical Institute, 2001, 2011; or "Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2011, Population by Citizenship, Ethnicity, Religion and Mother Tongue." Statistical Reports. Zagreb: Croatian Statistical Institute, 2013.

[135] See the conclusion of Chapter 5 of this research.

where it had no influence.[136] According to Jurcan, the process of politicization of the regional identity of Istria was initiated by representatives of the cultural-academic community who were, however, quickly replaced by "professional" politicians. He cites Loredana Boljun-Debeljuh as the most evident example, initially involved with research on the identity of the Italian minority and poetry (in the 80s), and later, in the 1990s, becoming one of the founders of IDS, a deputy governor, and an author of the statute of the County of Istria. The statute turned out to be one of the major points of conflict between HDZ and IDS, and was used widely to build IDS's image in contrast to HDZ's undemocratic and intolerant practices. Another Istrian intellectual, Frano Juri, who had initiated a petition in Kopar supporting bilingualism and the rights of the Italian minority, was later among the founders of Gruppo 88 whose role was to initiate discussion among the Italian community on the institutional changes awaiting the county with the collapse of Yugoslavia. Those discussions quickly expanded to comprise the democratization of society in general, and are according to Jurcan, considered by many analysts to have initiated political change in Istria. [137] In 1990, in Gali žani a number of political groups, including Club Istria and Gruppo 88, assembled to discuss a joint running on the first local elections. The assembly elaborated a political programme based on *convivenza* (cohabitation), bilingualism and autochthony. This political programme turned out to be very successful as the newly-formed political party won more than 70% of the vote in Istria in 1993. Soon afterwards, the actors from the cultural and academic milieu were replaced by more politically savvy leaders, and IDS became a stable political party with compact hierarchy and its own president and assembly.[138]

The politicization of regional identity in Istria was associated with the formation of a prescriptive model of culture (culture-as-ideology) which was both normative, providing a model of what culture should be, but also descriptive,[139] reproducing assumptions of what the regional culture is. In order for the politicization process to be successful, the descriptive elements needed to be perceived as accurate by the electorate, or at least by a significant portion of it, and the normative model had to be consistent with the descriptive

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[136] The strategy was similar to HDZ's strategy to identify itself with Croatianness and with the people who were fighting in the war. Examples of such slogans include "If you want Croatia, choose Croatia" (in Croatian, "*Ako želite Hrvatsku, birajte Hrvatsku!*")

[137] Giuricin, Ezio. "Gli anni difficili (1971-1987): Il percorso storico dell'Unione degli Italiani dall'Assemblea di Parenzo al 'dopo Borme'." *Quaderni CRS*, 2002, XIV, as cited by Jurcan.

[138] Jurcan (2013).

[139] For similar prescriptive dissection of "ethnic cleansing," please refer to Hayden, Robert. "Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia." *American Ethnologist, 1996,* 23 (4), pp. 783–801.

elements, and accepted by the general population. IDS's formation of regional identity was based on a rational calculation. The country was in war which isolated it from the rest of Europe and impacted its economic situation and prospects. IDS's leadership chose to distance itself from the political party and the politicians on central level which supported or led to the conflict, and thus from the rest of the country, in order to recover the region's tourist industry and its economic exchange with neighbouring countries. Such a choice of strategy was facilitated by the fact that, although Istria was ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, its Serbian population was a small fraction of the region's overall population, and the region was geographically distanced from the conflict zones. Furthermore, the incorporation of elements of the supranational Yugoslav identity in the new Istrian regional identity provided residents with a certain level of continuity and thus security in times of disorder and uncertainty. Although IDS emerged relatively quickly on the political scene, the intellectual support which it received in the beginning provided it with a well thought-over, consistent and authentic political message. Its proximity to citizens provided it with channels to promote itself, and to reassure them in the strength of their collective identity.

3.3.4. IDS: Current political agenda

IDS's political platform throughout the 1990s, as already explained in the previous section, has been simple, consistent and clear. Because of the predominance of Croatian nationalism in the rest of the country, and the centralized nature of the Croatian state, Istria's influence on national level could only have been insignificant. Ironically, IDS thus used rhetoric supporting such issues as openness, tolerance, pluri-ethnicity and multiculturalism to shut the region from the rest of the country to the extent to which it was possible. Instead of attempting to steer national policy and have an impact on national institutions, the party used them, or more correctly, its conflict with them, to secure its political control over Istria. Similar to the manner in which VMRO instils fear among electorates by berating the growing power and rights of minority groups, IDS has continuously "warned" Istrians about the nationalism, intolerance and bias of the central government. Unlike VMRO, however, it has done so in a disciplined and politically consistent way, generating its political power from its region rather than from the political issues of the day. The following section will make a review of major IDS political documents

and its leaders' rhetoric in order to build understanding about IDS's political platform and the factors behind the party's prolonged political success.

Istrian regionalism is not blossoming in a region with strong historical claims to autonomy. IDS's success thus cannot be explained by the region's history but by relatively new political developments, and the party's own actions for the politicization of the region's identity. IDS selected cultural norms accepted by majority of the region's residents, outlined them and publicized them in its programme and declarations, and presented them as ever-lasting. As Jurcan puts it, "in order for the governing structures to ensure their own legitimacy, their cultural-ideological foundation needs to be timeless, as if it has always been present and is unrivalled . . . In reality, all those cultural norms, and particularly the term Istrianity, were formed as recently as in the 1980s, and got strengthened in the years after the collapse of Yugoslavia when the new political scene in Croatia was being formulated."[140] A selective use of history was thus part of the politicization process - IDS linked the region's traditions, language and culture to a modernity which respects tradition but is not burdened by it.[141] Such an approach to identity building is very much in alignment with constructivist theories, according to which collective identities, be they national, supranational or regional, are not so much "discovered" as are "created," a form of "imagined communities."[142] The rhetoric of "self-determination" ceases to be understood as simple moral claims based upon the acknowledgement of what is given in the world, and comes to be deconstructed as "struggles for the command of symbolic resources which will permit mobilisation for communal action."[143] Such an approach to understanding of group identities fits well with the case of Istria.

Both Istria and Pirin Macedonia's past was characterized as much by conflict as by cohabitation. The tensions that periodically arose among the different national and class groups generally occurred between natives and newcomers who arrived after periods of crisis from outside.[144] Unlike in Bulgaria where the transition from communism to democracy was peaceful, the collapse of Yugoslavia was tumultuous and violent, and the relations between the different national groups on the territory of Croatia were put again to a test. That led to significant migration of people, and to the dominance of the Croatian

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[140] Jurcan (2013)

[141] *ibid*

[142] Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991, rev. ed. as cited in Allcock, John, p. 140.

[143] *ibid*

[144] For the case of Istria, see Ashbrook, p. 875

majority over all public institutions and spheres of life. In order to protect minorities and prevent buried tensions from surfacing again, a pluri-national identity was forged in Istria which was based on culture and territory rather than on nationality and history. While nationalism is based on blood and heritage, Istrian regionalism focuses on land as the foundation for the construction of a collective identity. Thus, since Istrianity is defined in predominantly cultural, rather than ethnic or national terms, the acceptance of its fundamental premises - cohabitation, tolerance and multilingualism - is relatively easy for both members of majority and minority groups. The native-newcomer conflict has not been fully avoided, however, and the political struggle between HDZ and IDS has followed a similar rationale: IDS has not only opposed the supposedly "alien" nationalism of HDZ but also its attempts to establish outside influence over the region's economy and administration. Putting this into a territorially and culturally bound context, Emilio Cocco suggests that "the spatial tension between cultural and territorial elements set the stage for a political confrontation ... between the Istrian regionalist movement on the one side and the state promoted Croatian nationalism on the other."[145] All of IDS's major political programmes, declarations and documents reflect this tension.

Firstly, IDS's statute[146] is an administrative document, and as such it does not outline a political agenda. However, it provides an overview of the region's culture, based on multiculturalism and multilingualism, and regulates that all official IDS acts need to be written in the Croatian, Italian and Slovenian languages which are of equal standing (Article 56). The party was the first one in the country to include such a clause in its statute, and that caused significant controversy in the nationalist environment of the 1990s which promoted one nation, one language and one religion. Italian is, together with Croatian, the official language of all public institutions in Istria, and while bilingualism is accepted by most Istrians, in other Croatian counties even nowadays the introduction of a second official language causes much distress and conflict.[147] Furthermore, the statute clearly demonstrates the political nature of the post of the governor in Croatia. Article 37 lists all members of the party's presidency, the executive-political body of IDS, and those include among others, county governors and presidents of county assemblies, if they are members of IDS.

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[145] Cocco, Emilio. "Borderland Mimicry: Imperial Legacies, National Stands and Regional Identity in Croatian Istria after the Nineties." *Narodna umjetnost,* 2010, 47, pp. 7–28.
[146] IDS Statute, supplemented and amended 14 Feb, 2014. Pazin: IDS Assembly, 12 July, 2014.
[147] The most notable is the case of Vukovar, where a number of signs on public institutions written in Cyrillic were removed or destroyed repeatedly after their placement in 2013 and 2014.

In addition to the statute, in the beginning of the 1990s, IDS also issued four declarations of more political nature, known as the Rovinj Declarations, which listed all its political priorities. The first one was IDS's Programme Declaration[148] which states that the party is based on liberalism, defined as the respect and protection of individual rights, particularly the national, religious and gender equality of all Istrian residents, and that any discrimination based on nationality is considered anachronous and in conflict with the premises of a civilized modern society.[149] It furthermore talks about Istria and portrays the region as a bastion of tolerance, harmony and overall good relations between the different ethnic groups residing in it. The Programme depicts IDS's role as a protector of those relations and of the region's residents against ethnic shocks,[150] which have led to material and spiritual regression in the past. The Programme Declaration was significant for the politicization of Istrian regional identity in two ways. Firstly, it initiated the process by providing key features around which to unite the region's population:

> *"Istria is a multicultural and multilingual region. The centuries-long pluri-ethnic cohabitation in Istria has led to the formation of ethnic features expressed in Istrian pluri-ethnic autochthony ... Istrianity represents a specific consciousness of regional belonging which refers to the process of identification of an Istrian with the common territory and historical destiny... It refers to the cultural heritage of the Istrian space, established on the complexity of local, predominantly dialectal, cultures, and located on the geo-political margins of national space...Istrians identify themselves by manifesting a Croatian, Slovenian, Italian national affiliation and an Istrian ethnic affiliation.[151]*

As already discussed, the above described features of Istrianity duplicate in essence the Yugoslav identity which the Communist Party tried to establish in the period after World War II to 1989. Pluri-culturalism, pluri-lingualism, inter-ethnic tolerance are all terms used to describe the Yugoslav state and citizen. And this leads to the declaration's second significance - it was drafted as a message for Croatian nationalists, and in particular HDZ. It stated that Istria did not support the war, that it was for a peaceful and non-nationalist

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[148] IDS Programme Declaration. Medulin: IDS Assembly, 7July, 1991, available online at http://www.ids-ddi.com/ids/3/0/168/Files/Programska_deklaracija.pdf, author's translation from Croatian
[149] *ibid*
[150] In Croatian "*potresa,*" literally translated as earthquakes.
[151] *ibid,* "On Istrianism"

resolution of the conflict, and for the prevalence of economic development over political issues.

The same message was passed on to HDZ through the second declaration issued in 1994, the Declaration on the Democratization of the Republic of Croatia.[152] The declaration opened with concerns about the state of democracy in Croatia:

> *"Establishing that the Republic of Croatia is in a state of social, economic and*
> *political crises, which could push Croatia to totalitarianism,*
> *Expressing willingness to build the Republic of Croatia according to a modern*
> *European state model…"*

Those statements reflected the conflict between IDS and the central government. By denouncing a central government which it depicted as undemocratic, un-European and unsupportive of minority rights, IDS established itself as a democratic and modern European political party, which, as was mentioned later in the text, stood for the respect of the rights and freedoms of all Croatian citizens regardless of their race, nation, religion, gender, or any other belief or affiliation. The rights of minorities and threatened groups were specifically mentioned as were the freedom of speech and print, the freedom of thought and conviction, and the freedom of religious practice, which were all undermined by the central government.

In reference to the economy, the declaration stated support for rapid privatization open to all citizens and carried out in accordance with the principles of the free market, and for the restitution of property nationalized by the communist system. Thus, in this early period of transition, IDS was clearly supportive of economic liberalism and broke with the Yugoslav traditions of public property and state planning. It did not, however, denounce the tradition of antifascism established in the Yugoslav state, and the Declaration clearly stated support for the abolition of all symbols associated with the *ustaša* regime of the Independent State of Croatia which governed the country during World War II. Lastly, it called for a sharing of the legislative power by the central government and the regions, seeing this as a guarantee for the protection of democracy. Given the fact that IDS had no control over central government decision-making, the only possible way for it to influence the county's economy and political situation was to request higher autonomy on county level. It thus built up its support in the region by opposing the central government and HDZ

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[152] "Declaration on the Democratization of the Republic of Croatia." Rovinj: Istrian Democratic Assembly, April 23rd, 1994.

which served as "outside other" factors, the perceived culprits for the economic devastation and the violation of human rights in the country. Economically, however, its policies were not different from HDZ's, which IDS nevertheless systematically accused of corruption and war profiteering.

IDS's attempts to brand itself against the nationalist centrism of HDZ would not have been so successful had HDZ not agreed to play the (same) game, and reacted strongly against IDS's rhetoric. Istrian regional identity posed a serious threat to Tuđman's view of a homogeneous Croatian national identity. Not only was "Istrianness" based on a multicultural and multinational identity but it was also tied to a region as opposed to a nation. Its ambivalence towards the national question was also clearly a threat to Franjoism.[153] In addition, Tuđman and HDZ strongly opposed regionalism, and their rigidity on the topic antagonised many Istrians.[154] For example, Edi Benković, a HDZ activist in Istria, listed Istrians, Italians and Yugonostalgists as Croatia's enemies.[155] For Tuđman, regionalist tendencies in Istria were best described as "irredentism" organized by "disintegrative elements."[156] Attempts were made to curb them by cutting off sources of information and obtaining control over the regional economy. Public enterprise managers were replaced throughout the region with HDZ supporters, and the privatization programme was manipulated to ensure that enterprises were not sold to employees but remained in the hands of privatization funds, i.e. in the hands of the state or HDZ.[157] The government also sold Istrian resources to foreign companies for considerably less than they were worth thus attempting to discredit the regional economy.[158] IDS's leadership responded to the attacks by hardening its rhetoric, while public support for it and other opposition parties in Istria grew. Although HDZ has since then significantly modified its political stances and rhetoric, IDS frequently "reinvents"' Croatian nationalism by issuing declarations against it and in the speeches of its leaders who fight it through tolerance, pluri-culturalism, calls for decentralization, and threats for referendums on regional autonomy.

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[153] Bellamy, Alex J. *The Formation of Croatian National Identity: A Centuries-Old Dream*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 129.
[154] Šantić, Neven. "The Democratic 'Violations' of President Tudjman" (in Croatian, "Demokratski 'prekršaj' Predsjednika Tuđmana"). *Glas Istre tjedni*, 2 October, 1993, p. 1 in Ashbrook, p. 111.
[155] Ashbrook, John. *Buying and Selling the Istrian Goat: Istrian Regionalism, Croatian Nationalism, and EU Enlargement.* Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2008, p. 111
[156] *ibid,* p. 129.
[157] *ibid*
[158] *ibid*

The third of the Rovinj declarations issued by IDS in 1994, the Declaration on the Regional Organization of the Republic of Croatia,[159] dealt with an issue which remains the focus of politics in Istria until nowadays - regionalism. As already said, regionalism is not a process with long historical traditions in Istria, despite IDS's attempts to portray it as such. Istrians are not an ethnic group, nor do they have a unified language, culture or even history. Many of them have moved to the region relatively recently, in the period after World War II to fill in the population gap left after the exodus of the Italian (but also Croatian and Slovenian) population, which left the region underpopulated and in need of a work force. Thus, although IDS's political agenda resembles the agendas of European regionalist political parties active in historical regions, especially in terms of its strong anti-central state stance and its attempts to appeal to a regional identity, it is in reality but a political tool for securing the party's control over regional institutions. More conventional regionalist parties are typically concentrated on territories which have a national identity based on historical claims to a nation, such as in Scotland, Wales, Catalonia and the Basque country[160], while regionalism in Istria is young and driven from above. Before the establishment of IDS, the idea of an autonomous region called Istria was not widespread in Istria's political milieu. It was IDS which managed to create an alternative "imagined community"[161] and to put regionalism on the political agenda. It constructed a kind of "neo-ethnicity" for a "nation" made up of citizens who do not necessarily have a distinctive history, culture or language but share similar socio-economic values and attitudes.

At about the same time IDS tried to build the foundations of a regional identity and politicize it for its own political purposes, a similar project emerged across the border in Italy, and the common points between the two parties are unavoidable. The Northern League (*Lega Nord*) articulated a new and successful political project in the 1990s in Northern Italy. It attempted to invent an ethnicity for the North of Italy in order to justify its political claims for the protection of the economic interests of the region. Those political claims included the foundation of a separate state, "Padania," which was to comprise a number of regions in Northern and Central Italy. [162] The Northern League's political agenda was based on three major issues: the underdevelopment of Southern Italy, the inefficiency

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[159] Declaration on the Regional Organization of the Republic of Croatia. Rovinj: Istrian Democratic Assembly, April 23rd, 1994.

[160] Giordano, Benito. "Italian Regionalism or 'Padanian' Nationalism - the Political Project of the Lega Nord in Italian Politics." *Political Geography,* 2000 (19), pp. 445–471, at p. 468.

[161] Anderson, B. *Imagined communities, Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983 as referred to in Giordano, p. 468.

[162] Giordano, p. 446.

and anachronism of the central state, and the North's demands for an increased regional autonomy. In short, the party's leaders argued that the Italian state did not present an economically sound arrangement: the North supported the lazy South which was not likely to reform because of government subsidies and path dependency. In the meantime, the standard of living in the North was suffering because the residents of this part of Italy were working for and feeding the entire country. Initially, the party envisioned the creation of a federal state, but as that idea became increasingly mainstream and failed to distinguish it from other political parties, it started promoting secessionism.[163]

All those points resonate in IDS's agenda, and it is highly likely that its leadership has looked for inspiration across the border. All throughout the 1990s, IDS urged for increased regional autonomy. Yet, when pressed for an explanation of the type of autonomy sought, IDS leaders talked about a model more similar to decentralization than to autonomy, demanding more control over taxation and regional and local institutions[164]:

> *"Autonomy is not about splitting but merging or rebuilding the state on foundations of higher quality."*[165]

Such a specification of autonomy was deliberate as any wider demands could be interpreted as irredentism. Jakovčić, after meeting with the leader of the *Lega Nord*, Umberto Bossi, explained IDS's position:

> *"...we have clearly stated [to Mr. Bossi] that the idea of federalism cannot be used in Croatia because of the revulsion against this term and the way it was used in the previous system, and also because of the conviction that federalism means the right to separate individual parts of a state, which is, of course, incorrect."*[166]

IDS's portrayal of Istrian culture and lifestyle has been genuine and convincing, which has facilitated their acceptance by the region's population. Its political model for the region, however, has been less clear and consistent. The party's demands have changed according to the behaviour and policies of the central government, and although following a rational

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[163] *ibid,* p. 464
[164] Author's translation from Croatian of interview with Pauletta, Ivan. *Feral Tribune*, 2 January, 1994 cited in Milardović, Anđelko (1995), p. 55.
[165] Author's translation from Croatian of interview with Blečić, Mario, *Naši foji*. 10 May, 1995 cited in Milardović, Anđelko (1995), p. 63.
[166] Author's translation from Croatian of interview with Jakovčić, Ivan, *Feral Tribune*, 29 May, 1995 cited in Milardović, Anđelko (1995), p. 45.

type of logic, they have also created confusion and contributed to an image of profit-seeking behaviour:

> *"IDS's formal position is stated in the programme – realization of regionalism with a high degree of autonomy, but there are no fixed borders which define when it becomes a region with high degree of autonomy or something else. The less autonomy we receive, the more pressure is placed on Istria, the more drastic and significant our demands will become."[167]*

In the 1991 Programme Declaration discussed previously,[168] IDS had defined how the political system in Istria should look. The party was against the alteration of the territorial borders existing then, however, it also opposed the hardening of borders. It stood for the "erasing" of all state borders in Europe, and for the creation of a unique European space. The model for intra-state organization was a decentralized state with powers transferred to the local and regional level, one in which free communities were united and looked after their interests through regional bodies elected on direct and secret elections. IDS also opposed Istria's status as a province and denounced the metropole-periphery relationship, or similar to the Lega Nord in Italy, the financing of the Croatian capital with Istrian money.

Despite its conflict with central authorities, IDS was aware of the times in which it was operating and very careful not to cross any lines. Firstly, its leaders denied accusations of promoting irredentism or secession. Secondly, pluri-culturalism meant the recognition of the predominantly Croatian identity of the region's population. To this end, in 1994, the party's Assembly passed a Declaration on the Autonomy of the County of Istria[169] in which it declared that "the County of Istria is established as an autonomous region and is a constitutional part of the inseparable Republic of Croatia."[170] There was no explanation as to what was meant by an autonomous region, or what was the exact legal purpose of the declaration as it mostly reiterated the responsibilities given to counties by law. Its political value, however, lay in the confirmation that secession from Croatia was not on the party's political agenda. Additionally, the declaration could be seen as a publicity tool to attract or

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[167] Author's translation from Croatian of interview with Pauletta, Ivan. *Arkzin*, 30 September, 1994 cited in Milardović, Anđelko (1995), p. 37.
[168] Programme Declaration. Medulin: IDS Assembly, 7July, 1991, available online at http://www.ids-ddi.com/ids/3/0/168/Files/Programska_deklaracija.pdf
[169] Author's translation from Croatian of the "Declaration on the Autonomy of Istria County." Rovinj: Istrian Democratic Assembly, April 23rd, 1994.
[170] Author's translation from Croatian of the "Declaration on the Autonomy of Istria County," Article 1. Rovinj: Istrian Democratic Assembly, April 23rd, 1994.

mobilize larger political following and voters. Almost twenty years later, in 2013 the Assembly of Istria County passed a very similar Declaration on the Regional Development and Uniqueness of Istria.[171] The document is demonstrative of IDS' control of regional institutions as it was supported unanimously not only by IDS but by all Assembly members, including such from parties typically unsupportive of decentralization and regionalism. The declaration was a response to a draft proposal of the Act on Regional Development of Croatia which provided for the merging of Istria, the Kvarner and Lika into a single region. Istria was thus to lose its status as a separate county.[172] In its first part, the declaration repeated the cultural and political features of the Istrian region. In the second part, which was the declarative one, the Assembly opposed a status of a sub-region for Istria.[173] It claimed that the primary cause for the inefficacy of the internal organization of Croatia was not the marginalization of governing units but the (strong) centralization of the country, and called for further functional and fiscal decentralization (Article III), and for the implementation of the EU principle of subsidiarity (Article IV). In the same part, the Assembly expressed willingness to consult Istrians in a referendum on whether they wished Istria to remain part of Croatia or to become an autonomous region. Again, it was not clear what the specific objective of the declaration was. It did have (limited) political significance in that it set up boundaries for the central government's interference in the region, although as part of the ruling coalition on central level, IDS held shared responsibility for any prepared and proposed draft laws, so in a way its representatives in the Assembly passed a declaration against their own colleagues in the central government. The declaration's objectives were clearer if one assumed that its targeted audience were not the central authorities but rather the county's electorate. In that case, the Assembly's intentions were to preserve the central government's image as an outside threat for Istrian interests, and thus to mobilize public support for itself. The following is an excerpt from a speech by current IDS president and mayor of Pula, Boris Miletić, which exemplifies the way in which central governments are typically depicted by Istrian politicians and how responsibility is always transferred to a higher level:

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[171] Author's translation from Croatian of the "Declaration on the Regional Development and Uniqueness of Istria (in Croatian, *Deklaracija o regionalnom razvoju i jedinstvenosti Istre*)." Pazin: Assembly of Istria County, October 29th, 2013, available online at http://www.ids-ddi.com/user/ids-ddi/DEKLARACIJA_ORRIJI_06.pdf.
[172] IDS is member of the ruling political coalition in Croatia, and as such, it might have expressed its opinion on the draft proposal much earlier in the process, rather than after it was presented to the public.
[173] Declaration on the Regional Development and Uniqueness of Istria (2013).

Croatia is after Greece the most centralized member of the European Union in which from 100 kunas, 90 go to the central state, 5 to the City of Zagreb, and the remaining 5 to the rest of the country. Almost 95% of all decisions related to the life of the residents of Pula, Vukovar, Rijeka and Split are made in Zagreb … How would citizens benefit from decentralization? If the revenues of the towns and municipalities are increased by one third, Pula would, for example, be able to build a new school, a new kindergarten and a new home for the elderly each year … An example are the 50 investment projects which are currently proposed in Istria and which are projected to employ around 1000 people, which, however, are currently being blocked by the state administration.[174]

Despite IDS's control over regional institutions for two and a half decades, and its participation in two central government administrations over the same period, the party has never taken direct responsibility for the situation in Istria. In this respect, IDS and VMRO have something in common – they both utilize populist rhetoric to mobilize electorates, and they both use central governments and larger political parties as scapegoats for electoral dissatisfaction. From this point of view, it can be said that the centralized nature of the Croatian state has been of use to IDS because it has allowed it to shift blame to an outside other, a configuration keeping it in power over a long period of time. Since in Croatia regions are having more independence than in Bulgaria, regional institutions should at least in theory also bear higher responsibility for the political and economic situation in their region. Boris Miletić's speech from above demonstrates how that responsibility has been systematically shifted elsewhere. For IDS, the regionalization process has not meant the transfer of responsibilities to regional and local levels but rather a reduction in central government's oversight over regional self-governance. Such an attitude questions both the political and economic foundations of Istrian regionalism – if regional governance is not associated with the overtaking of responsibility for regional affairs, then the mobilization of the Istrian regional identity by IDS has been done solely with a self-serving objective. Increased accountability, efficiency and democratization have not taken place because they have never been the focus of regionalism in Istria. Indeed, none of the above analyzed documents mentions any of those as an objective. As a result, it has been increasingly hard to sell the "outside other" pitch to electorates, and public support for the party has been continuously decreasing. What has been lost in popular

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[174] Miletić, Boris. "Istria as an autonomous region within inseparable Croatia" (author's translation from Croatian of "Istra kao autonomna regija u nedjeljivoj Hrvatskoj"), 2014, official webpage of IDS, available online at http://ids-ddi.com/m/1002/6998/

support has however been replaced by effective control of regional institutions. According to Emil Jurcan, an activist for *Pulska grupa* and a member of the association *Praksa*, which are both civil, non-governmental organizations operating in Istria, the popularization of Istrian cultural identity, or at least its political expression, is nowadays mechanical, pushed artificially in order to reproduce the lost (popular) support which IDS once had.[175] Due to the fact that the party has won all county elections since 1993, its functionaries have continuously held the highest ranked public positions on regional level, shaping the region's legislation, institutions and day-to-day operations. IDS has thus "tied" to itself a significant number of people who depend financially on its staying in power. Staff in public institutions, businesses depending on subsidies, and civil society associations funded by county budgets all depend financially on IDS, and view a change in the political situation in the region as risky and unpredictable (i.e. they might lose their jobs, lose institutional funding, or not get expected subsidies). Furthermore, according to Jurcan, as IDS's election performance has deteriorated, its leadership has changed political strategies activating what he calls "disciplinary" processes, such as controlling the regional media, the flow of finance, and exercising personal intimidation.[176] Given Istria's small size and its peripheral position, IDS's proximity to electorates has enabled it to use such tactics with its voice being nearer and more familiar than that of central government institutions.

The politicization of regional identity in Istria was carried out by a regionalist political party which on the one hand, benefited from Istrians' dissatisfaction with central government policy, while on the other hand, was very active in influencing regional attitudes. The process was successful because IDS's leaders were adroit at understanding public opinion and the regional culture but also because the external situation was conductive for the mobilization of collective identities. Furthermore, the regional culture shaped as a foundation of Istrian regionalism by IDS did not focus on characteristics defining an ethnic group, such as language, religion or shared past, but rather on the specificity of border regions with their open identification and aversion to uncertainty. Although the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia was conductive for the politicization of Istrian identity, it also preconditioned the weaknesses of that process. Regionalism in Istria was not founded on concerns for improved accountability, efficiency and democratization but on the strive to gain political control over public institutions and companies in the region. Ironically, in order to "fight"

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[175] Jurcan (2013).
[176] *ibid*

the undemocratic and repressive central government, IDS replicated many of its features (control of media, regional institutions and public sources of finance) on regional level.

4. EU integration's influence on IDS's and VMRO's agendas

While the 1990s had been years of experiments and instability both in Croatia and Bulgaria, the 2000s brought normalization and relative prosperity to the citizens of both countries. That was partly due to the stabilization effect of the previously initiated reforms, and partly - to the European integration process which transformed all "new" Member States. Although, as already discussed, pre-accession processes and funding have mostly impacted central institutions, IDS's and VMRO's agendas and ideologies have also been influenced by EU integration.

IDS and VMRO are distinctively pro-EU. Both have a representative (MEP) in the European Parliament, and are gaining experience in attracting broader support in EU institutions for issues of importance to them and their electorates. VMRO has modified at least partially its rhetoric and has worked on making alliances in the European Parliament. IDS has utilized the opportunity to rejuvenate its popularity in Istria by associating itself with cross-border and pan-European initiatives. Given the traditionally practical behaviour of both parties, their leaders are well aware of the political and financial opportunities associated with EU membership, and this is likely the reason behind such a warm-hearted acceptance of the accession process.

Apart from this direct participation in EU governance, IDS's and VMRO's leaders mention frequently the Union in their domestic political discourse as well. Their declarations and speeches are full of vague references to EU practices. Such a referral to the EU as an engine of change is frequently misleading and used to justify political stances. EU legislation is very "thin" as far as regionalism is concerned. The administrative and territorial divisions within a country remain in the jurisdiction of Member States, which means that practices and legislation differ from country to country. Countries like Germany and Belgium which have federal constitutions grant significantly more rights to their regions than centralized states like France, the UK, Bulgaria or Croatia. That does not mean that the diversity of their regions is less distinctive, but rather that their internal organization is reflective of the political traditions and the status quo in a country. There is no EU-wide legislation enforcing the granting of larger political and fiscal independence to regions. On the

contrary, it is entirely up to Member States to regulate how much independence, rights and responsibilities and in what areas regions would have. This is clearly exhibited in the difference in the organizational structures of Bulgaria and Croatia, which have already been discussed in Chapter 4.

This lack of a universal model for regionalization in Europe, however, has not prevented regionalist parties from tying in their political agendas with EU practices. IDS's political behaviour is a perfect example of associating regionalism with EU integration. The party has continuously emphasized that Istria's geographic and cultural proximity to Western Europe has influenced the predominant "world view" of its residents.[177] As a result, Western values were not only widely articulated and accepted in Istria, but the region served as an example of the idea of "Europe of the regions." IDS's leaders envisioned a "Croatia of the regions," where counties would be assembled into larger regions and power devolved from Zagreb to them. Europe was thus widely used by IDS as a symbol, but also as a source of best practices in accordance with which the party's programme and ideology were formulated.

In contrast, VMRO's vision of the EU is "Europe of nations" where Member States are able to protect their national interests through cooperation and coalition-building. In order to achieve this vision, the party's leaders have modified their behaviour in Brussels using more neutral and respectful language. Additionally, the party has softened its policy towards neighbouring countries, [178] accepting the fact that overt intolerance and nationalism are not politically beneficial in the long-run. The EU has thus exercised an unconscious cultivating effect over VMRO.

The European integration process which evolved parallelly with the emergence of a competitive party system in "new" Member States has inevitably influenced political agendas and ideologies. In the cases of IDS and VMRO that influence was indirect and selective in that the parties themselves chose which models to copy and follow. Despite the non-binding nature of European best practices, those have been instrumental in shaping IDS's and VMRO's agendas with the former following and copying regionalist projects and the latter using European conservatism as a model for its ideological positioning. Although such a transfer of ideas would have been enabled merely by the

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[177] Bellamy, Alex J. *The Formation of Croatian National Identity: A Centuries-Old Dream*. Manchester, New York, Vancouver: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 122-128.
[178] Author's interview with historian and member of VMRO executive committee Ivan Stoyanov, carried out on 4 July, 2014.

proximity of "old" Member States, it was made fully possible by EU membership which locked in reforms and confirmed the diversity of political projects and parties as a desirable political model on national level.

5. Conclusion

Despite the direct connection of regionalism with territory and the associated with it cultural specificity, culture alone, as discussed in the previous chapter, is insufficient foundation for strong regionalism. This research is aligned with and confirms theories which study collective identities as constructed and provisional in character rather than as naturally occurring phenomena. The coined by Anderson term "imagined communities" [179] describes well the fluid and politically-shaped identities of the residents of both Pirin Macedonia and Istria. The word "residents" is the most accurate one for depicting people living in border regions as the political instability which is typical for such regions also pre-conditions the migration of people in and out of them preventing the formation of stable populations. Within such a context of frequent and significant population changes, collective identities cannot be inborn or ethnic in character but are rather acquired. Not without struggle, newcomers are forced to adopt the regional way of living in order to fit in and succeed in their new place of residence. This fluidity, however, also means that identities are frequently rediscovered and created. In particular in periods of major change, such as the two World Wars and the collapse of ex-Yugoslavia have been in the 20th century, there is room for new political ideologies and parties to emerge and transform both political environments and regional identities. Within constructivist theories, "self-determination" is not understood as simple moral claims based upon the acknowledgement of what is given in the world, but rather as "struggles for the command of symbolic resources which will permit mobilisation for communal action."[180] When applied to regionalism, such a vision of identity seems to provide wider choice for populations both on individual and collective levels, and to ultimately lead to democratization. In reality, however, the process of redefining of regional cultures and identities in times of turmoil is usually overtaken by political parties which work to limit choice in order to mobilize support for their own agendas. That is not to say that there is no continuity and objectivity in the establishment of the essential characteristics of regional

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[179] Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991, rev. ed. as cited in Allcock, John, p. 140.
[180] *ibid*

cultures, but that the latter are typically complex and even contradictory, in particular in border regions, and are thus subject to different interpretations. The strong of the day provide the prevailing interpretation at different times, and as long as their programme and agenda are compatible with at least some elements of regional culture, those can easily be accepted as universal and timeless, erasing previous visions of collective identities. Within such a perspective on regionalism, the transfer of responsibilities and authority to subnational levels does not necessarily lead to democratization, but to a shift from one power centre to another.

In the cases of Pirin Macedonia and Istria, there is no evidence that regionalism in the periods when it was strongest was a grass-roots process for self-identification. In both regions, it started with a ground-shattering external event which led to a major change in the composition and size of regional populations. Because of the peripheral position of border regions, a gap in political representation also appeared which was filled in by regional political actors. The physical and cultural proximity of regional political parties and actors in Istria and Pirin Macedonia has thus been simultaneously their strength and their weakness. On the one hand, they have benefited from their proximity to electorates in that they have provided more timely and adjusted political platforms to address emerging challenges on the regional level. Additionally, electorates have been more tolerant to regional political actors in times when they have perceived the centre as physically and culturally distanced from them. On the other hand, the proximity has made political parties more exposed to public scrutiny while also enabling them to be more controlling over all sectors of public life, which has ultimately jeopardized democratization processes. This has meant that in the cases of Pirin Macedonia and Istria there has been a trade-off between concerns for democratization and political survival, with the latter taking prevalence over the former. Regionalism has thus in its essence become a process for the acquisition of political power on regional level. The trade-off has not been extended to the cultural sphere. On the contrary, the more power regional parties have gained, the more they have consciously promoted territorial loyalty as collective identities have helped them reinforce their own legitimacy. Potential legitimizing arguments have been built on more or less "objective" factors, such as history, the existence of distinct regional language(s), cultural traditions and economic conditions. As those factors have also acted as preconditions that have shaped pre-political meso-territorial identities, the process has been circular and reinforcing. In short, in order for the politicization of regional identities to take place, the historical and cultural premises on which the process is built need to ring as true and be

accepted as genuine by regional populations. Additionally, political programmes and agendas need to address emerging regional challenges to a much larger extent than is expected from central institutions and national political parties where ideology still influences significantly electoral choice.

To this end, IDS's political programme has been very carefully crafted and promoted. Firstly, it has reflected the multi-ethnic nature of the region and the association of a majority of the population with the previous communist regime by promoting inclusivity and a non-militant stance, with the rights of all ethnic and minority groups at least theoretically equalized. Secondly, it has addressed the challenges arising from the economic recession in the county by calling for an immediate cease of military action, and peaceful resolution of the conflict. In times of uncertainty and violence, in a region with large ethnic minority groups and significant political divergence from the ideology of the centre, the party's political message immediately attracted wide support among the region's population. In contrast, VMRO, which had been in somewhat better position than IDS in the beginning of the 1990s due to its political background and already existing electorate,[181] alienated members of minority groups, while also failing to mobilize the Bulgarian majority by not addressing any issues of practical concern to them. Both regions were in a similar situation in that they had ethnically diverse populations and were facing severe economic crises in times of overall political instability. IDS's multiculturalism and inclusivity proved better suited for the politicization of regional identity than VMRO's nationalism, not least because its agenda was in sharp contrast with the nationalism of the ruling political party and elites on national level. VMRO never truly emphasized the uniqueness of the regional identity as a parallel identity to the national one, nor distinguished its political platform from those of larger national actors. It moved from issue to issue switching frequently political coalitions. Its lack of focus (on Pirin Macedonia), its inconsistency and its political opportunism prevented the full mobilization of its significant traditional electorate (residents of Pirin Macedonia and people whose origins are from any of the three parts of Macedonia and who reside throughout the country), with only the most ardent of those voting for the party for the sake of its history and name. VMRO has furthermore never served as a genuine opposition to central governments, nor has it advanced any specific and clear ideology. As a result, although it has been one of the

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[181] The fall of communism in Bulgaria led to the reestablishment of a number of political parties which had existed prior to the introduction of a mono-party system. Their previous supporters and activists, who had frequently been persecuted because of their political beliefs, resumed support for those reinstated political options with renewed zest.

important political actors on local level in Blagoevgrad County, its impact and control over local and regional institutions have been much less significant than those of IDS in Istria. This said, unlike support for IDS which has been continuously declining since 1993, support for VMRO is rising in Pirin Macedonia[182] generated by its focus on Bulgarian nationalism, which was the party's distinguishing feature in the interwar period as well. Although not as pronounced as in other European countries, Bulgarian nationalism is growing on national level as well, as globalization and the poor economic situation in the country are making populistic parties increasingly popular among electorates. In Pirin Macedonia, in particular, support for nationalist projects is above the national average, however, in order for them to generate full-blown political mobilization of the Macedonian Bulgarian majority, similar to the one existing until the end of World War II, a viable external threat needs to present itself. Neither the central government nor neighbouring countries at the moment present such a threat for Bulgarian nationalism in Pirin Macedonia, so for the time being, VMRO's choice of policy, although relatively successful, prevents it from becoming the major political option in the region.[183] Such a status seems to be aligned with VMRO leadership's strategy as the party appears to be more interested in serving as a smaller member of larger coalitions than to bear responsibility for governing, be it on national, regional or local lever. Had VMRO assumed larger governing responsibilities on regional level, it could have easily disappointed electorates and disappeared from the political scene, as had been the case with a number of political parties. This could have led to a period of brief and intense regionalism in Pirin Macedonia which, given VMRO's agenda, could have easily led to conflicts with neighbouring countries. From this point of view, VMRO's political strategy has proved beneficial both for the party's political survival and for the region's stability.

Such kind of stability was achieved in Istria as well, using, however, an altogether different approach, namely the politicization of regional identity. The success of IDS as a political project was tightly connected to the growth and mobilization of Istrian regionalism, and the party did not hesitate to tie those two processes together. Similar to HDZ's political campaign to connect the establishment of the newly-founded Croatian state with its party and policy, IDS presented its own programme and Istrian regionalism as the two sides of the same coin. In order for the politicization process to be sustained, however, it needed to be deeply rooted in and supported by the civil population. While that was undoubtedly the case in the 1990s, the further diversification of the population, in particular by the

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[182] The party is not running alone on elections but in broader coalitions of nationalist parties.
[183] Nationalism as a platform automatically excluded all minority groups as potential electorates.

immigration of non-autochthonous groups which find it more difficult to fit in, and the economic recession which has struck the region badly, are presenting challenges to the further politicization of the regional identity. In addition, because of the proximity of regional institutions to residents, the latter are well informed about and disillusioned with IDS's governance, which makes it increasingly hard to transfer blame for regional and local problems to the central level.

Because of the instability and fluidity of regional identities, it is overall possible that an extended economic recession or an international confrontation might yet alter the levels of politicization of regional identities in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. In the event a nationalist trend spreads throughout Europe, VMRO's political platform might resonate louder in Pirin Macedonia, making the region a likely leader of a Bulgarian nationalist revival. Istria might in contrast turn to a larger national entity for the provision of its security, which would ultimately weaken the already diminished power of IDS in the region. That would intensify the differences between its ethnic groups questioning the prevalence of multiculturalism in the region and altering collective identities. Overall, the control of the politicization of regional identities by political parties, although effective, seems to shift priorities from democratization, improved efficiency and accountability to gaining of control over regional institutions and sources of funding by a small group of regional actors. From such a perspective, regionalism as a political model offers no advantages over centralism.

Chapter 7

Economic development as a factor in the emergence of regionalism

According to Dahl Fitjar, three main economic factors explain the emergence of regionalism in Europe, namely **globalization**, **European integration** and **economic development**.[1] The first encompasses foreign direct investments and their effect on the regional economy. Globalisation could weaken central states as they are no longer able to control the economy in the face of increasingly mobile goods, services and labour. It could also provide opportunities for regional actors proactive in the pursuit of regional economic development to gain larger independence from the central government.[2] The second factor, European integration, identifies a European Union-promoted trend of decentralization and regional development. It suggests that it is in the interest of EU supranational institutions to strengthen the sub-national level in order to weaken Member States, i.e. to help delegate political and economic authority downwards in order to enable its delegation upwards.[3] Sub-national actors on their part see direct economic interest in EU funding, for the control and acquisition of which they need and strive to gain more independence from central governments. The third factor deals with the level of economic development of a region. According to Dahl Fitjar, regions with high level of economic development are more likely to politicize regional identity.[4] This could be traced to three reasons: prosperous regions see interest in keeping more of their resources locally, regional economic development boosts a sense of pride conductive to the building of a regional identity and regionalism,[5] and individual regional actors have economic interest in gaining financial independence from the central government.

In this chapter I examine the above listed three economic factors and their correlation with regionalism in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. Do international investors (including EU institutions) choose to cooperate with the regional level and circumvent the central one?

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[1] Dahl Fitjar, Rune. *The Rise of Regionalism: Causes of Regional Mobilization in Western Europe*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2010; Dahl Fitjar, Rune. "Building Regions on Economic Success: Prosperity and Regionalism in Rogaland." *Scandinavian Political Studies,* 2006, 29 (4), pp. 333-355.

[2] Dahl Fitjar (2006), p. 339.

[3] Rokkan, S. & Urwin, D. "Introduction: Centres and Peripheries in Western Europe," in Rokkan, S. & Urwin, D., (eds.). *The Politics of Territorial Identity: Studies in European Regionalism*. London: Sage, 1982 as cited in Dahl Fitjar (2006), p. 340.

[4] Dahl Fitjar (2010); Dahl Fitjar (2006).

[5] Dahl Fitjar (2006), p. 334.

To what extent are regional authorities still dependent on financing from the central government? Do regional political and business actors in Bulgaria and Croatia have a strong economic incentive to look for ways to gain higher independence from the central government? Although important in their own right, those questions will also help me identify the connection between economic prosperity and the growth of regionalism. Is the politicization of regional identity in Istria motivated by the increased financial interest of the region and certain regional players in gaining independence from central governments over the control of regional self-government budgets and regional resources? Are thus economically developed regions more likely to promote regionalism and the politicization of regional identities? Since both Istria and Pirin Macedonia are among the most economically prosperous regions in their countries, why are some developed historic regions successful in politicizing their regional identity and establishing strong regionalism while others are not?

The major economic actors, and simultaneously sources of capital, present on the regional level in Croatia and Bulgaria are regional/county authorities, central governments, European institutions through their project funding mechanisms, and the business sector (both domestic and foreign). [6] This chapter will focus on those four economic factors and their influence over the governing systems in the regions of Pirin Macedonia and Istria.

1. Economic development

Listed by Dahl Fitjar as one of the factors conductive for the deepening of regionalism, higher economic development provides regions with an incentive to look for more independence from central governments simultaneously boosting pride in the region's achievements and way of living. Since both Blagoevgrad and Istria Counties are economically developed for national standards, it is not so useful to analyse how economic development has contributed to the politicization of regional identity in Istria, but rather why the same process has not taken place in Pirin Macedonia. In other words, what are the differences in the economic systems of these too regions, if there are any, which have led them to develop different types of regionalism? A special focus will be placed on the tourist sector which, as already explained in the chapter dealing with regional identities, is

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[6] Other actors which define economic interests and demands on the regional level are political parties and the civil sector. Their influence has been analyzed in separate chapters.

fundamental for Istrian economy and has largely been associated with the crafting of the region's contemporary identity.

1.1. Blagoevgrad County economic characteristics

Blagoevgrad County is part of the Southwestern NUTS 2 Region in Bulgaria. Its population, as of 31 December 2012, is 320 160 people, following the national tendency of decreasing population at a somewhat slower rate than most other regions (-2.6% in 2012). The population of the county is 4.4% of the national population, making it the 6th largest county in Bulgaria. In terms of area, it is the third largest in the country.[7]

The Southwestern Region is the most developed economic region in Bulgaria. This is largely due to the concentration of resources – human, material and financial – in the capital Sofia. Its level of economic development is close to that of medium developed regions in the EU. Both the GDP and GDP per capita in the Southwestern Region are the highest in the country (again largely due to the performance of the capital city), highly exceeding those of any other region. Its GDP in 2012 was 36.8 billion levs (close to 19 billion euros), while the national GDP was 78 billion levs. The Southwestern Region is thus responsible for almost half of the national GDP. Despite its excellent performance in comparison with the rest of the country, the GDP per capita is still low for EU levels - 8900 euros. When expressed in purchasing power, it is equal to 75% of the EU average.[8]

Blagoevgrad in particular is among the highest ranking counties in terms of GDP per capita (3 070 euros in 2010) in the country, 6th after Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Burgas and Stara Zagora, which are centred on much larger metropoli. The average annual income per household member is slightly more than 2 000 euros (data for 2013), and the annual transfers per capita from EU operational programmes slightly less than 200 euros (2013).[9] The employment and unemployment levels are traditionally respectively higher and lower that the country's average. In 2013, the employment rate of persons 15-64 years old in

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[7] Regional Statistics, County of Blagoevgrad, National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, last revised on 06 February, 2014, available online at www.nsi.bg/bg
[8] "Socio-economic profile of the Southwestern Region." Bulgarian Ministry of Regional Development, p. 5, available online at http://www.mrrb.government.bg/index.php?controller=category&catid=69
[9] "Regional profiles: Indicators of Development." Institute for Market Economics, annual results, 2014, Blagoevgrad County, Economic section, http://www.regionalprofiles.bg/en/regions/blagoevgrad/

Blagoevgrad County was 63.3% or 3.8% higher than the national average (59.5%).[10] That was the second highest employment rate in the country after that of the capital Sofia, however, employment levels were lower than in 2009. The unemployment rate has been going up continuously since 2008, from 2.3% in 2007 to 10.4% in 2012,[11] reflecting the influence of the world recession, in particular, the economic downfall in Greece, and thus the loss in employment positions at home and abroad.[12]

The traditionally high employment rate in the county has a positive impact on various indicators of poverty. The overall social environment and conditions for living are evaluated by the county residents as "very good" (the highest available category) in a population survey carried out annually by the Institute for Market Economy.[13] The county has the lowest poverty rates in the country expressed in the number of persons living in households with very low work intensity (2.8%), the percentage of the population that is materially deprived (28.5%), and the percentage of persons living under the poverty line (12.4% as compared with a national average of 21.2%).[14] Residents are satisfied with the quality of the environment, housing conditions, and the educational opportunities offered in the county, and overall self-assess their standard of living as high.[15] The county is marked in third place in quality of living after Sofia and Plovdiv counties.[16] This higher standard of living contributes also to the fact that the ratio of the population aged 15 to 64 to that aged over 65 is favourable.[17] For every person aged over 65 there were more than four people of working age, which is also attributable to the presence of two major universities.[18] Furthermore, the share of the population aged 30-34 with higher education in the

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[10] Economic statistics, Labour market, "Employed persons and rate of employment for persons 15-64 years of age." 2013 annual data on national level, statistical regions and counties. National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria.

[11] Regional statistics, Blagoevgrad County, 2007-2012, National Statistical Institute, available online at: www.nsi.bg/en/content/11435/district-blagoevgrad111111111111111122

[12] *ibid*

[13] "Regional profiles: Indicators of Development." Institute for Market Economics, annual results, 2014, available online at http://www.regionalprofiles.bg/en/news/

[14] Statistics for 2014, Comparison of the social environment by county, http://www.regionalprofiles.bg/bg/ categories/social-environment/

[15] *ibid, p. 46*

[16] Statistics for 2012. Krastev, Petar. "Which counties have the highest standard of living?" *Institute for Market Economics,* 28 June, 2013, available online at http://ime.bg/bg/articles/v-koi-oblasti-kaestvoto-na-jivot-e-nai-visoko/

[17] "Regional profiles: Indicators of Development." Institute for Market Economics, annual results, 2013, Blagoevgrad County, Demographics, http://www.regionalprofiles.bg/en/regions/blagoevgrad/

[18] *ibid*

Southwestern Region in 2011 was 39.1%, which was higher than the national average of 27.3%,[19] and the EU average of 35.7%[20].

In short, the county is characterized by high employment, above average GDP per capita, relatively young population structure, a well-educated labour force, and above average residents' satisfaction with the standard of living. These are all positive features which boost the population's pride and attachment to the region.

1.2. Blagoevgrad County tourist sector

The tourist sector generates around 13.6% of Bulgaria's annual GDP. According to data from the Bulgarian National Bank, revenues from international tourism in the period January-December 2013 totalled slightly more than 3 billion euros (an increase of 4.9% compared to 2012 levels).[21] The importance of the sector for the national economy is just as high as in Croatia, and again similar to Croatia, majority of tourists come from neighbouring countries. The ranking by number of tourists is headed by Romania (941 392 tourists), followed by Greece (935 431 tourists), Germany (682 702), Russia (681 562), Macedonia (397 309), Turkey (381 704), and Serbia (303 184).[22] Five of those countries are neighbouring ones. The EU countries' share in 2013 was 60.5% of all tourists, and the EU is the most important tourist market for Bulgaria. In particular, the number of Greek tourists is on the rise, and has increased by 0.7% in 2013, from 928 552 in 2012 to 935 431. The number of Bulgarians who travel to Greece is comparable - 828 929 persons in 2013, marking an annual increase of 4.9%. Tourist flows with FYROM, the other country which has historical ties to Pirin Macedonia, are much lower and declining - 315 604 Bulgarians travelled to FYROM in 2013, a decrease of 6.4% from the previous year.[23] The higher flows of people and the more developed economic exchange between Greece and Bulgaria as

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[19] "Socio-economic profile of the Southwestern Region," p. 8.

[20] Data for 2012, for EU 28. "Educational Statistics at Regional Level," part of Eurostat Regional Yearbook publications, available online at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Education_statistics_at_regional_level#Tertiary_educational_attainment

[21] Bulgarian National Bank statistics as cited in "Bulgarian Tourism in Facts and Figures (January - December 2013)," publication of the Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy, available online at: www.mi.government.bg/bg/themes/statisticheski-danni-za-mejdunaroden-turizam-v-balgariya-za-2013-g-1239-322.html, p. 4.

[22] National Statistical Institute as cited in "Bulgarian Tourism in Facts and Figures (January - December 2013)," publication of the Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy, available online at: www.mi.government.bg/bg/themes/statisticheski-danni-za-mejdunaroden-turizam-v-balgariya-za-2013-g-1239-322.html, pp. 2-3.

[23] *ibid,* p. 5*.*

opposed to FYROM suggest a trend of cultural rapprochement between Pirin and Aegean Macedonia at the possible expense of Vardar Macedonia. These processes are also indicative of how regional identities are not fixed but rather a function of time and political occurrences.

In Blagoevgrad County, which has the most developed ski and spa tourism in the country, Greeks are also the number one visiting nation. For example, in the winter period 2012-2013, Greeks realized 211 494 visits.[24] For short-trip visits during national holidays, border records indicate that between 50 and 70 thousand people travel from Greece to Bulgaria and vice versa. In the period 2012-2013, a total of 211 494 Greeks made short-term visits to Bulgaria visiting predominantly border areas (mostly in Blagoevgrad County).[25]

There are no statistics as to the precise number of annual visitors to Blagoevgrad County.[26] The number of realized overnights, however, has been growing steadily in the past decade, and in 2012 that number was 962 thousand overnights, bringing in revenues of more than 37 million levs (see Table 1).[27] Those numbers are lower than the actual ones as they do not include visitors staying in their own property in Bulgaria, or all visitors staying in private accommodation as owners frequently do not report revenues. They also exclude one-day shopping visits.

Table 1. Development of tourism in Blagoevgrad County in the period 2010-2012[28]

Year/county	Nights spent 2010	Revenues (in levs) 2010	Nights spent 2011	Revenues (in levs) 2011	Nights spent 2012	Revenues (in levs) 2012
Blagoevgrad County	734 639	30 882 667	752 002	32 770 497	962 067	37 400 279

[24] National Statistical Institute as cited in "International tourism in Bulgaria, winter season 2012-2013," publication of the Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy, available online at: www.mi.government.bg/files/useruploads/files/turism_-_statistika_i_analizi/winter2013_analysis_acc2.pdf , p.2.
[25] *ibid*
[26] Blagoevgrad County has a well-developed tourist sector with the most popular and well-equipped ski resort in Bulgaria (Bansko) and some of the most popular spa destinations.
[27] Ministry of Regional Development of Bulgaria, Regional Statistics, "Socio-economic profile of the Southwestern Region," p. 7.
[28] "Economy of Blagoevgrad County." National Statistical Institute, Regional Statistics.

The number of tourists and their influence on Pirin Macedonia's economy through tourism, investments in the property market, and cross-border shopping is significant. Similar to Istria, signs on stores and institutions are frequently written in both Bulgarian and Greek, but unlike Istria, this is almost exclusively done for commercial reasons. As already mentioned, there is not a significant Greek minority residing in Pirin Macedonia. Greek "investments" and influence over the regional economy are individual. They do not represent a homogenized interest. The Blagoevgrad County administration is also lagging behind in the development of a cohesive and strategic policy to boost economic exchange with Greece and FYROM by emphasizing cross-border cultural similarities. In short, the impact of tourism on Pirin Macedonian identity is not strategic but "spontaneous," and no combined effect over the region and its governance can be established. In particular, there are not strong Greek or FYROM lobbies which protect those countries' business and political interests, and influence strategically the region's economic development. The possible (unplanned) influences of tourist flows over the economy are its internationalisation and the building of a regional identity which combines elements from different cultures. Those, however, are not aligned and are certainly not used for political reasons. The internationalization of the economy and the building of a cross-border regional identity are nevertheless interconnected. On the one hand, the location of Blagoevgrad County as a border region between Bulgaria, Greece and FYROM facilitates the economic exchange between these three countries (due to physical proximity and cultural similarities); on the other hand, the intensified economic exchange in the region further shapes the regional culture through the mixing of different cultures and languages.

1.3. Istria County economic characteristics

Istria County is the 6th largest in terms of population in Croatia, with 208 055 residents.[29] Similar to Pirin Macedonia, where the percentage of young people in the overall population is the largest in Bulgaria, the demographic picture in Istria is more positive than in most other Croatian counties. In 2013, the rate of employment of Istria County was 61.7%, and the rate of unemployment was 12.6%, while the national average in the same year was 20.2%.[30][31] Although unemployment has been on the rise, Istria has the second lowest

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[29] 2011 Population Census, results by counties. Croatian Bureau of Statistics, available online at www.dzs.hr
[30] "Godisnjak, 2013" (Annual report, 2013). Croatian Employment Service, available online at http://www.hzz.hr/UserDocsImages/HZZ_Godisnjak_2013.pdf

unemployment rate in the country, ranked only after the city of Zagreb, in which the county is comparable with the indicators of Blagoevgrad County (similar nominal unemployment and second lowest level in the country). Employment rates are lower in Croatia than in Bulgaria, with the national average in 2013 being 44%, however GDP levels are higher. Croatian GDP in 2011 was 44.2 billion euros, and the GDP per capita - 10 325 euros.[32] The GDP of Istria in the same year was 2.7 billion euros and the GDP per capita - 12 991 euros, which is the second highest rate after the City of Zagreb, 125.5% of the national average,[33] and more than 4 times higher than that of Blagoevgrad County. Istria County is also responsible for 6.1% of the national gross value added.[34]

In terms of microeconomics, the average monthly net earnings in the County of Istria in 2012, according to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, were 5 411 kunas, which is lower than the national average (5 469 kn). Net earnings in the public administration and defence sector (6 196 kn), although also lower than the national average (6 301 kn), were higher than the average earnings on county level by 14.5%.[35] In short, similar to Pirin Macedonia, while Istrian GDP per capita is 125.5% of the national average, and the county's contribution is 6.1% of the national gross value added, the levels of spending on public services and the levels of net salaries in Istria are lower than can be sustained by the regional economy. This justifies demands by the regional self-government for further fiscal decentralization and more economic independence on county level. While in Pirin Macedonia the lack of self-governance on regional level means that there is no institution which is interested in or could bring up the issue, in Istria, the elected County Assembly provides a mechanism for making political and economic demands. In addition, since net earnings in the public administration in Istria are higher than the average net earnings in other sectors, employment in public administration is desirable. As employment in the public sector is frequently influenced by the party holding political power, i.e. political parties employ their members in public institutions when holding political power, there is a direct economic appeal in seeking to win county elections, and once those are won to use

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[31] "Analytical Report," XV/4. Zagreb: Croatian Employment Service, 2013, p.10
[32] "Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia, 2013." Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, December 2013, p. 203.
[33] "Gross Domestic Product for Republic of Croatia, NUTS 2 Level and Counties, 2011." Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 14 February, 2014.
[34] "Gross Domestic Product for Republic of Croatia, NUTS 2 Level and Counties, 2011"
[35] "Employment and Wages, 2013." *Statistical Reports.* Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2014, pp. 325-341.

regional institutions to demand more autonomy.[36] The more political independence on county level exists, the more independence regional parties like IDS have in employing politically convenient staff, including family and friends. The economic benefit is both direct in the form of salaries and employment benefits, and indirect in the form of control over decision-making processes related to political (demand for more autonomy) and economic (issuing of building permits or distribution of county subsidies for the business sector) matters.

In 2011, Istria exported goods worth 7.1 billion kunas (959 million euros), which was 10 % of total Croatian exports, and in 2012 – 5.2 billion kunas (698 million euros), or 7.2% of total exports. It imported goods worth 5.4 billion kunas (732 million euros) in 2011 and in 2012 - 5.1 billion kunas (683 million euros). It has a positive balance of trade, one of the very few counties in Croatia to do so.[37] Istria's status as a cross-border region connected economically with Slovenia, Italy and Austria gives the region a competitive advantage over the rest of Croatia, and contributes to its positive balance of trade.

The largest number of business entities registered on the territory of the county are in the sectors of trade, construction, real estate intermediation, professional and technical services and industry. On the revenue side, most developed are the processing industry (35.4%), trade (20.8%), hotels and restaurants (11.9%), construction (9.3%), and professional and technical services (5.6%). The orientation of all those sectors is external.[38] As the local market is too insignificant to generate growth, the county's economy is export-oriented, in particular offering tourist and other related services.

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[36] The media is full of articles on conflict of interest and nepotism in the public sector. For reference, here are a few examples: Zebić, Enis. "Nepotism in the public sector: The case of the director of HEP" (in Croatian, "Nepotizam u javnom sektoru: Slučaj direktorice HEP-a"). *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 04 September, 2014, http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/nepotizam-u-javnom-sektoru-slucaj-diktorice-hepa/26567008.html; "Ladonja: Entanglement and nepotism as key problems for functioning democracy in Istria" (in Croatian, "Ladonja: Umreženost i nepotizam kao ključni problem funkcioniranja demokracije u Istri"). *www.barkun.hr*, 25 March, 2013; Čuljat, Elena. "Istria is stagnating, and the pact between Sanader and Jakovčić is the cause, media, nepotism and corruption" (in Croatian, "Istra stagnira, a za sve je kriv pakt Sanadera i Jakovčića, mediji, nepotizam i korupcija"). *Večernji List*, 3 January, 2014, http://www.vecernji.hr/sjeverni-jadran/istra-stagnira-a-za-sve-je-kriv-pakt-sanadera-i-jakovcica-mediji-nepotizam-i-korupcija-913192.
[37] "Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia, 2013." Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, December 2013, p. 389.
[38] "Economic developments in Istria County, 2008-2011," summary by Croatian Chamber of Commerce, Pula County Chamber, Pula, 10 July, 2012, available online at http://www.hgk.hr/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/kretanja_u_gospodarstvu_istarske_zupanije_razdoblje_2008_2011.pdf , p. 2

1.4. Istria County tourist sector

The economic differentiation of Istria can be traced to the mid-70s, and the sector that brought about economic well-being to the region is tourism. In the period 1965-1975, Istria was among the least developed regions in Yugoslavia, as it had been in Italy and in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the end of the 18th century, the French traveller Balthasar Hacquet stated that he had never seen in Europe poorer people and bigger backwardness than in Istria.[39] In the '70s and '80s, as the region closest to Western Europe, and as part of a Yugoslav strategy to develop the tourist sector, Istria began to attract increasingly large number of foreign visitors who brought in a fresh supply of foreign currency. In this otherwise unstable economic period with growing inflation and deepening economic recession, the number of foreign visitors vacationing in Istria grew fivefold.[40] That led to a significant increase in per capita earnings in Istria which had until this period been on the levels of the Croatian and Yugoslav averages. In 1975, per capita earnings in Istria were 1.4 times the Croatian average and 1.7 times the Yugoslav one (see Graph 1).[41]

Graph 1: Per capita earnings in Istria, Croatia and Yugoslavia in dinars, 1962-1978[42]

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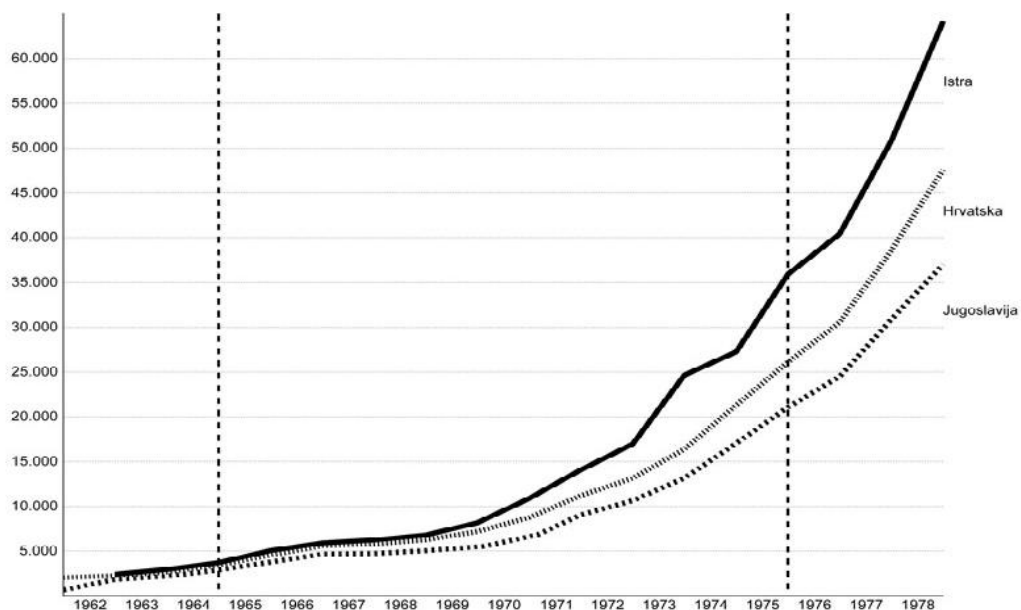
[39] Statement quoted in Pederin, Ivan. "Istria in Austrian and German Travelogues in 18th to 20th Centuries." *Istarski mozaik*, 1973 (6), p.56.
[40] "Tourist Traffic in Sea Locations." Republican Bureau for Statistics of the Socialist Republic of Croatia, 1966-1977 as summarized in Jurcan, Emil. "Istrian Consent: Forms of Repression in a Multicultural Society." *Zarez*, 373-374, 19 December, 2013.
[41] "Statistical Yearbook" of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1975 as cited in Jurcan, Emil.
[42] *Ibid ("Hrvatska" – Croatian for "Croatia")*

During this period (1970s-1980s), by shaping itself as a tourist destination, Istria also began to acquire a single regional identity. The first step towards the construction of the singularity of Istria was through the creation of a single market product (a single tourist destination). Simultaneously, a new regional and intellectual elite appeared enriched and with freshly-built confidence. [43]

Nowadays, tourism represents 15.5% of the Croatian GDP.[44] Istria remains the most visited tourist region and county in Croatia. Around 3 million tourists visited Istria County in both 2012 and 2013, realizing close to 20 million overnights annually. In 2012, that number represented 25% of all tourist arrivals in Croatia, and in 2013 – 24%.[45] A large majority of those visitors were foreigners (2.8 million in 2013)[46] coming from neighbouring countries.

In comparison with Pirin Macedonia, the number of tourists visiting Istria and the amount of revenues those leave in the economy are significantly higher. According to the Croatian National Bank's *bilten*,[47] in 2013 Croatia generated 7.2 billion euros from tourism, of which, roughly speaking, one third or **2.4 billion euros** were generated in Istria.[48] That indicates a significant internationalization of the Istrian economy and a dependence on financial inflows from tourism in all segments of society on a scale much larger than in Pirin Macedonia. The real estate, services, hospitality, transport and environmental sectors are all significantly influenced by the inflow of tourists, but more importantly, as already said, the local culture has been shaped initially subconsciously, and later, strategically, to suit Istria's image as a tourist destination.

According to Yujie Zhu, "cultural performance, which is the presentation, perception, and interpretation of local cultures, is an intrinsic part of international tourism and helps (re)build the place-bound identity in mediating the influence of global forces."[49] This is exactly what has been happening in Istria in the last two and a half decades. Istria's residents and culture have not been merely recipients of the effects of globalization but have actively adjusted to the process by comprehending and controlling the developments

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[43] Jurcan, Emil
[44] Statistics for 2012. "Tourism in Figures 2013." Zagreb: publication of the Croatian Tourist Board and the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia, p. 47, available online at www.mint.hr/UserDocsImages/140624_HTZ-TURIZAM-2013_HR.pdf
[45] "Tourism in Numbers 2013," pp. 34-35.
[46] Tourist Board of Istria, www.istra.hr/.app/upl_files/Istra_2013-2007.pdf
[47] "Bilten." Zagreb: Croatian National Bank, 207/10.2014, p. 81.
[48] Author's calculation based on the number of registered overnights in Istria County.
[49] Zhua, Yujie. "When the Global Meets the Local in Tourism—Cultural Performances in Lijiang as Case Studies." *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 8 (3), 2012, pp. 302-319.

in the tourist sector. In this sense, they have been shaped from inside, i.e. the regional culture has been reinvented by internal players and processes, in order to satisfy the demands of the outside (international tourism). Istria has been portrayed systematically in all political rhetoric, in all strategic developmental documents, and in all marketing materials as a region where different cultures meet and not only co-exist peacefully but also combine to create a hybrid culture of tolerance and multiculturalism, a culture that welcomes differences and embraces globalization.[50] In other words, the influence of economic development has not been direct through the existence of a (foreign) strategic economic policy targeted at shaping the regional economy in Istria and through it the political system, but rather indirect. In order to attract tourists, Istrians have chosen to embrace and emphasize the elements of their regional culture that are most similar to the culture of neighbouring countries (language, food, traditions). This said, unlike in Pirin Macedonia, where Greece does not have any cultural or economic strategy for the development of its similarities with Pirin Macedonia, Italy and Austria do provide some support for cultural and educational institutions in Istria. For example, the Italian government partly finances Italian elementary and secondary schools and organizations of the Italian minority in Istria. Various Austrian and Italian associations sign contracts for cooperation with Istrian towns and businesses, and are thus able to stir the service sector (and partially, culture) in a desired by them direction.[51] Those, however, are marginal factors which would have been insufficient for the shaping of regional culture, let alone its politicization. It was the overall economic incentives which were presented by the prospects for the development of tourism, and later on the actual financial flows, which led to the consolidation of a single regional identity from the bottom up. When those flows were jeopardized in the early 1990s by the policy led by the central government, the regional identity was further consolidated and politicized to enable the region to protect its economic interests.

In summary, the hypothesis that higher economic development leads to stronger regionalism seems to hold water in Istria, and the correlation is valid when placed in

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[50] Regional identity and culture have been discussed in Chapter 2.

[51] For example, the town of Poreč has a contract with some organizations of retired people in Austria, which enables the latter to speak in one voice and have larger negotiation power over prices and conditions, but also over the overall provision of services (i.e. to demand personnel that speaks German, or specific music and food), which shapes the culture of accommodations and towns. A town visited by thousands of Austrians every year for Christmas, for example, ultimately picks up elements of the Austrian culture for economic reasons.

comparative context as well. Istria is more developed economically than Pirin Macedonia, and its regionalism is stronger than the Pirin Macedonian one.

2. The effects of globalization – foreign direct investment

This section will explore the second of the three economic factors which are identified by Dahl Fitjar to lead to the emergence of regionalism, namely globalization. The hypothesis is that since Istrian regionalism is stronger, then the region should also have been the recipient of higher levels of FDI. A detailed analysis of the foreign direct investments in Istria and Pirin Macedonia will be made, but prior to that a short comparison of the two national economies will provide an overview of the framework within which regional economies operate.

According to the World Investment Report for 2013,[52] published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the highest levels of FDI in South East Europe - 13.3 billion dollars - were realized in 2008, just before the financial crisis engulfed the region. Since regionalism in Istria was strongest in the 1990s, the positive relation between it and FDI seems to be initially disproved. The surge in FDI to South East Europe, especially after 2006, was driven largely by its post-transitionary economic recovery, a better investment climate, and the start in 2005 of association (and accession) negotiations with the EU. In addition, relatively low labour costs, easy access to European markets, and the privatization of the remaining public enterprises also gave a boost to FDI flows. Economic recovery, however, did not last long. In 2009 the flow of investments recorded a negative trend and was reduced by 35%; in 2010 it fell by further 46%. Croatia was hit worst and the flow of FDI went down from 6 billion dollars in 2008 to 490 million dollars in 2010. [53] The fragility of FDI flows to South East Europe was related partly to the large share of inward FDI from the EU, where economic woes had particularly negative knock-on effects for FDI in associated economies. South East Europe's industry composition also worked against it; investment flows had not been diversified and were concentrated mainly in industries such as finance and retail which were hit badly by the recession.[54] Croatia's

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[52] "World Investment Report 2013," United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/wir2013_en.pdf

[53] "World Investment Report 2013." United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/wir2013_en.pdf, p. 64. The report excludes EU Member States from the category of developing countries, so Bulgaria was not included in the statistics for South East Europe.

[54] *ibid*

overdependence on the tourist sector, which relies heavily on European investments, explains at least partially why its economy was so significantly impacted.

The summarized data for Croatia and Bulgaria is presented in the table below. It shows the inflows of FDI in million dollars and as a percentage of GDP in the period 2008-2013.

Table 2. FDI flows to Croatia and Bulgaria in million dollars and as a percentage of GDP, 2008-2013

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Bulgaria						
FDI (million euros)[55]	6 728	2 437	1 151	1 330	1 142	1 157
FDI (million dollars)[56]	9 855	3 385	1 525	1 849	1 375	1 450
FDI (% от GDP)[57]	19.9	8.0	3.9	4.0	3.1	3.6
Croatia						
FDI (million euros)[58]	4 063	2 434	377	1 072	1 068	550
FDI (million dollars)[59]	5 938	3 346	490	1 517	1 356	580
FDI (% of GDP)[60]	8.4	5.5	1.4	2.0	2.4	1.0

The FDI flows to both countries are comparable, with Bulgaria performing slightly better in the long run than Croatia. An area in which Bulgaria does significantly better than Croatia, however, is the value of greenfield FDI, especially in the period 2008-2010. In the peak year

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[55] Information summarized by the author based on Bulgarian National Bank annual statistics on foreign direct investment in Bulgaria, available online at:
http://www.bnb.bg/Statistics/StExternalSector/ StDirectInvestments/StDIBulgaria/index.htm
[56] Information generated from 'World Investment Report 2014.'
[57] World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.WD.GD.ZS. World Bank calculations are higher than those of the Bulgarian National Bank. For the latter's calculations, see www.bnb.bg/statistics
[58] Information generated from Croatian National Bank statistics,
http://www.hnb.hr/statistika/estatistika.htm
[59] Information generated from 'World Investment Report 2014.'
[60] World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.WD.GD.ZS

2008, the inflow of greenfield FDI in Bulgaria was 11 billion dollars, while their value in Croatia was 3 billion, almost four times lower.[61] The sectors which have attracted most FDI in Croatia are financial intermediation (21.3%), trade (9.7%), real estate activities (7.8%), post and telecommunications (6.5%), and other business activities (5.9%).[62] It is visible that in those sectors we are not talking about significant greenfield investments nor about investments in production. Thus the sector which gives Croatia its competitive advantage over Bulgaria (tourism) is also the one which is responsible for its lower levels of greenfield investments as those are rarely made in tourism and related sectors. Overall, the FDI structure indicates that Croatia serves as a market for foreign products to a larger extent than Bulgaria, with foreign banks providing the financial capital to purchase such products. This is also confirmed by Croatia's higher rates of foreign debt.

2.1. Foreign direct investment in Blagoevgrad County

Blagoevgrad County offers major advantages to investors – direct borders with two countries (Greece and FYROM), proximity to Serbia and Turkey, good road infrastructure, an abundance of resources for development of tourism, and two universities which bring a lot of money to the county and ensure a well-educated work force. The most developed economic sectors are tourism, light industry, logging, woodworking and real estate. Overall, the Southwestern Region is ranked first in Bulgaria attracting 64.6% of all FDI. FDI flows to Blagoevgrad County are listed in the table below.

Table 3. Annual foreign direct investment in non-financial sector enterprises at cumulative base in the period 2007-2012 (in thousand euros)[63]

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Blagoevgrad County	134 446	215 233	252 672	251 985	257 517	306 899

As can be seen, the traditionally higher rates of economic activity in Blagoevgrad County are not accompanied by high rates of FDI, which is explaining why the local population's

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[61] 'World Investment Report 2014,' p. 218.
[62] *ibid*
[63] National Statistical Institute, County profile, Blagoevgrad County, item 'Direct foreign investment in non-financial sector enterprises at cumulative base in the period 2007-2012 (in thousand euros).'

incomes are lower than the national average. Overall, foreign direct investment in Blagoevgrad County in the period 2007-2013 has amounted to 1.4 billion euros, or 4 400 euros per capita.[64] That is on the average a little bit more than **600 euros** per capita annually. The highest annual FDI per capita in the non-financial sector was recorded in 2012 and amounted to 957 euros.[65]

For the purposes of this research, investments made by neighbouring countries are of particular interest since they might reveal their influence over the studied regions. FYROM investments in Bulgaria in 2013 were 3 million euros, while Bulgarian investments in FYROM were 2.2 million euros.[66] Both figures are negligible. Greek investments are much more significant and Greece is one of the most important investors in Bulgaria ranking third among a total of 182 countries.[67] In the period 1996-2013, Greek investments in Bulgaria amounted to 3.6 billion euros, which is 8.5 % of all foreign direct investment.[68][69] Additionally, the Greek business sector has contributed to the creation of around 80 000 job positions in Bulgaria, and the annual bilateral trade in goods for 2013 was 2.8 billion euros.[70] According to the InvestBulgaria Agency, 7 of the 100 largest investors in Bulgaria are Greek-owned companies. Most large investments, however, are made in Sofia or Sofia County, not in Blagoevgrad County, and are national in focus, which means that one cannot talk about a significant regional focus of Greek investments.[71] While Greek investments on the national level are significant and large, and Greece's lobby in Sofia is strong and visible,[72] Greek investments in Blagoevgrad County are predominantly in small businesses, in particular in the textile industry, benefiting from the cheaper labour and utilities and

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[64] Author's calculation based on FDI data and number of Blagoevgrad county's population in 2012 (320,160)

[65] "Regional Profiles: Indicators of Development." Institute for Market Economy, Indicators for the economy in Blagoevgrad County 2014, available at www.regionalprofiles.bg/bg/regions/blagoevgrad

[66] Bulgarian National Bank, http://www.bnb.bg/Statistics/StExternalSector/StDirectInvestments/StDIBulgaria /index.htm

[67] Bulgarian investments in Greece are insignificant and are mostly expressed in the running of small businesses in Greece by Bulgarian citizens, or the purchase of real estate property.

[68] Statistics from Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy, http://www.mi.government.bg/bg/ themes/garciya-267-333.html?p=eyJwYWdlIjoyfQ==?p=eyJwYWdlIjoyfQ==

[69] A negative trend is the fact that the net payments made to Greece exceed the volume of investments. In 2012, net payments to Greece exceeded investments by 89.8 million euros, in 2013 – by 17.5 million euros. For more information, see www.mi.government.bg/bg/themes/ garciya-267-333.html?p=eyJwYWdlIjoyfQ==?p=eyJwYWdlIjoyfQ==

[70] Mihajlov, Ljubomir. "Sofia and Athens to promote jointly tourism" (author's translation from Bulgarian), interview with the Greek Ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Dimosthenis Stoidis, for *Standart*, 16 December, 2014.

[71] *ibid* and Minko Gerdzhikov.

[72] See Hellenic Business Council in Bulgaria.

from the more favourable tax regime.[73] Those do not impact significantly the regional economy nor have the credibility to influence local and regional governance.

The deep economic problems which Greece has encountered in the last couple of years have actually had a somewhat positive effect on the economy of Pirin Macedonia. A significant amount of funding is moving from northern Greece to Bulgaria, and part of it is invested in Blagoevgrad County. Here we are not talking only about the transfer of bank deposits from Greek to Bulgarian banks but also, to a lesser extent, about the relocation of production facilities.[74] According to National Revenue Agency data, in 2012 the number of Greek companies registered in Bulgaria increased by 72%. A total of 3 781 enterprises funded entirely with Greek capital filed tax returns with NRA in 2012. Almost half of them, or 1 535 companies, were registered on the territory of Blagoevgrad County.[75] The companies likely opted for Bulgaria because of the difficult economic situation in Greece, the better tax conditions (10% flat profit tax), and the cheaper labour force. The official statistics of the Ministry of Economy and Energy confirm those numbers, listing around 3 800 Greek companies operating in Bulgaria at the end of 2012,[76] and if the companies with mixed ownership are added, the number exceeds 15 000. One of the largest concentrations of Greek firms is in the municipality of Sandanski which is in Blagoevgrad County.

To summarize, FDI in Blagoevgrad County amounts to some 600 euros per capita annually. Given the fact that the GDP per capita on county level is slightly more than 3000 euros, that number, although low, is not insignificant for the regional economy. However, flows have not been sufficiently high or unstable to cause major fluctuations in the standard of living of the regional population, and have not had any impact on the political organization in Pirin Macedonia. Since the level of regionalism has remained relatively low in the last two and a half decades, no correlation between globalization and regionalism in Pirin Macedonia can be established. As of recently, FDI flows from northern Greece to Pirin Macedonia have been on the rise due to the prolonged economic crisis in Greece. Although

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[73] According to statistics by the Blagoevgrad County administration, around 8 thousand people work in a couple of hundred Greek firms in the textile and sewing industry. The firms are small in size, with the largest among them employing no more than 200-300 employees.

[74] Nikolaeva, Vesela, *capital.bg.*

[75] Denizova, Vera. "The number of Greek firms in Bulgaria is growing" (in Bulgarian, "Броят на гръцките фирми в България расте"), C*apital*, 28 June, 2012; Smith, Helena. "Bulgaria benefits from weakness of Greek economy." *The Guardian*, 19 March, 2014.

[76] Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy, http://www.mi.government.bg/bg/themes/garciya-267-333.html?p=eyJwYWdlIjoyfQ==?p=eyJwYWdlIjoyfQ==

it is too early yet to analyse such trends, should they persist or intensify, they might serve as a breakthrough factor for Pirin Macedonian regionalism.

2.2. Foreign direct investment in Istria County

The peak of investment flows to Istria County was recorded in 2008 – 3.3 billion kunas (around 430 million euros). However, the trend since then has been negative, with investments falling down to 1.8 billion kunas in 2011 and experiencing a slight recovery to 1.9 billion kunas (253 million euros) in 2013. The most significant sectors for investment in 2011 were tourism with 571 million kunas and construction with 408 million kunas.[77] Overall, investment flows in Istria County are low, and on the same level with those in Blagoevgrad Country.

The largest provider of Foreign Direct Investment in Istria is Germany with 25% of all FDI. Second is Italy with 21%, followed by Slovenia (14%) and the Netherlands and Denmark (8% each). In the period 1993-2013, 39% of all FDI was invested in the real estate sector, 32 % in the production of non-metal products, and 10% in hospitality (hotels and restaurants).[78]

The table below summarizes the levels of FDI over a 6-year period.

Table 4. Annual foreign direct investment for Istria County in non-financial sector enterprises at cumulative base in the period 2008-2013 (in thousand kunas and euros)[79]

Region/year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Istria (EUR)	457 293	340 941	338 802	238 657	254 686	255 467
Istria (HRK)	3 301 659	2 502 513	2 469 868	1 773 226	1 915 239	1 933 884

According to the data, in the period 2008-2013 FDI per capita has varied between 1100 and 1200 euros annually, which is around 8% of the region's GDP per capita (data for 2011). In

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[77] "Economic Developments in Istria County, 2008-2011," summary by Croatian Chamber of Commerce, Pula County Chamber, Pula, 10 July, 2012, available online at http://www.hgk.hr/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/kretanja_u_gospodarstvu_istarske_zupanije_razdoblje_2008_2011.pdf
[78] "Istrian Economic Overview," statistics by the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, Pula County Chamber, Pula, 28 August, 2014, available online at www.hgk.hr/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/istria_ english_2014.pdf
[79] Croatian Chamber of Commerce, Pula County Chamber

Pirin Macedonia, in 2011 the FDI per capita was around 25% of the region's GDP per capita, or 3 times larger than the number for Istria. It is clear that any impact on regionalism caused by globalization must have been stronger in Pirin Macedonia than in Istria.

To place the data in national context, investments on the territory of Istria County coming directly from the state budget have amounted to 70 million kn annually in the period 2012-2014[80], 74 million kn in 2011, and 68 million kn in 2010.[81] Additionally, Croatian Roads, a public limited liability company for managing state roads, has invested 117.7 million kunas in 2013 in Istria, Bina Istra has received 210 million kunas from the budget,[82] and Croatian Waters have invested 225 million kunas in the construction of water networks and canalization systems.[83] And a waste management facility in Kaštijun has received close to 200 million kunas of (centrally-negotiated) EU funding.[84] In short, the levels of central government investment in the region are comparable with those of FDI, and no correlation between globalization and the growth of regionalism can be established based on FDI flows only.

3. European integration and funding

European integration is frequently seen as one of the catalysts of regionalism, to a large extent because of both national and sub-national actors' tendencies to justify their actions by referring (frequently erroneously) to EU best practices or legislation. The rationale behind the correlation between EU integration and regionalism is that supra and sub-national interests share a common interest in weakening central governments which has prompted the European Union, as represented by the European Commission, to promote processes of decentralization and regional development.

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[80] Grakalić, Dubravko. "Istria gets 10 million kunas less from the state treasury" (in Croatian, "Istri deset milijuna kuna manje iz državne kase"). *Glas Istre*, 3 March, 2013, available online at www.glasistre.hr/vijesti/pula_istra/istri-deset-milijuna-kuna-manje-iz-drzavne-kase-442693
[81] Grakalić, Dubravko. "Istria to receive 250 million kunas from the state budget" (in Croatian, "Istri 250 milijuna kuna iz državnog proračuna"). *Glas Istre*, 20 February, 2012, www.glasistre.hr/vijesti/arhiva/348943
[82] Republican budgets for 2013 and 2014. "Programme classification (by programmes, activities and projects)." Zagreb: Croatian Ministry of Finance, http://www.mfin.hr/hr/proracun
[83] "Kajin: There is no development in Istria without state investments" (in Croatian, "Kajin: Bez državnih investicija u Istri nema razvoja"). *Glas Istre*, 19 November, 2013, available online at www.glasistre.hr/vijesti/pula_istra/kajin-bez-drzavnih-investicija-u-istri-nema-razvoja-430433
[84] Financing for the project was ensured through a bilateral agreement signed by the Croatian government and the Commission of European Communities, and not through a direct application by county authorities.

Both Croatia and Bulgaria are latecomers to the European Union. That means that on the financial side flows from the EU to those countries have been relatively low, and that reforms have focused on more fundamental issues, such as the fight with organized crime and the reform of the legal sector, rather than decentralization. The following section will discuss the impact of the EU on Blagoevgrad County and Istria, regions which because of their border status and proximity to "old" EU Member States should have benefited the most from EU-led reforms in the area of regional development.

3.1. EU funding – Blagoevgrad County

Because of the limited real power of governors and county administrations, the regional level is largely undermined in Bulgaria. Mayors of different towns and municipalities rarely undertake the initiative to work together on both national and EU projects, and an independent and powerful county-level governance which could envision strategic regional development is lacking. Furthermore, the lack of self-government features in regional authorities means that as far as EU funding is concerned, from the 7 EU operational programmes, county administrations are eligible for funding under only one – Administrative Capacity, which has the smallest budget and is limited to educational activities for staff. Since national programmes follow the same rationale and priorities for funding as EU ones, often combining resources by co-financing the same programmes and objectives, it is clear that in Bulgaria, the regional level is not serving as a unit for strategic economic planning.[85] Several post-accession analyses in the new EU Member States confirm that local governments regard Structural Funds as one of the most important instruments for their socio-economic development, while their capacity to absorb funding is limited due to the low absorption capacity of local government.[86] That is indeed the case of counties in Bulgaria.

For the 2007-2013 period, Bulgaria was allocated 6 853 billion euros in total in EU Structural Funding, 6 674 billion euros under the Convergence objective and 179 million

[85] *ibid*, p. 10.
[86] Tatar, Merit. "Estonian Local Government Absorption Capacity of European Union Structural Funds." *Administrative Culture*, 2010, 11 (2).; Šumpíková, Markéta, Pavel, Jan and Stanislav Klazar "EU Funds: Absorption Capacity and Effectiveness of Their Use, with Focus on Regional Level in the Czech Republic",
http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/NISPAcee/UNPAN018547.pdf

euros under the European Territorial Cooperation objective.[87] Its own contribution was to amount to a minimum of 1 345 billion euros. In reality, as of November 2014, around 4.7 billion euros worth of funding have been absorbed. Pirin Macedonia, or the institutions on the territory of Blagoevgrad County, from the time Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 to September 2014, have absorbed under all Operational Programmes more than 358 million levs (almost **182 million euros**).[88] That includes all projects on the territory of the county, regardless of who the main beneficiary is (public or private institutions, NGOs, state authorities or the business sector). The number of signed contracts for funding as of November, 2014 is **387** with 208 direct beneficiaries[89]. Funding absorbed by the Blagoevgrad County administration itself from 2009 to 2014 is 746 thousand levs (less than **400 thousand euros**), comprising **8** projects focused on improving administrative capacity and service delivery.[90] Taking into consideration the size of the county, the amount is comparable to that absorbed by other counties, i.e. it is not visible that because of its border position and the common border with an (old) EU Member State, Blagoevgrad County has absorbed a larger amount of funding than other Bulgarian counties.[91] The rationale behind such thinking is that because of its proximity to an EU Member State, and because of cross-border cooperation, institutions in Blagoevgrad County might have gained know-how related to EU funding processes earlier than other Bulgarian counties, and might have used the fact that Greece is an old EU Member State[92] to acquire funding for the strengthening of the region's (multicultural) identity. Furthermore, Greece, as an EU Member State, could have been the lead applicant on EU projects focused on the strengthening of cross-border economic, political and cultural relations with Pirin Macedonia even prior to Bulgarian membership in the EU, an opportunity other counties in Bulgaria have not had. As Pirin Macedonia shares cultural traits with Aegean Macedonia in Greece, it can be expected that those regions would be natural partners on a number of EU projects, but a review of funding does not demonstrate any particular concentration in cross-border projects, or any particular Greek influence over the region via EU

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[87] All EU funding data is from the Unified Management Information System for the EU Structural Instruments In Bulgaria, maintained by the Administration of the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria, Directorate "Information and Systems for Management of EU Funds," available online at http://umispublic.government.bg/opOperationalProgramms.aspx

[88] *ibid*, http://umispublic.government.bg/prPlanningRegions.aspx?pr=10002&list=1, information from September, 2014.

[89] *ibid*

[90] *ibid*

[91] This figure excludes funding under bilateral programmes with neighbouring countries (Greece and FYROM), which would be described later in the chapter.

[92] Greece was the only EU Member State with which Bulgaria shared a border prior to the latter's accession to the EU (when Romania also became a Member State).

mechanisms.[93] That seems to disprove the theory that EU funding is used by Greek or county authorities to reinvent or strengthen the cross-border regional identity of (Pirin) Macedonia. On the contrary, the relatively balanced distribution of EU funding on national level suggests that planning and execution is carried out by the central level as the latter is concerned with the reduction of economic and social discrepancies and thus with the balanced development of all counties. That means that in Bulgaria central government institutions are in charge of contracting and financing, with local authorities serving as beneficiaries but having little control over the setting up of the priority areas for financing[94] or the selection of the projects to be financed. Since EU programmes are designed to evaluate projects' success according to the extent to which they contribute to the achievement of programme priorities, any influence on regionalism in Pirin Macedonia could only have been accidental, uncoordinated and insignificant.

Furthermore, although almost every sector of the economy in Pirin Macedonia has been influenced by EU funding mechanisms, the Blagoevgrad County administration itself has had very limited access to funding outside of the central state budget. Any developmental and strategic projects on the county level funded with Structural Funding were developed and implemented by central government institutions, which were also responsible for direct payments and financial management. The available data supports the dominance of the national and local level over the regional. In the period 2007-2013, the 28 county administrations in Bulgaria have jointly absorbed around 7.8 million levs. As already mentioned, Blagoevgrad County's administration has participated in 4 projects, exclusively under the EU Structural Programme "Administrative Capacity," absorbing 457 thousand levs (approx. 233 thousand euros). By comparison, in the same period (2007-2013), the (central authority) Administration of the Council of Ministers absorbed close to 51 million levs, which is 6.5 times more than the amount absorbed by all county administrations together; and the Ministry of Regional Development, which is responsible for the implementation of the Regional Development Act, participated in 69 projects worth 49 million levs. On local level, the Municipality of Blagoevgrad, which is the largest local unit

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[93] Greek involvement in the pre-accession process appears to have been mostly on central level, and focused on the protection of Greek investments and influence over Bulgarian accession in general rather than over the regional identity of culturally similar regions.

[94] Apart from a consultative role in the process of preparation of strategic documents and policies.

on the territory of Blagoevgrad County, has absorbed close to 55 million levs (approx. 28 million euros) and has realized 22 projects.[95]

The seven years since Bulgaria joined the European Union have been years of hectic economic change, enabled by the availability of more significant EU funding, but also triggered by necessity, i.e. the country became part of the Union's internal market and had to adjust to its principles and rules. Bulgarian accession to the Union coincided roughly with the beginning of a prolonged period of recession and financial crisis in Europe, which limited other sources of financing and augmented the importance of EU funds as one of the few remaining sources of support for the economy. In the pre-accession period Bulgaria had been focused on carrying out administrative and political reforms targeted at preparing its administration for EU membership. In contrast, the period since Bulgaria became a full-fledged member was characterized by deeper economic change focused on operating within the common market, and on the regional level –by attempts to make towns and municipalities more competitive and to reduce regional disparities. County administrations played a minimal role in the process. Specific economic and business projects were financed on the local level, while strategic planning and the distribution of funding were carried out through projects conceived and executed by central government institutions. The regional level focused on improving its administrative capacity and the quality of provided services, which again confirms that level's role as a predominantly administrative unit. Furthermore, it also appears that EU institutions, through their funding schemes, have strengthened the central level by providing it with significant funding, but also by using it as an intermediary for regional and local development. Central government institutions have played a pivotal role in the selection and funding of projects, and in the setting up of programme priorities and strategic documents. In the case of regional development, focus was placed on the reduction of intra- and interregional discrepancies. As counties were not actively involved in the distribution of EU funds and were also recipients of insignificant funding, the regional level has been underrepresented in decision-making processes. On the top, the central government has focused on the absorption of EU funds, the strengthening of the administrative capacities of central institutions, and the growth of less-developed areas. At the bottom, local authorities (municipal or town) have focused on local development, competing directly with each

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[95] Statistics until November, 2014. All EU funding data is from the Unified Management Information System for the EU Structural Instruments In Bulgaria, maintained by the Administration of the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria, Directorate "Information and Systems for Management of EU Funds," available online at http://umispublic.government.bg/opOperationalProgramms.aspx

other for funding, and cooperating to some extent with local businesses. Neither of those saw any economic interest in the development of regional structures, and as a result, the regional level has been largely neglected.

3.2. EU funding – Istria County

Istria has been considered one of the most successful Croatian counties in the absorption of EU pre-accession funding. This was due to the fact that regional and local self-governments demonstrated an early interest in available funding for the development of the tourist and goods-processing sectors. Furthermore, since the origin of funds was foreign, those were seen as an opportunity to increase the region's independence from the central government. IDS, which had positioned itself as a European regionalist party, also welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate its connection with Europe. The rationale behind IDS' focus on EU membership and funding was both political and economic. Politically, it sought to strengthen its position in the political arena in Istria by demonstrating a connection with the more "civilized," tolerant and multi-cultural "old" Europe. Economically, because of Croatian central government's limited resources and because of the rocky relations with the centre in the 1990s,[96] regional authorities in Istria on county and municipal levels had to be proactive in securing both EU funding and FDI.

According to the Department for International Cooperation and EU Affairs of the County Administration of Istria, pre-accession programs have been the predominant source of EU funding, due to Croatia's late accession to the European Union. Structural Funds only started being operational in the beginning of 2014, and no significant amount of funding can be traced to them. In addition, in the 2007-2013 funding period, the county was eligible for funding under the cross-border programme for cooperation with Slovenia and two transnational programs (MED and SEES) within the framework of which cooperation with Italy and Slovenia was also supported. However, similar to the case of Blagoevgrad County, because of the large programme area included in those mechanisms, their cross-border impact, particularly on county level, has been insignificant.

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[96] IDS has served as an opposition to HDZ, which was the leading political party in Croatia during most of the last two and a half decades. Even as a member of the ruling coalition in Račan's SDP government in 2000-2003, IDS frequently disagreed with its leading partner and even left the coalition pre-emptively leading ultimately to the collapse of the government.

Overall, in the past 20 years, 133 entities from the public, business or civil sectors registered on the territory of Istria County have participated in **320** projects financed through various EU programs and other international funds.[97] The total value of the implemented projects, for Istrian-based partners is **106 million euros**. The two largest projects have been infrastructural - construction of a drainage system in Poreč and a waste management facility in Kaštijun.

The county administration has been very active in developing and implementing EU projects. It has participated in 94 projects and has founded a number of institutions to facilitate the acquisition of funding, namely three county development agencies, IDA – the Istrian Development Agency[98], IRENA – the Istrian Regional Energy Agency, AZRRI – the Agency for the Rural Development of Istria, and also Natura Histrica, the Istria Region's Foundation for Civil Society Development, and the Istria Region's Institute for Physical Planning.

Lastly, to put EU funding within the context of annual county budgets, in 2013 the Istria County administration absorbed revenues in the amount of slightly more than 16 million kunas or around 2 million euros on a project basis.[99] Of that amount, 12.4 million kunas were revenues from projects of associated enterprises and county budget beneficiaries, and the remaining 3.6 million were direct revenues of executive bodies of the county administration. The revenues from EU projects were 14.3 million kunas (1.9 million euros), or 90% of all project-based revenues,[100] and **4.8%** of the county's total revenues. County authorities participated in 12 projects, and county enterprises and budget beneficiaries in 13 additional ones of public benefit. Because of the latter's recognized public value,[101] those projects were also supported through the county budget by the provision of a grant (up to 15% of the project's value) and/or pre-financing of the remaining 85%[102].[103]

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[97] Information by the County Department for International Cooperation and EU Affairs (from May, 2016), Istria County, see www.istra-europa.eu

[98] IDA has been a partner on 26 EU projects funded through pre-accession mechanism, with allocated financial support of 3.5 million euros. Information available at official programme webpages, www.ida.hr, under section "International cooperation and EU programmes."

[99] "Annual report on the execution of the official budget of Istria County, 2013," available online at http://www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=3968

[100] *ibid*

[101] The decision of a project's value and benefit to the general public, and thus of provision of co-financing or pre-financing by the county administration, is made on regional level by the county office under whose jurisdiction the project falls.

[102] To be returned to the county budget upon receipt of Community funding.

[103] All data is generated from the "Annual report on the execution of the official budget of Istria County, 2013," available online at http://www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=3968

Despite the significant efforts of the county administration to secure EU funding, comparisons with Pirin Macedonia are indicating higher flows going to it than to Istria. The overall levels of EU funding absorbed on county level[104] in Blagoevgrad were 182 million euros or **562 euros** per capita, while those in Istria were 106 million euros or slightly more than **500 euros** per capita. The difference is even more significant when one considers the lower levels of development of Blagoevgrad County. The same amount of funding should have a larger impact on a smaller economy, and Pirin Macedonia is the smaller of the two economies. Given the higher activism and capacity of Istrian institutions in comparison with Pirin Macedonian ones, the reasons behind this underperformance must be sought elsewhere. On the one hand, it might have been due to the fact that Croatian counties have become eligible for more abundant Structural Funds only in 2013, and that the first such calls were announced in Croatia only in 2014. Average project values in both counties (472 thousand euros in Blagoevgrad County and 331 thousand euros in Istria County) seem to confirm this explanation. The larger size of the projects in the former seems to suggest that Structural Funds were a predominant source of finance. However, those numbers also confirm another theory, and that is the predominance of the central level in the distribution of EU funding. Of the two counties, Istria County is incomparably more proactive and focused on attracting EU funding. It has numerous agencies created for this sole purpose, has a larger budget devoted to the absorption of funds, and provides financial and administrative support to entities applying for funding. The role of the Blagoevgrad County administration in the process of the absorption of EU funding is minimal. It is not only not involved in any other programmes but such related to the building of administrative capacity, but also lacks any structures supporting the acquisition of funding. That suggests that in Blagoevgrad County, the central government has played a strong role in the procuring and absorption of EU funding. It has significantly assisted the process of project preparation, planning and application, also defining regional priorities and strategies for development. The higher per capita financing generated from EU funds in Blagoevgrad County is also refuting a positive correlation between levels of EU funding and stronger regionalism.

The above analysis of the three factors identified by Dahl Fitjar to be conductive for the emergence of regionalism reveal only one certain correlation in the cases of Istria and Pirin Macedonia. The more developed of the two regions is also the one with deeper, more politicized regionalism. The engine of Istrian economic performance is also identified

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[104] Funding absorbed by all institutions based on the territory of the county.

(tourism), and although associated with the internationalization of the regional economy, it is not linked with FDI flows and EU funding. That means that the development of the tourist sector was carried out mostly bottom up, and was to a large extent based on open market economic principles. Since, however, as already discussed in Chapter 1, both Croatia and Bulgaria are highly regulated countries, it needs to be explored what has been the involvement of county authorities, in particular in Istria, and how this purely economic advantage has been used for political purposes.

4. Regional financial capacity and budgets

4.1. Local/regional authorities and the process of fiscal decentralization in Bulgaria and Croatia

The fiscal decentralization process in Bulgaria featured several distinct periods. The beginning of the transition period (1991-1993) was characterized by high centralization and the absence of dialogue between local and central authorities.[105] In 1993 the independence of municipal budgets within the consolidated state budget was acknowledged, meaning that although they were still part of the consolidated state budget, municipal budgets were listed separately, i.e. it was visible exactly what revenues and expenses were attributed to which municipality.[106] The change was necessitated by central government's efforts to increase financial responsibility on the local level and abandon the centralization of local budget surpluses and the financing of local deficits. In practice, however, up until the end of 2002, the financial system remained centralized.[107] Even nowadays, local authorities' funding is predominantly provided through state budget transfers. In 2011, 44% of all revenues of local self-government units were from own sources while 56% were transfers from the central budget, of which only 6% were untied to specific grant conditions. By comparison, in Croatia, a majority of funding (51%) is provided through shared taxes, 31% are generated from own resources, and only 14% are government transfers.[108]

[105] Stoilova, Desislava. "Local Government Reforms in Bulgaria: Recent Developments and Key Challenges." Blagoevgrad: Southwest University, p. 3.
[106] This is still not the case for counties which remain part of the Council of Ministers' budget.
[107] Stoilova, p. 3
[108] Data for both Bulgaria and Croatia is from "Indicators of fiscal decentralization for Southeastern Europe: 2006-2011." Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, NALAS, work group on fiscal decentralization: November, 2012, 2nd edition, p. 25.

The 2nd period of decentralization was launched at the end of 2001, and it focused on increasing fiscal decentralization and the financial independence of municipalities.[109] A distinction was made between the functions performed on local and central level, an arrangement regulated for the first time by the annual 2003 State Budget Act.[110] Municipalities' responsibilities were divided into state-delegated activities and local activities. State-delegated activities were entirely financed through intergovernmental transfers, while local activities were connected to the provision of local services.[111]

The system looks similar to the Croatian one (described further in this chapter), with one major difference: in Croatia the county shares responsibilities with the municipal level, while in Bulgaria it performs central state functions on the regional level. That limits significantly county administration budgets in Bulgaria in comparison with municipal budgets and with county administration budgets in Croatia. In both countries income taxes remain controlled and distributed by the central government, and because of the tying of financing to the provision of specific services, local authorities have limited control over local budgets and spending. In the case of Bulgarian counties, their budgets are tied to the budget of the Council of Ministers, which means that financing cannot be used in disagreement with the central government or without its authorization. The promotion of any regional interest or policy, if those are not supported by the central government (and thus the political party/coalition in power), is not possible financially.

The process of decentralization in Croatia was also initiated in the beginning of the 1990s when the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia arguably necessitated a highly centralized system. Although newly-passed legislation had established counties as a new middle tier of government, it had also imposed strong central control over them. County administrations found themselves with weak decision making and fiscal autonomy which led to a delayed regional development throughout the country. The process was aggravated by the international isolation of Croatia which reduced the inflow of tourists and investments. In short, although counties were granted legal status as branches of self-government by the Constitution, in reality they served as administrative units on the regional level. In addition, an almost fivefold increase in the number of local units led to an enlarged bureaucracy with watered down responsibilities and unclear chain of control.

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[109] *ibid*

[110] *ibid*

[111] The mechanism establishes a single approach with regard to determining the expenditures for the mandated activities of municipalities on the basis of standards for their financing, and is adopted by a decision of the Council of Ministers for the relevant year.

At the same time as in Bulgaria (2001), a process of deeper decentralization was initiated. Self-government units (initially, all counties and larger cities) were enabled to take over the responsibility for the delivery of public services in the areas of primary and secondary education, health care, social care and fire protection. This enabled units with higher fiscal and administrative capacity to undertake decentralized tasks while those less capable of doing so remained reliant on state institutions. Overall, the decentralization process was targeted at increasing administrative efficiency and responsiveness to local needs. It did little for regional development and the reduction of disparities despite the fact that this was and remains one of the priorities of both national and EU regional policy.

The current scope of county responsibilities in Croatia is defined by the Law on Local and Regional Self-Government of April 2001.[112] Article 6 defines a county as a "regional self-government unit, the area of which represents a natural, historical, transportation, economic, social and self-governing whole, organised in order to perform tasks of regional interest."[113] In contrast with the Bulgarian system, here a county is expressly defined as a unit of regional self-government although it has a dual character. On the one hand, it serves as a unit of self-government, and on the other hand, it is responsible for performing some state administration tasks, if such are delegated to it by the central government. Self-governing activities are financed through:

• local sources of revenue (income from county property, regional taxes, fines and fees);
• common taxes (16.5% of the personal income tax collected on the county's territory and additional 6 % for the performance of transferred decentralized functions).
• grants from the state budget;
• capital income from the sale of assets and the privatisation of local enterprises.[114]

In addition, the costs of the performance of delegated tasks are settled from the state budget, which means that a significant transfer of money from the central government to county authorities might take place. Transfers of additional funding could be done through

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[112] Law on Local and Regional Self-Government, prom., *Official Journal of the Republic of Croatia*, NN 33/01, 60/01, 129/05, 109/07, 125/08, 36/09, 36/09, 150/11, 144/12, 19/13, available online at http://www.legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/5864
[113] *ibid*
[114] Law on the Financing of Units of Local and Regional Self-Government, prom., *Official Journal of the Republic of Croatia*, NN 117/93, 69/97, 33/00, 73/00, 127/00, 59/01, 107/01, 117/01, 150/02, 147/03, 132/06, 26/07 – Decision by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia, 73/08, 25/12, 147/14, latest amendment available online at http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2014_12_147_2754.html

the delegating of additional responsibilities, through equalization assistance for counties with insufficient resources, through investments by the central government and its institutions, through current or capital grants, or through special provisions for less developed regions. An example of the transfer of additional responsibilities is presented by the process of legalization of illegally built property, which led to the processing of more than a million cases. The government's initial decision had been that since it lacked the human and material resources to process such a significant number of applications on central level, and since it was more distanced from citizens than municipal and county authorities, applications would be processed on local and regional level. After some time, however, the government announced the setting up of a temporary central Agency for the Legalization of Illegally Built Buildings. The Agency became responsible for the supervision of the work of local and regional self-government authorities, but furthermore, in the event quotas for processed applications were not met, it also obtained the right to overtake those from local and regional administrations. The Croatian County Association immediately reacted to the establishment of the new agency by accusing the government of centralization and bureaucratization, and suggesting that instead of setting up a new agency, the central government had to boost local and regional authorities' resources by sharing part of the fees collected from the legalization process with them.[115] The association's plea was not heeded, and the agency was founded and is still functional. So far, it has overtaken more than 60 thousand applications from local and regional authorities,[116] thus obtaining control over the process and retaining collected fees in the central budget. The setting up of the agency is a violation of the principle of subsidiarity introduced in the Constitution, but is also a clear example of the central government's authority in choosing which (special) sources of financing to share and which not. Similarly, the central government had delegated to counties the additional responsibility to govern construction and spatial planning on their territory. The agreement had been that funding for the salaries of the county staff involved in the process would be provided through a transfer from the central budget. Nevertheless, although the responsibility was delegated, the funding was not, which left county administrations understaffed or underfunded. The transfer of state administration tasks to the county level in the above provided examples

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[115] "A message to the Minister of Construction: Counties can complete independently the process of legalization, we do not need yet another agency for research on mining and waste of time!" HINA, 8 November, 2013, author's translation from Croatian.

[116] "Information on the number of legalization files to be overtaken after verification of the situation on county level." Official report of the Agency for Legalization of Illegally Built Buildings, Zagreb, 10 February, 2013, author's translation from Croatian.

seems to strain county budgets and resources, and not to bring any particular benefit either for regional authorities or for citizens. They are also indicative of how the system can be manipulated to the benefit of the central government, and used to "settle scores" with regional authorities.

Another way to increase the funding of selected counties is through "assistance within the consolidated budget" which refers to the redistribution of budget resources from one public institution or unit to another. In 2013, that item came up to close to 500 million kunas.[117] Although such expenses are to a certain extent limited by existing legislation (State Budget Acts, Law on the Financing of Units of Local and Regional Self-Government, Regulation on the Calculation of the Equalization Assistance for Decentralized Functions of Local and Regional Self-Government Units), the central government still has significant jurisdiction over their distribution. Political parties holding the central power thus tend to support units of self-government run by their members, and vice versa choose not to finance or delay financing for local and regional government units where members of the opposition party hold power. It is not infrequent that mayors and governors from opposition parties complain for a reduction in investments in their regions and municipalities.[118] For example, the daily newspaper *Vecernji list* published information that the now discontinued Fund for Development and Employment functioning on central level was used widely to provide loans for enterprises associated with HDZ[119] or located in the birth county of its executive director.[120]

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[117] Croatian Ministry of Finance, National Treasury, "Consolidated budget of counties, towns and municipalities 2010-2013" (item 353), available online at http://www.mfin.hr/hr/ostvarenje-proracuna-jlprs-za-period-2010-2013.

[118] The mayor of Zadar, who is a long-time member of political party HDZ, complained in 2013 that 'this (SDP) government does not give us anything, they stop our projects' (Author's translation from Croatian of speech by chairman of HDZ regional branch Božidar Kalmeta at 24th jubilee of HDZ's branch in Zadar municipality as reported by Brkić, Velimir. "Kalmeta: For many people Zadar is like a thorn in the eye." *Zadarski List*, 26.12.2013.). Similarly, the governor of Split-Dalmatia County complained that the central government was blocking investments in his county for political reasons (i.e. because it viewed them as HDZ projects) (Author's translation from Croatian. Koharević, Ojdana. "Ante Sanader: Zagreb blocks projects in our county for political reasons." *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 27 February, 2013). In Požega-Slavonia County, according to the governor, Alojz Tomašević, who is also from HDZ, revenues were reduced by more than a million kunas because of the central government overtaking control of two programmes previously delegated to the county. In addition, county requests for assistance by the central government for the covering of fiscal deficits from previous years were refused twice (author's translation from Croatian. Nakić, Mario. "The county cuts its budget: The government refused assistance twice this year." www.034portal.hr, 02 October, 2014).

[119] Croatian Democratic Union, Croatia's largest right party.

[120] Puljić-Šego, Iva. "The Fund for Development gave one billion to enterprises associated with HDZ members and other eligible people." *Vecernji List*, 12 May, 2011, author's translation from Croatian.

Lastly, regions deemed as lagging behind are also entitled to larger transfers from the central government. Instead of being static, though, both the definition of a lagging behind region and the funding granted to it can vary. Laws are frequently amended when new political parties gain power on the central level. For example, the area of Gorski Kotar risked losing its status as a lagging behind region and some 80 million kunas annually under a proposal for a new Regional Development Act developed by the Social Democratic Party.[121]

All presented examples indicate that the central government's control over the legislative process and central budgets make local and regional self-governments highly dependent on it. Counties, especially less developed ones, still depend on financing from the central budget and government transfers, and are subject to frequently changing legislation and regulations, which means that they are operating in a system of uncertainty. As already mentioned, the legal and regulatory framework is frequently confusing, which means that counties which are able to attract better educated and qualified staff perform better in such an environment, i.e. are able to use their granted autonomy more fully, but also that central government institutions have subjective authority which regional authorities to prosecute for violations and which not.[122] The abundance of laws and regulations and their impreciseness means that one is always in some kind of violation, and that the central government can use that for political purposes.

Overall, local and regional units of government dispose of limited financial resources. For example, in 2013 the budgets of all Croatian municipalities, towns and counties constituted around 20% of the revenues and 15% of the expenses of the entire consolidated state budget, which was around 6.7% of the country's GDP.[123] The numbers for Bulgaria were comparable: units of local government participated with 22% of total revenues in the

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[121] Krmpotić, Marinko. "Damages of 180 million kunas: The government would bury Gorski Kotar with a new law." *Novi list*, 13 March, 2014, author's translation from Croatian.
[122] In the midst of a number of corruption affairs related to local and regional self-government in Croatia (eg. the mayor of Zagreb, the governor of Sisak-Moslavina County), Istria County stands out as a region without major prosecutions and trials despite the fact that the county's major political party, IDS, and its leadership was associated with a number of scandals. According to ex-IDS member, Damir Kajin, that is due to a form of protectionism by SDP over its coalition partner IDS.
[123] Author's calculations based on data by the Ministry of Finance ("Report on the execution of the 2013 State Budget of the Republic of Croatia" and "Consolidated budget of counties, towns and municipalities by execution 2010-2013") and the Croatian Bureau of Statistics ("Croatia in Figures 2014").

consolidated budget in 2013, which was 8.2% of the national GDP.[124] The high fraction of central state revenues and expenses[125] places both Bulgaria and Croatia in the category of highly centralized states in the European Union.[126]

Because of the higher level of fiscal decentralization and the delegation of more responsibilities to the county level, in Croatia county administrations employ a larger number of people than in Bulgaria, often for performing redundant tasks and establishing confusing and interweaving positions and relations between the different branches of government. This leads to overlapping responsibilities and the reduced efficiency of both government and self-government units, where the former seem to perform redundant tasks with county authorities and to bring questionable value to the administrative system,[127] while the latter seem to maintain unnecessarily large personnel and thus expenses. Because of its complexity, the Croatian structure provides at least in theory an opportunity for more developed checks and balances, however, there is no indication that the granting of higher independence to the regional level has democratized or improved the efficiency and accountability of the system. It has simply enabled less conscientious public servants to "hide" and underperform. This tendency is a highly criticized feature of the Croatian administration presenting an excellent example of regionalism which has not brought about real economic and administrative reforms but has preserved the systematic flaws existing prior to its emergence. In other words, the transfer of financial and administrative responsibilities to the regional level in Croatia, and in particular in Istria, has led to the establishment of a clientalist system with inflated regional administration and intermingled interests, which is nothing more but a replica of the system existing on central

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[124] Author's calculations based on data by the Ministry of Finance ("Report on the execution of the 2013 State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria, Consolidated State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria 2006-2013" and "Local budgets of the Republic of Bulgaria 2002-2013.").

[125] Consolidated budgets in 2013 came up to 33% of the national GDP in Croatia and 37% of the national GDP in Bulgaria.

[126] Konjhodžić and Šuman Tolić (2009); Ott, Katarina (2008); Alibegović, Dubravka Jurlina. "Analytical Framework for Efficient Decentralization in Croatia." Zagreb: *Economic Institute,* 2010, p. 11; Nenkova, Pressiyana.
"Local Authorities Taxation Autonomy and its Role in Assessing the Financial Aspects of Decentralization." *Economic Thought*, 2003 (5), pp.39-52.

[127] The purpose of and the value that state administration offices bring to governance is frequently questioned in Croatian society. For example, the president of the Croatian County Association, Tomislav Tolušić, stated in an interview for magazine *Aktual* from 30 October, 2013 that "In the country we have a hundred levels of government. We have state administration offices which, I honestly do not know, what they serve for," author's translation from Croatian. The central government has also recognized that the system needs reorganization and has announced an amendment to the Law on the State Administration System, cutting the number of offices from 20 to 5, and attempting to speed up the system and improve efficiency.

level. Because of their similarities and vested interests, regional and central authorities have an unwritten agreement not to disturb each other, and so the system persists despite its obvious shortcomings. There is no evidence for improved accountability or efficiency as civil servants, just like in Bulgaria, are selected based on their political affiliation rather than merit, and the number of staff has been rising rather than dropping. Nothing has changed in the quality of the provided services either apart from the fact that they are financed directly from regional rather than central budgets.

4.1.1. Review of county administration budgets –Istria County[128]

Istria County budgets are publicly available on the official webpage of the county administration,[129] in the Official Gazette of Istria County,[130] and on the webpage of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Croatia[131]. The most recent information is about the 2013 budget, which was voted by the County Assembly on the level of 46 million euros.[132] In comparison with Bulgarian county budgets, which will be reviewed in the next section, Croatian counties have much larger budgets.[133] Nevertheless, because of their dependence on income taxes for the generation of revenues (50% of county revenues come from personal income tax collections), there are also much larger discrepancies between the levels of development of different counties. For example, the annual budget of the County of Vukovar-Sirmium[134] in 2013 was around 23 million euros,[135] or two times smaller than that of Istria. Istria is the second most developed county in Croatia in terms of GDP per capita, with 12 991 euros per capita in 2011.[136] The County of Slavonski Brod-Posavina's GDP per capita in the same year was 5 822 euros and the GDP per capita in the County of

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[128] The latest county budget updated according to realistic revenue and expense levels is for 2013. The budget for 2014 is still a projection as the fiscal year has not ended.

[129] Self-Government of Istria County, Budgets of Istria County by year, Pula, Croatia, available online at www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=2534

[130] Self-Government of Istria County, *Official Gazette*, Pula, Croatia, available online at www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=8

[131] Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Croatia, State Budget Acts by year, available online at www.mfin.hr/hr/proracun

[132] Author's calculation; official numbers are provided in kunas, "Budget of Istria County 2013," p. 3, available online at http://www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=3968.

[133] Concretely, the budget of the County of Istria's administration is 46 times larger than the budget of Blagoevgrad County.

[134] One of the least developed counties in Croatia.

[135] See official county pages, http://www.vusz.hr/Cms_Data/Contents/VSZ/Folders/dokumenti/upravni/proracun-vukovarsko-srijemske-zupanije/~contents/2SQ27FJ27UB9HRFH/ii.-izmjene-i-dopune-prora-una-za-2013..pdf

[136] "Gross Domestic Product for Republic of Croatia NUTS 2 Level and Counties, 2011." Zagreb: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 14 February, 2014.

Vukovar-Sirmium was 6 217 euros. Similar to budgets, those are roughly two times smaller than the levels in Istria. This large difference, however, does not provide conclusive information about the relation between economic development and regional aspirations for establishing control over financial sources. At first sight it appears that because of the relative wealth of its population and the higher levels of county budgets, the growth of Istrian regionalism might be positively related to economic performance. However, more economically developed regions typically also provide more opportunities for development, which will suggest that in poorer regions with fewer opportunities public spending, as one of few certain sources of financing, might present a much larger temptation for local elites. A closer look at county budgets might provide more clarification as to the relation between county and state authorities, and the nature of fiscal decentralization.

Revenues from personal income tax collections in Istria constituted 49% of the county budget, and although lower as a percentage than the national average, still represented the largest revenue item in the budget. The amount of revenues generated through the collection of income taxes in Istria County in 2013 was 647 million kunas (around 85 million euros), of which 22.7% (147 million kunas) were used by county authorities, 14% by the central state, and the largest portion, 63.3%, by municipal/town authorities.[137] From the 22.7% included in the county budget, 7.8% (50 million kunas) were spent for the performance of decentralized functions and 14.9% (97 million kunas) were for non-earmarked expenses. That means that almost 15% (97 million kunas) of all common taxes generated on the territory of the County of Istria were spend on or by the county authorities. An additional 15 million kunas were generated from county taxes, in particular property tax, road tax for motor vehicles, gambling tax and inheritance and gift taxes.

To elaborate, county budgets in Croatia feature three main categories of both revenues and expenses: earmarked, non-earmarked and decentralized. Of the 46 million euros in revenues in 2013, 25.4% were for the performance of decentralized functions, 47% were deemed as non-earmarked expenses, and the remaining 27.6% were earmarked revenues which were to be spent on pre-determined by the law tasks on county level.[138] Overall, in 2013 almost **140 million kunas (18 million euros)** were transferred to the county budget by

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[137] "Annual report on the execution of the budget of Istria County, 2013." Pula: Istria County, April 2014, p. 134.
[138] "Annual report on the execution of the budget of Istria County, 2013," p. 132.

the central government and its institutions. [139] That is close to half of all budget revenues, and is indicating a significant dependence on central government transfers, which although guaranteed by law, could always be delayed or reduced depending on the state budget's performance.

On the expense side, the same three main categories are distinguished: non-earmarked expenses in the amount of 158 million kunas or 49.4% of all expenses, earmarked expenses in the amount of 84 million kunas or 26.3% of all expenses, and decentralized expenses of 78 million kunas, or 24.3%.[140] Earmarked expenses and expenses for decentralization in 2013 were less than the generated revenues in those two categories, while non-earmarked expenses exceeded non-earmarked revenues. It is clear that while there is sufficient funding for pre-determined and decentralized functions, funding for non-earmarked expenses is insufficient, and this is the area where county administrations have the most freedom in controlling what funding is spent on, and where they apparently spend more freely. [141] Under non-earmarked expenses, some **112 million kunas, or close to 15 million euros,** were redistributed by county authorities in 2013. Additional 52.1 million kunas were spent on the purchasing of non-financial property for county purposes. That amount of funding, targeted at both individuals and legal entities operating in all spheres of life, and the associated with it political power, presents a serious motivation for holding political power on county level, and an incentive for intensifying regional demands for higher fiscal decentralization and control of revenue and expense flows. It is also refuting the neoliberal assumption that regionalism would reduce state interference and boost the performance of the open market. On the contrary, the role of regional authorities in Istria revolves predominantly around the provision of services which could be provided by the private sector, and the redistribution of resources, including to businesses and political entities. This distribution is certainly not limited to collective goods.

In addition to the size of county budgets, the scope of the county administration's work is also significant. The County of Istria maintains an array of institutions financed by the

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[139] Ministry of Finance of Republic of Croatia, http://www.mfin.hr/, and official webpages of Istria County administration, http://www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=3968
[140] "Annual report on the execution of the budget of Istria County, 2013," p. 147.
[141] Both in Bulgaria and Croatia, county authorities have limited control over expenses as a significant amount of their revenues has predetermined (earmarked) use, i.e. it is predetermined on what function the revenue would be spent. In Croatia, support for the performance of decentralized functions is provided for by the state budget for covering expenses related to the transfer of responsibilities to counties for performance of tasks in elementary and secondary education, social care and the health system.

county budget. Those can be political in nature (the County Assembly and the Youth Assembly), administrative (Department of Decentralization, Local and Regional Self-Governance, Spatial Planning and Construction), civil (Commission on Gender Equality, Foundation for Promotion of Partnership and Promotion of Civil Society), business (Preservation of ISO Programme, Spatial Planning and Construction, Department on Sustainable Development) and cultural (Department of Culture). It even provides financing for political parties. [142] In short, the County's autonomous activities are significant and encompass a number of areas of public interest. By controlling the financing of those institutions, the County exercises at least partial control over a number of areas of public life.

In total, local and regional self-governments in Istria jointly disposed of a budget of some 200 million euros in 2013.[143] The revenues per capita generated from local and regional self-government budgets in 2013 were 7 617 kn (more than **1000 EUR**).[144] That number is comparable with the per capita FDI levels on annual basis, and much higher than the levels of EU absorption. It is evidently giving local and county authorities significant economic power, and presents an incentive for political parties to seek and hold power on the county level. Their control can be seen as an end in itself by politicians. It is also showing that there is reasonable doubt that the rationale behind IDS's calls for increased economic autonomy for regions might not be driven by concerns for accountability, efficiency and increased self-rule but by more mundane matters. In this sense, counties like Istria with larger budgets and stronger regional economy offer larger incentives for regional politicians to seek political independence from the centre in comparison with less developed counties which are more economically dependent on transfers from the central government. This said, the central Croatian government has retained significant control over county budgets, and Istria is not an exception as almost half of the county revenues are in the form of transfers from the central government. That means that political leaders and administrators on the county level dispose of as much autonomy as the central government is willing to grant them, and that the enforcement of rules can be subjective. If

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[142] In accordance with the Law on Financing of Political Parties, Independent Lists and Candidates (NN 1/07), 546 141 kn were spent in subsidies to political parties under the project "Political Party" in 2013, see "Annual report on the execution of the budget of Istria County, 2013."

[143] Overall, the 2013 budget is close to 11% larger than the 2012 budget. Data from the Ministry of Finance, State Treasury, "Consolidated budgets of counties, towns and municipalities: Istria County, 2010-2013."

[144] Author's calculation according to data from the "Annual report on the execution of the budget of Istria County, 2013."

Istria has been given (more) political and economic autonomy, that could only have been because the central government has chosen to do so rather than because the legal and economic frameworks have provided for it. In other words, Istrian regionalism has been in the least "tolerated" by central authorities. Since a number of different political parties have been in power on central level in Croatia in the past two decades, political considerations and configurations have not likely been the reason for that, although such have definitely existed. It is more likely that central governments have not seen a real threat in Istrian regionalism since the latter has not been reformist, and has not presented an alternative model for state organization. IDS leaders have been quite happy to replicate the national clientalist model on regional level, and as long as their political and economic control of the region has not been questioned, no concerns for democratization on national level have been raised. This kind of political rationale could not have been attributed to IDS in the 1990s, when the party emerged and the politicization of Istrian identity took place, but has become the *modus operandi* since then. It is also likely the reason behind the declining political support for IDS on county level.

In summary, the County of Istria budgets are an elaborate affair covering a lot of regional and local-level functions, and the work of a number of specialized regional institutions, some of which have questionable significance for regional development but add up to overall public expenses, and all of which operate under the direct control of regional authorities. For the most part of its revenues, the county depends on the collection of taxes over the levels of which it has little control, but which are influenced by employment and income levels in the region, and thus by overall economic development. Furthermore, county authorities have a significant independence on spending and thus the redistribution of revenues, which is an incentive for holding political power on the regional level. Salaries and compensations of county officials and governors in themselves are high enough to justify a direct financial interest in holding office.[145] There appears thus to be a positive correlation between economic development as expressed in the amount of funding controlled and distributed by regional authorities and stronger regionalism.

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[145] County governors' gross monthly salaries range from around 3000 to 4700 euros according to an investigation carried out by *index.hr* at the end of 2013 of the income statements for 2012 of all governors. The governor of Istria County, Valter Flego, received a monthly salary of 27 761 kn (around 3700 euros) with the average net salary in Croatia being 5478 kn in 2012, or 5 times less than Flego's salary. For the investigation, see Vidov, Petar. "Get rid of counties: 660 million kunas! This is how much we give them annually for salaries and benefits." *www.index.hr*, 24 November, 2013.

In the case of IDS, the preservation of control over regional and municipal authorities has been achieved through political elections, and the development of a political agenda tightly associated with regional identity and culture. Because of its dependence on the identification by a large percentage of the Istrian population with a common and clearly-defined Istrian identity, and thanks to its access to public funding, IDS has at least partially financed this process (by approving funding for projects, publications and entities publicizing the constructed and politicized by IDS regional identity).

4.1.2. Review of county administration budgets - Blagoevgrad County

The situation in Blagoevgrad County is different from that in Istria in that administrative budgets are much smaller, more rigidly pre-defined, and part of the budget of the Council of Ministers, which means that all staff salaries and operating expenses are paid directly from the consolidated state budget and pre-determined annually by the Republican Budget Law. The number and type of staff employed in the county administration and the level of their salaries is also defined by a decree of the Council of Ministers.[146] Overall, county authorities have limited financial capacities, and jurisdiction sufficient only for the carrying out of central government tasks on county level. Practically all of their funding is for the performance of earmarked tasks and beneficiaries, and since the Council of Ministers controls the employment of all high ranking officials in the county administration, it is not likely that any form of regionalism might be conceived by county administrations.

County governors have the most authority and functions in the area of coordination, supervision and control (94 functions), which is aligned with the jurisdiction granted to them by the Constitution as organs of the executive power in the county. Second are functions related to service delivery (39 functions) aligned mostly with the governors' authority to manage state property on the territory of the county. Sector policy functions make up only 14.5% of all functions performed by governors, and most of them are pre-defined and regulated by primary legislature.[147] It can be said thus that governors specialize in the supervision and control of local authorities, and the management of state property.

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[146] Classification of state employees employed at all levels of government is made in the "Classifier of Positions in State Administration"; minimum and maximum amounts of state employee salaries are regulated by a Decree on Salaries of Employees in State Administration, Bulgarian Parliament, Decree № 129 of 26th June, 2012.

[147] "Official Report of the Council of Ministers on the Realization of Council Policies and Programmes in 2013," Bulgarian Council of Ministers, available in Bulgarian at http://www.government.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0211&n=90&g=

They have limited powers as far as cross-sectoral policy and development on county level are concerned.[148] This erodes the regional perspective in planning and strategy building. A look at the number of civil servants employed in territorial administration in 2013 confirms such line of reasoning. On national level that number was close to 33 thousand people. Of them, less than a thousand (around 3%) were employed at county administration offices. By comparison, more than 22 thousand people were employed by municipal administrations. [149] Furthermore, not only is the number of staff employed by county administrations low, but counties are also the only unit of territorial administration which is undergoing a significant reduction in size (9.5% in 2013), which is also suggesting a reduction in importance.

On the financial side, since counties in Bulgaria are not a unit of self-government, as already said, they do not have independent budgets. County budgets are listed in the budget of the Council of Ministers under programme "Implementing State Policy on the County Level,"[150] item "Council policy on the carrying out of state functions on the territory of Bulgarian counties".[151] The realized funding for the programme in 2013 was 30.8 million levs or around 15.7 million euros for all 28 counties, which was 43% higher than the amount initially provided for by the law.[152] Of them, 77 % were for administrative expenses, and the remaining 23% represented one-time grants for specific projects defined by the central government. On the revenue side, in 2013, a mere 393 913 levs (around 1.2% of all country expenses) were generated in service fees by all 28 county administrations in Bulgaria. [153] Service fees are the only source of somewhat independent

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[148] "Updated Strategy for Decentralization 2006-2015." Bulgarian Council of Ministers, http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=616, pp. 8-9.

[149] "Report on the State of Administration, 2013." Bulgarian Council of Ministers, http://www.government.bg/fce/001/0211/files/DSA_2013.pdf

[150] In Bulgarian, Програма „Осъществяване на държавната политика на областно ниво."

[151] In Bulgarian, „Политика Осъществяване на държавните функции на територията на областите в България."

[152] The initial amount approved by the Bulgarian Parliament for programme "Implementing State Policy on County Level," was identical in both 2013 and 2014 budgets - some 16.5 million leva (8.3 million euros), however, in 2013 individual donations and higher administrative expenses increased the budget almost twofold. This said, it is important to emphasize that those additional expenses are not defined and approved by the county authorities but rather by the central government, and that they are for specific, pre-defined beneficiaries.

[153] "Official Report of the Council of Ministers on the Realization of Council Policies and Programmes in 2013." Bulgarian Council of Ministers, p. 3, available in Bulgarian at http://www.government.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0211&n=90&g=

funding generated by counties.[154] The remaining 99% of revenues were a transfer by the central government.

The annual budget of individual county administrations is somewhere around a million euros, which covers the functioning of the administration including salaries and capital expenses.[155] No funding is provided for political parties on the regional level, nor institutional grants or donations for the business and NGO sectors. Staff salaries are also defined by regulation, with basic net governor salaries varying from 524 euros to 2000 euros monthly in 2014. [156][157] Investment and developmental projects can be financed through county budgets but this refers to one-time expenses pre-approved by the Council of Ministers.

Overall, county budgets in Bulgaria are entirely provided and controlled by the central government. County governors are in a subordinate and dependent position, and their personal employment but also the projects which they hope to implement on county level need to be approved by the central level. In addition to their monthly remuneration and some office perks, there is no additional financial interest in holding the post. Also, since they are appointed by a decision of the Council of Ministers, governors are typically members of the political party in power and it is not in their interest to push for more independence and powers on the county level. That is justified by the fact that county governors and their deputy governors are by job description not administrators. They form the county's "political cabinet," and are typically replaced every time a different political party wins the national parliamentary elections.[158] A conflict with the central government

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[154] Even in this case, the types of fees that can be charged are defined by the Law on State Property, and the exact amounts are defined by Ruling 26/2011 of the Council of Ministers.

[155] Author's calculation based on the annual budget of the Council of Ministers and, in particular, programme "Implementing State Policy on County Level."

[156] The average monthly net salary in Bulgaria in 2013 was a little more than 400 euros, according to the National Statistical Institute, report "Average work salary of employed persons by economic activities and sectors 2013," in Bulgarian "Средна годишна заплата на наетите лица по трудово и служебно правоотношение по икономически дейности и сектори през 2013 година."

[157] Civil Servants Act of the Republic of Bulgaria, prom., State Gazette No. 67/27.07.1999, effective 28.08.1999, last amended, SG No. 15/15.02.2013, effective 1.01.2014,
available online at http://www.mi.government.bg/en/library/civil-servants-act-381-c25-m258-2.html

[158] For example, in the case of Blagoevgrad County, since 1999 when the current number of counties were created, governors were Boris Maskrchki (1999-2000, UDF), Vassil Chobanov (2000-2001, UDF), Anton Brachkov (2001-2005, Coalition for Bulgaria), Vladimir Dimitrov (2005-2009, Coalition for Bulgaria), Valeri Smilenov (2009-2011, GERB), Konstatin Hadzigaev (2011-2013, GERB), Musa Palev (2013-2014, Movement for Rights and Freedoms), and Dimitar Dimitrov (2014, caretaker government). In that period the political parties holding central power were United Democratic Forces (1997-2001), two coalition governments between the National Movement Simeon II, the

might lead to them losing both their function as governors and their status, even membership, in the political party. The typical procedure to follow in order to address political disagreements is to discuss and resolve those within the political party, not to look for more independence outside of it. The central government for its part carries out control of the regional level by controlling budget expenses and appointment processes, and by using its political party's established structures and procedures.[159] Governors' performance is judged by how successful they have been in implementing state policy on county level, and not by how successful they have been in protecting county interests, let alone for pushing for more political autonomy on the county level.

Last but not least, developmental programmes are controlled and defined by the central government through the function of the county governor. Theoretically speaking, the government's occupation is with the balanced development of all counties and municipalities, which is also the focus of EU Structural Funding. Bulgaria's Regional Development Act[160] focuses on developing regional development policy which creates conditions for balanced and sustainable integrated development of counties and municipalities. Its focus is on uniformity, cooperation and reduction in disparities, which is aligned with the state government's occupation with the national economy and the balanced development of the country. Those principles, however, are in conflict with the strengthening of the competitiveness and thus the level of development of more developed regions, municipalities or towns, as this could jeopardize the balanced

Movement for Rights and Freedoms, and Coalition for Bulgaria (2001-2009), GERB (2009-2013), a coalition government between Coalition for Bulgaria and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (2013-2014), an interim/caretaker government (2014) and since November, 2014, a coalition between GERB and Reformist Block. The latter and most recent government fired 24 of the 28 county governors in November 26, 2014, less than a month after forming a government. There is thus a direct and visible connection between the political parties holding political power on central level and the governors appointed by the Prime Minister. The latter are always members of the parties holding central power, and were always appointed immediately after national elections. They were always dismissed after new national elections and a change in government, with the exception of Maskrchki and Smilenov who did not complete their terms in office and were replaced by other members of their political party. There is not a single case in Blagoevgrad County where a governor was politically independent or a member of a political party in opposition.
[159] Even if regional governors do have autonomous base of support in the region because of their proximity to its residents (unlike the leadership of political parties who typically communicates with constituents through their party's local and regional structures), they cannot run independently on regional elections as such do not exist.
[160] Regional Development Act of the Republic of Bulgaria, prom., State Gazette No. 50/30.05.2008, effective 31.08.2008, last amended SG No. 93/24.11.2009, effective 25.12.2009.

development of the entire country. [161] Similarly, the Bulgarian National Regional

Development Strategy for the period 2012-2022[162] focuses on cohesion, understood as a

reduction in disparities (economic and social) and achieving of better connectivity. In order

for cohesion to be achieved, less developed regions need to play catch up with more

developed ones. As the very document outlines, the philosophy of the regional policy is

"catching up with the development not only by redistribution of resources to the weak

ones, but by mobilizing their specificity and potential as well.[163]" It is visible that the

preoccupation is with "weak" regions, rather than "strong" ones. As regional development

policies in Bulgaria are developed and executed by the state government, no specific

county budget exists for their execution. The Regional Development Act (Article 26)

regulates that the sources for financing of regional development are the state budget, the

municipal budgets, financing by physical and legal individuals, EU funding, international

financial institutions, and other sources as provided by law. This means that regional

development strategies are financed through the state budget, while specific development

projects are implemented on municipality or town level. The county administration is

neither eligible for funding nor has the capacity to implement independently

developmental projects. Its role in the process thus is administrative, i.e. governors are

responsible for coordinating the drafting of the regional development strategy of their

county and for the monitoring of its implementation. They, however, have no real authority

to enforce compliance or cooperation among the municipalities and towns which promote

their own interests and not those of the county. Furthermore, the indicators for the

successful execution of the strategy are very general,[164] [165] and the only effective way to

"punish" failure might come from the general public via direct elections (i.e. by not re-

electing officials who have not been successful in boosting regional development),

however, since such elections do not exist on county level, responsibilities for failure get

transferred up to the central government, or down to town mayors. Lastly, the existence of

specific regional values and principles within the framework of a purely administrative unit

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[161] Tanev, Todor. "Cooperation Mechanisms between the Levels of Government in the Process of Development and Implementation of Strategies in the Public Sphere," p. 6, available online at http://www.self.government.bg/decentralization/

[162] "National Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Bulgaria for the Period 2012-2022," approved by Decision of the Council of Ministers № 696/24.08.2012.

[163] *ibid*, p. 7.

[164] "County strategy for the regional development of Blagoevgrad County in the period 2005-2015," prepared by the governor of Blagoevgrad County, Blagoevgrad: September 2005.

[165] For example, in the case of the development strategy of Blagoevgrad County, the two major indicators are reduction in unemployment and an increase in the BDP per capita, without specific mentioning of rates

as the county is highly questionable. Centralized control limits strategic thinking, and county authorities lack the capacity to develop real strategies as opposed to an implementation plan under a strategy developed by a higher level of government (or by a foreign consultant). [166] Indeed, a review of the "County Strategy for the Development of Blagoevgrad County" reveals no mentioning of regional culture or values, and is in essence an economic and social analysis of the county with some developmental priorities.

In summary, unlike in Istria, county authorities have neither the economic means nor the political interest to pursue regionalist policies. Although Blagoevgrad County is more economically developed than the national average, this wealth is not transferred to or distributed through county authorities. Any self-interest county governors might have lies in their appeasement of the central government (Council of Ministers) rather than in seeking more autonomy from it. That means that regionalist movements would likely be generated either from the bottom (be grass-roots) or by the municipal level. Since, however, the competition between municipalities remains unchecked due to the lack of a strong regional level, joint regional action is rare, with every municipality and every mayor choosing to look after their own political and economic interests.

5.   Conclusions

Foreign direct investments and European funding have not been a significant factor in the development of a regional political identity in either Pirin Macedonia or Istria. Although they have contributed to the rising standards of living in both regions, most investments and grants have been arranged and distributed by central authorities. EU institutions have not demanded or established any mechanisms for direct communication with counties or local levels of government. All communication and planning has been done through the central level, which has been the crucial unit for the distribution, but also for the absorption, of EU funding. Similarly, FDI levels in both counties are low. Flows of money are transferred through tourism and weekend shopping, but organized FDI where specific business entities and interests emerge, is minor in scope. Most large investors again prefer to deal with the central government and to make investments which are national in scope. Croatia and Bulgaria are small markets, and it would not be wise for investors to limit their revenue potential by investing in small border regions, even if they are more developed

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[166] Tanev, p. 6.

than the rest of their countries. Most investments are done with the purpose to sell to local markets rather than to boost local production and exports, and thus development. Furthermore, central governments are able to offer business incentives county officials cannot provide (tax breaks), and that could serve as an inducement for regional authorities to demand larger fiscal powers on the regional level. Overall, instead of weakening central authority, FDI and EU funds have strengthened the centre by providing it with more financial power and by making regional authorities more dependent on it. They have furthermore delayed administrative reform efforts by providing funding for the sustaining of a large and often inefficient central bureaucracy.

This said, in Istria and Pirin Macedonia both globalization and EU integration have also been related to the third factor mentioned in the introduction, economic development. Classical theories on the relationship between the centre and the periphery within a country tend to portray that relationship as one of exploitation: the stronger and better developed centre uses the (raw) resources of the weaker and lagging behind periphery in order to further its own development.[167] The formation of a regional political identity thus is done in opposition to the power of the centre, with the periphery revolting against it. According to such theories, regionalism can be predicted to be stronger in poorer regions.[168] In contrast, another school of thought suggests that prosperous peripheries are more likely to demand a more central position and higher political and economic independence from the centre to match their economic power.[169] Since both Istria County and Blagoevgrad County are some of the most economically developed regions in their countries, the theory of internal colonialism does not seem to apply to them. Furthermore, the two regions are specific in that a traditional periphery-core division does not hold ground in their case either. As a periphery of the periphery, they are ironically physically, and thus also culturally and economically, closer to the centre. Their economic development is due precisely to this proximity as it opens opportunities for economic exchange. Since the benefits derived from economic exchange with the periphery of the centre (Italy, Austria and Greece) are larger than those with the centre of the periphery

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[167] Dahl Fitjar, Rune. "Building Regions on Economic Success: Prosperity and Regionalism in Rogaland." *Scandinavian Political Studies,* 2006, 29 (4), p. 335. The relationship between centre and periphery in globalization theories is portrayed in the same way.
[168] *ibid*
[169] Keating, Michael. *State and Regional Nationalism: Territorial Politics and the European State.* Hemel Hampstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988; Dahl Fitjar (2006). Dahl Fitjar presents Catalan regionalism, Slovenian succession from Yugoslavia, and the success of the Lega Nord in Northern Italy as examples of economically-triggered politicization of regional identities.

(Sofia and Zagreb), external colonialism is both welcome and dominant. In other words, conflict with the national centre might occur if it tries to curb or jeopardize the periphery's economic exchange with the EU core. Related to that conclusion, the first observation made at the end of Chapter 5 that both Istrian and Pirin Macedonian regionalism emerged in times of economic turmoil, although accurate, does not depict fully the situation in those two regions. Economic underdevelopment by itself was not sufficient to trigger the politicization of regional identities. It was rather the sharp and significant decline in the standard of living of the regions' populations which served as the ground-shattering event which led to the strengthening of offstream political options. In this respect, the economic recession in Istria in the 1990s had the same effect on the politicization of the regional identity as the impoverishment of Pirin Macedonia after World War I. It was the developments taking place afterwards that distinguished the level of regionalism in the two regions.

Theoretically, the effect of economic growth on regionalism could be both direct and indirect.[170] Firstly, there is a direct fiscal incentive for elites in both counties to demand economic and political decentralization. Whereas poor regions benefit from transfers from the central state, richer regions lose from such an arrangement,[171] and it is rational that demands for greater political and economic autonomy intensify. People, including political and economic leaders, seem more likely to politicize their regional identity if their region, and they themselves, stand to gain economically from that process.[172] Secondly, the increased financial flows generated from the economic development of the region could be used to finance and develop its cultural life, which could contribute to the building of a stronger regional identity and deeper regionalism. Economic growth could also boost self-esteem building inhabitants' assertiveness and political activism.[173]

Empirically, the crucial question to be answered then is, if one is to accept that Istrian regionalism had its origins in economic impoverishment and grew stronger with economic development, what are the factors which have triggered the transfer of this economic advantage to the political arena? Or for the purposes of this research, why has Pirin Macedonia's economic development not deepened its regionalism and strengthened the politicization of its regional identity? Since Istria and Pirin Macedonia are at the same level

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[170] Dahl Fitjar, p. 352.
[171] Dahl Fitjar, p. 336.
[172] Dahl Fitjar, p. 352.
[173] *ibid*

of economic development relative to the rest of their countries, i.e. neither is richer than the capital city nor is having a standard of living comparable to those of more developed regions in "old" EU Member States, no discerning factor between the two regions can be identified in this respect. Furthermore, the central governments in both countries have been focused on the reduction of regional disparities rather than the development of richer regions, and EU funding has not been identified as an engine for either of the regions' growth. The higher economic development in both Pirin Macedonia and Istria appears thus to be attributed almost exclusively to open market forces, and in particular in Istria - to the performance of the tourist sector. The comparative economic advantage of Istria over Pirin Macedonia is provided almost exclusively by that sector, which is not only a source of significant (independent) financial flows but also tightly interrelated with regional culture and identity.

The first consequence of the increase in financial flows to a region is an increase in the tax base, i.e. an increase in the rate of employment and salary levels. In Istria, indeed, both employment rates and salary levels are the second highest in the country, surpassed only by the City of Zagreb. In Pirin Macedonia, the high employment rates are not paralleled by high salary levels. Thus, while in Istria, fiscal decentralization would be of benefit to the regional economy and actors, in Pirin Macedonia this is not the case as the amount of collected taxes is not higher than the national average. Tax collection in Istria means economic capital is extracted from the territory. Although some funds are returned to pay for government services in the region, Istria receives fewer funds than it pays in the national budget.[174] Acquiring regional control over tax collection would thus generate greater economic wealth on county level and, due to the high involvement of the public sector in economic matters, would also benefit county and municipality administrations. In contrast, in Bulgaria, counties depend on central government spending regardless of their tax base, so it is predominantly through political dealings that counties gain higher transfers from the central budget. The system does not provide any incentives for county administrations to seek independence from central control over political and fiscal decision-making nor is there an opportunity to do so. Central control over the system is tight and cemented in legislation. Croatian legislation is much more loosely drafted, and

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[174] The local media has depicted the region as a "milking cow" which contributes close to 3 billion euros annually to the central budget, and gets the most couple of hundred million euros back, see "Istria a milking cow –we make 3 billion euros and get back crumbs" (in Croatian, "Istra krava muzara - stvorimo 3 milijarde eura, a vraćaju nam mrvice"). *Istra News*, October 10, 2012. The opinion is widely expressed by Istrian politicians, especially from IDS, and one of the major reasons behind demands for further fiscal decentralization and political independence.

the EU provision of subsidiarity can be referred to at least in theory when seeking additional responsibilities on the county level. There has thus been both legal opportunity and an economic incentive for Istrians to seek more independence from the central government.

The second effect of the development of the tourist sector has been the "packaging" of Istria as a (tourist) product, a process relying heavily on the articulation of regional culture in a simple and cohesive manner. Due to regional authorities' involvement in and financing of the construction of this codified regional identity, and their close connections with IDS, the major features of the regional identity have been easily and successfully interwoven in political propaganda.

Lastly, the positive correlation between economic development and the strengthening of regionalism does not hold ground in Pirin Macedonia because of the nature of the administrative organization on county level. Both Bulgaria and Croatia are highly regulated countries where both central and local authorities have large redistributive and regulatory functions. It appears that since we cannot talk about an unregulated open market existing in either of the two studied countries, the economic advantage of more developed regions can play a role in the politicization of regional identities only if it is transferred to and used by regulatory bodies with regional authority (public county administration in the case of Istria). The politicization of regional identity is a process which requires funding and direction, and in Istria the county administration, which has come largely from IDS membership ranks, has had the economic, human and administrative capacities to provide those. Such a hypothesis is also confirmed by the fact that the deepest politicization of Istrian identity took place after the consolidation of IDS as a regional party and its establishment of control over municipal and regional public administrations and budgets. Prior to that, regionalism in Istria was similar to the one existing currently in Pirin Macedonia, i.e. it was limited to an expression of cultural and social association and solidarity.

Overall, however, it needs to be emphasized that financial flows to both regions are not consolidated; they are not "industrialized" and institutionalized, and for now, do not serve as a too large temptation for regional players to seek higher independence from the centre. This is also likely the reason why calls for autonomy in Istria have not developed a more militant overtone. However, the opportunities for increasing financial flows to both counties exist as both have relatively open and internationally oriented economies. It might

be a matter of time before deeper and more reform-oriented regional actors surface on the political arena, and begin pushing for higher political and fiscal independence. Istria County seems to be ahead of Blagoevgrad County in this respect, primarily because of the difference in legislation which defines counties in Croatia as units of self-government with significant regional budgets and authorities, and because of the larger financial flows from the tourist sector. However, the similarities between the two regions are significant, and an improvement in any of those factors in Pirin Macedonia might intensify aspirations for the politicization of the regional identity there as well.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

When initiating this research, the author attempted to find concrete, universal definitions of a micro or intrastate region, and the related to its processes of regionalism and regionalization. That proved to be a futile task, and the author opted to adopt definitions which were broad and best fitted to the case studies and the research objectives. One of the findings of this research is thus the confirmation that universal definitions but also universal (groups of) factors that define regions and lead to regionalism do not exist. A region can be anything from a political unit of self-governance to a culturally-defined physical space to an ideological concept living in popular perceptions. It can be peaceful and prosperous, but also torn by conflicts and violence. Similarly, regionalism can be a movement for cultural, economic or political autonomy, a political project for the independence of an ethnic minority or for enforcing the power of an ethnic majority, or a grass-roots movement aimed at improving accountability, efficacy and social equality. That multifacetedness makes comparisons very difficult and impermanent, particularly within the framework of social constructivism which is better fitted for recording the status quo than for analysing and explaining long-term processes. Yet, the variety of regional forms and projects also enables challenging in-debt qualitative research, and the identification of patterns of development which apply across time and territory. This empirical research was founded on precisely such in-debt contextual study of Istria and Pirin Macedonia, which were analysed through the prism of previously carried out quantitative work, in particular Rune Dahl Fitjar's research on the causes of regionalism in Western Europe. Identifying two regions where, according to Dahl Fitjar's findings, strong regionalism was likely to emerge, the author proceeds to build understanding of the differences between Istria and Pirin Macedonia, and to fine-tune the significance of each of the identified by Dahl Fitjar's factors.

1. Factors leading to (strong) regionalism in Istria in the early 1990s

The research has identified Istrian regionalism as an exception in "new" EU Member States, and has focused on understanding how and why it has emerged and strengthened in the early 1990s. Istria is unique as a cultural region because of the lack of any single major

ethnic minority on its territory. Its cultural specificity lies not in its altogether different ethnic, religious or linguistic constitution from the national majority, but in the support of an opposing value system, which makes its distinctiveness on national level voluntary rather than inherent. Furthermore, its small size makes any demands for full autonomy or irredentism irrational and implausible. That means that although the international environment, in particular EU integration, has served as a supporting process for Istrian regionalism, the latter needs to be studied primarily within the framework of domestic politics. In the case of "new" EU Member States, with the partial exception of Poland, domestic politics are taking place within highly centralized administrative, political and economic structures, which makes comparisons with federal or decentralized states also methodologically unsound. After taking all those factors in consideration, the region of Pirin Macedonia in Bulgaria emerges as one with comparable initial characteristics to those of Istria. It is similar in size, has a border location and multicultural identity shaped by the historical mingling of different cultures and the shifting of borders, and boasts a prosperous economy dependent on cross-border exchange and built on the premises of conflict and poverty. The predominantly Bulgarian identification of the Pirin Macedonian population also means that regionalist movements would likely focus on gaining more political, administrative or fiscal independence within the framework of the existing nation-state, rather than outside of it. Furthermore, the four factors[1] identified by Dahl Fitjar to be positively related to strong regionalism are also present in Pirin Macedonia. In contrast to Istria, however, and despite its more expressed traditions of political action and autonomy, Pirin Macedonia nowadays is not a region with strong regionalism. The region's specific culture is not politicized to address grass-roots challenges, regional parties do not hold full control of regional administrations, and no initiatives for increased economic and administrative independence on regional level have been undertaken. This is despite the fact that patterns of political support are somewhat different from those on national level, which according to the already discussed quantitative research by Dahl Fitjar (2010), is a political prerequisite for the growth of strong regionalism. So why is regionalism stronger in Istria than in Pirin Macedonia where it remains dormant? What factors have made the politicization of the regional identity in Istria more deeply rooted in that region's political system, institutions, and population's identity and voting patterns than in Pirin Macedonia? After analysing the two regions in detail, the author has identified two major factors which

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[1] Culture, vote and party distinctiveness on regional and national level, economic differences with the centre, and institutional and legal arrangement.

distinguish them from one another and which have contributed to the different degrees of politicization of their regional identities:

1.1. The historical context in which Istrian regionalism emerged and grew was one of conflict and instability, where the presence of a strong and threatening "outside other" (the central state and nationalism) necessitated the mobilizing of alternative political identities.

In both Istria and Pirin Macedonia regional identities and their political expression have been strongest in periods of violent change, when the presence of an "outside other" has intensified regional affiliation and solidarity. In the case of Pirin Macedonia that period was at the end of World War I, when large parts of Macedonia were left outside of Bulgarian control and territory, leaving a significant portion of the population in Pirin Macedonia unsatisfied with both the Bulgarian central government and neighbouring states. The central Bulgarian government, exhausted by the warfare, was unable to effectively establish rule of law and central control over Pirin Macedonia where the fresh and significant inflow of migrants from Aegean Macedonia increased the region's population and boosted its Bulgarian national consciousness, but also strengthened the demand for strong governance and common identification. The regional political and social movement led by VMRO provided such a strong, if not progressive, governance, and an interpretation of the regional identification as specific but composite of the Bulgarian one. In the case of Istria, regionalism was strongest in the 1990s when the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia and the nationalism which swept the country triggered the formation of an independent political project on regional level, building on the uniqueness of the regional identity. In both instances, central governments lacked the resources and focus (both were occupied with warfare, and later, with post-war nation-building) to address the political challenge posed by the regionalists. The central government was thus used as the "outside other" against the image and policy of which the regional identity was politicized. In both instances, the biggest advantage of the regional political movements over central governments and national political parties was their physical proximity to their electorates and their ability to capture popular sentiments and to adopt political agendas of importance to the regional population.

The IDS-led politicization of regional identity in Istria in the 1990s was based on a rational calculation of utility maximization within a political environment of limited available options. The country was at war which isolated it from the rest of Europe and impacted its

economic situation and prospects. Istria's residents felt threatened by the central government's policies of armed conflict and nationalism, which they perceived as detrimental to their living standards, their reputation as a tolerant and peaceful region, and in conflict with their hybrid identity. In other words, they perceived the central government as an outside other and its policy – in conflict with Istrian interests and identity. Capturing those fears, IDS's leadership actively distanced itself from the political party and the politicians on central level, which supported or led to the conflict, thus distinguishing the region from the rest of the country, and saving partially its tourist industry and its economic exchange with neighbouring countries. Such a choice of strategy was facilitated by the fact that, although Istria was ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, its Serbian population was a small fraction of the overall population, and the region was geographically distanced from the conflict zones. This is also partly explaining why similar forms of regionalism did not emerge in other parts of the country.

In Bulgaria, the political transition in the 1990s was just as unstable and challenging as in Croatia, however, it was peaceful, and in particular in the beginning of the 1990s, it was positively viewed by a majority of the population. VMRO's political opponent, the "outside other," was not the central government, but rather the communist system which had dismembered the party and had suppressed expressions of political and cultural difference. Furthermore, VMRO's new leadership looked with nostalgia at its predecessor's success in the interwar period, when the ancient VMRO had been a force to be reckoned with not only in Pirin Macedonia but also on national level. The party thus adopted an agenda very similar to that of the past, without much consideration for the changes which had taken place in the region. The objective was to reinstate the past and to mobilize its old electorate rather than to formulate a new political programme. The ancient VMRO had been a nationalist party, which had combined regionalist with nationalist Bulgarian agendas. It had been regionalist in its political orientation, focused on the "Macedonian question" and territory, however, strongly propagating the Bulgarian ethnicity of the Slav population in Pirin Macedonia and the wider Macedonian region. Additionally, it had been conservative and traditional in relevance to family and overall societal organization and relations. The modern VMRO adopted all those features (social conservatism, regionalism as a form of rigid nationalism, and intolerance towards minorities). It did so without pressure from outside, and without the threat of physical violence, but rather as an element of (relatively) democratic processes. Its electorate, thus, never had to choose between war and peace, and political choices were primarily an expression of one's

political convictions, rather than a calculation of one's utility. This said, VMRO has been very successful in propagating its vision of Pirin Macedonian identity as a cultural version of the Bulgarian one on both regional and national level. This success has been achieved through a tremendous effort by the party to block, including legally[2], any other political projects and expressions on the regional level. As a result, by eliminating alternative political agendas and visions of the regional identity, the party "transferred" most decision-making to the central level and the political agenda revolved mostly around issues of national importance. To stay competitive with parties which operated on the national level, VMRO in its turn had to alter its political agenda and electorate, and Bulgarian nationalism gradually emerged as the focus of its political activities. Thus VMRO itself undermined its basis for political mobilization on the regional level, which led to its regrouping and reshaping as a conservative extreme-right party. Its activities in Pirin Macedonia are still focused on controlling the region by suppressing alternative visions of its political and cultural identity, rather than by establishing control over its economy or administration. This is in sharp contrast with IDS's agenda, which is focused on direct control over all regional and local institutions.

1.2.   The political platform of Istria's regionalist party (IDS) has been more focused and consistent on regional issues, and particularly on the politicization of the regional identity.

During the communist period in Bulgaria most academic work and forms of cultural expression had been controlled by the Communist Party. This had led to a relative cultural and academic uniformity on national level, and to the concentration of cultural and academic activity in Sofia. In Istria, in particular in the 1970s and 1980s, an array of related cultural and academic work had been financed with capital generated from tourism. The initial objective of this intensified cultural activity had been to shape the region as a single tourist product, and to diversify tourist flows by emphasizing Istria's multi-ethnic character and diverse history. The process had not been sponsored or directly controlled by the central state, nor had it, however, directly undermined its power. Its non-deliberate yet lasting effects had resulted in the shaping of a separate regional culture, which had placed the foundation for future regionalist political projects. In the beginning of the 1990s, Istria

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[2] The party has sought and successfully achieved the legal banning of any regional parties promoting alternative interpretations of the regional identity, which have been on a number of occasions proclaimed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Bulgaria.

thus differed from Pirin Macedonia in two ways. It possessed independent sources of financing generated by the tourist sector, which had been used generously for cultural and academic production in the previous decades, and it was placed in an extreme situation, which necessitated the use of this production in the political sphere.

In order for the politicization of a regional identity to take place, it could be supported from above (by national or international players), or generated from within the region itself. In the case of Istria, the latter has definitely been the case. The politicisation of Istrian identity was led by a number of Istrian intellectuals who felt compelled to react to the conflict which engulfed Yugoslavia. They used the academic work developed in the 1970s and 1980s in order to make a case for a single and unique Istrian region, different from the rest of Croatia and Yugoslavia. The movement which led the transformation from the academic to the political realm quickly registered as a political party (IDS), and its leaders were replaced by "professional" politicians. The fact, however, remains that the academic and civil society in Istria provided the model for Istrian regionalism, and that prior to that they had propagated among the general public the ideal of a separate and unique Istrian identity. The extreme political situation in Croatia provided rationale for such an overlap between the academic and the political. Since then, and partially under pressure from IDS, Croatia has introduced self-government on county level, a process which has not taken place in Bulgaria. This has led to the shaping of a legal, administrative and fiscal framework which is more suitable for the emergence and strengthening of regionalist movements. The foundations for such decentralization can still be traced to the 1990s and the work of Istrian regionalists. No parallel process has taken place in Pirin Macedonia, and although VMRO has its own members from the academic community, their work is mostly historical, focusing on defining the regional identity by (re)interpretation of historical events. The major distinguishing trait between the two regions, however, has been another overlap, namely IDS's establishment of direct and full control over all decentralized institutions by massively employing its members in them. In Istria thus there is interconnectedness between political and administrative functions, with the regionalist party de facto controlling all public institutions, and the associated with them economic resources.

While IDS's control over Istria has transformed the region, and the party has won all county elections since its foundation in the early 1990s, VMRO's impact on Pirin Macedonia's administrative and political sectors has been mostly monitoring in nature. Using populist rhetoric and street protests as means towards its political ends, VMRO has been

instrumental for the sustaining of the Pirin Macedonian regional identity as a form of Bulgarian nationalism. The party has frequently changed political coalitions, but also political agendas, initially focusing on the "Macedonian question," or the belief that the Slav population residing in all parts of Macedonia has a predominantly Bulgarian ethnicity, and later picking up on any current-day nationalist issue which might provide it with visibility and additional electorates. VMRO leaders rarely talk of Pirin Macedonia, and the issue seems to be central to the party only on paper. In contrast, IDS leaders' speeches and a large majority of the programmes and declarations issued by the party reveal a coordinated and consistent approach to regional identity and to its politicization. In short, the politicization of the Istrian regional identity was deliberate and had a political objective – the acquisition of power on county level by a regionalist political party. That process has emerged from and involved simultaneously a couple of spheres of public life, from the cultural to the academic to the political, and has been led by a regionalist party which has appealed to the majority of the region's population by providing solutions to practical questions (ending of violence, recovery of revenues generated by the tourist sector, and cooperation with larger neighbouring economies). Pirin Macedonian political regionalism revolves around a single issue, which is associated strongly with the region of Macedonia, but is not of practical significance for the majority of the population residing there. Despite its emotional appeal, the party's nationalist rhetoric does not provide any material value to the local population. Based on the findings of my research, the politicization of regional identities is successful only if a political agenda brings direct benefit to regional populations in the form of improved economic well-being or increased security. Since the Pirin Macedonian regional identity is not threatened by extinction or absorption, VMRO's emotional nationalist messages have for the most part not triggered a strong public reaction or support on the regional level. Prior to that, the party has been successful in eliminating alternative political options which has effectively blocked the politicization of the regional identity.

The two factors listed above have shaped Istria's overall environment and have enabled the politicization of its regional identity. They have been at work simultaneously, reinforcing and complementing each other, and boosting the nascent political regionalism developing in Istria. Pirin Macedonia, despite the apparent regional identification of the population, and its history of (successful) regionalism, is lacking such a comprehensive, integrated and enabling framework. On the one hand, from above, the Bulgarian legal and political framework limits the political independence of counties which depend largely on policies

and money transfers from the central government. The central government's concern for centralisation, and the EU's focus on issues such as corruption and organized crime, which are handled best through reform of central institutions, has meant that the country has remained largely centralized. In contrast, in Croatia, counties function as a form of self-government, have independent budgets, and governors are elected through direct county elections. On the other hand, from below, Pirin Macedonia has lost the cohesion of a (political) region. The politicization of the regional identity of the population has been undermined by the predominance of the civil Bulgarian identity and efforts to erase cultural and linguistic differences during the communist period, and by the lack of a meaningful intellectual and academic discussion regarding the identity's changing characteristics during communism and afterwards. Furthermore, there has not been intensive cooperation between the sectors, and academic work and civil society activism have to a large extent not influenced the political domain. The regional political party, VMRO, has pursued a short-termed political agenda, focused almost entirely on its perseverance in the political life in Bulgaria rather than on the formulation of a long-term political project on regional level. The promoting of regionalist issues, although present, has been unfocused and buried within numerous other "distractions," which have also continuously changed in order to attract the vote of particular electorates. The incessant changing of coalition partners has intensified this process, bringing to the surface more immediate political concerns such as the distribution of political and administrative functions among the coalition partners.

And yet, despite all these factors working against the politicization of the regional identity of Pirin Macedonia, the "Macedonian question" lives on in the political domain in Bulgaria. It is kept alive by the Pirin Macedonian population which has preserved its regional cultural characteristics and sees itself as part of the wider Macedonian region (including the Vardar and Aegean parts), and generates limited political support even outside of the country, in FYROM, where parts of the population support and vote for VMRO. In short, while in Istria, regionalism has taken the form of political mobilization of the entire region and almost all spheres of life, in Pirin Macedonia, we are talking about the politicization of a single issue – that of the identity of the regional population. Because of the impossibility of tying an issue exclusively to a territory (not least because VMRO activists had dispersed throughout Bulgaria after World War II), in the case of Pirin Macedonia, regionalism is more abstract and less associated with traditional foci of political power such as political offices and control of financial resources. It thus is also less visible and less active, arguably, exhibiting

less potential for mobilization, particularly in times of political stability. Lastly, although most research focuses on regionalism as a process of political emancipation of a region, my research indicates that this is not always the case. In Pirin Macedonia, regionalism has traditionally overlapped with nationalism, and this overlap does not seem to be contradictory. That suggests that the political agenda on which regionalism develops can vary, and that regionalist movements seeking more autonomy and self-rule at the expense of central power are representing but one type of regionalism. Within this context, the case of Istria is also not as straight-forward as it appears. Although Istrian regionalism suggests the undermining of central government power and fixed borders, and a gradual shift to more open, fluid relations with neighbouring regions, in reality, in Istria this is not convincingly the case. The multi-cultural approach propagated by IDS has exhibited serious limitations. Despite IDS leadership's rhetoric about openness of cultural and physical borders, there exist internal rigid borders which limit regional identity along religious lines (the cultural contribution of Muslim minority groups seems to be undermined), but also along autochthonous versus newcomer lines. The openness of regional identity seems to not embrace the identity of newcomers, integrate and digest it, leading to continuous mutations of the collective regional identity. It rather prescribes a model of regional identity which is just as limiting and thus rigid as state borders and national identities. Furthermore, regionalism in Istria is before all an example of how power has shifted from the central level to the regional one, preserving the same exclusivist approach to it. In other words, although the county level has gained some political and fiscal powers at the expense of the central government, the access to those has been largely limited to IDS functionaries and supporters, who retain tight control of Istrian institutions and power centres. In this case, we cannot talk about self-governance, whereby different societal groups and governmental layers (regional, central, EU) are involved, but rather of a self-government controlled by a single political party.

Overall, when reviewing identity (trans)formation in border regions, my research suggests that utility maximization is the prevailing cause for the fluidity of the population's identification, and, in certain cases, for the emergence of regionalism. As the utility value of a rigid identity is low during times of instability, Istrians have chosen Istrianity with its impartiality and parallel identification as the winning identity, i.e. the identity leading to utility maximization during the conflict in the 1990s, while Pirin Macedonians have not had a positive or negative incentive to make a choice at all, which has reduced the potential for widely-supported political projects on regional level. This is indicative of how precarious

politics and identities in border regions might be, and how regionalism itself might be easily reversed.

Because of the rapid growth of IDS in the 1990s, the party has been losing some ground and its popularity is on the decrease, with electorates becoming increasingly disillusioned with the political promises of its leaders. Furthermore, because of its direct responsibility for self-governing on regional level, the party is not able to credibly shift blame for regional challenges to outside factors and actors. In contrast, VMRO's persistent and discreet presence in county and local administrative structures has enabled it to maintain its status as a political factor in the region, without having full responsibility for any aspect of public affairs, and support for the party (when acting as a member of broader nationalist coalitions) has been gradually growing. IDS's political survival has been tied to its control over regional administrative, economic and political structures. A reform of county administrations initiated by the central government could severe those links, and easily lead to IDS's demise. In contrast, VMRO, due to its coalition-building skills, its political manoeuvring and its shying away from overtaking full responsibility for governance, is likely to survive any political and administrative restructuring. Thus in the long run, the two factors which have enabled Istrian regionalism – extreme political instability and strong control of a regionalist party over local institutions – might turn out to be the biggest disadvantages of the process, as both of them could be short-lived. In the context of modern political systems in "new" EU Member States, where political parties frequently fragment or even disappear, it is altogether possible that regionalism is a temporary process in which regional political identities are mobilized as a solution to specific problems, and fall back on second plan with the disappearance of the problems which have activated them and the political parties which have championed them. Because of the lack of deep structural reforms and the perseverance of the centralized nature of the ex-communist states, no institutional and legal mechanisms have been created to support regionalist movements. In the few cases where regionalism, in particular political regionalism, has emerged, it has done so as a function of specific political and historical developments rather than universal state reforms and processes. Additional quantitative research which covers a larger number of regions and spans over a longer period of time needs to be carried out in order to shed some light on the durability of political regionalism, yet the cases of both Pirin Macedonia and Istria seem to indicate that the politicization of regional identities is not a stable and irreversible process.

2. Legal and administrative setup and the influence of EU integration on regionalism.

As already said, some major differences exist between the legal set up of county authorities in Croatia and Bulgaria. While in Bulgaria counties are not legal entities separate from the central government but administrative branches of the latter enabling the implementation of state policy on regional level and "moving" the government closer to citizens, in Croatia, they are units of self-government with independent budgets, staff and responsibilities, and in many ways autonomous from the central government. In Bulgaria, control of county governors' actions is enabled by control of the hiring and firing process, while in Croatia governors are directly elected and thus at least to a certain extent, independent from central government control. This difference, however, should be viewed within the larger context of the overall high level of centralization in Croatia and Bulgaria. While it is true that counties in Croatia function as independent units of self-government, possessing budgets and power exceeding those of their Bulgarian counterparts, in reality their power is primarily administrative, and their budgets supervised by central institutions. Because of the complexity of the legal and regulatory framework, central authorities in charge of creating the framework are in a better position to use it to their advantage. For example, they have the authority to limit counties' economic power by transferring additional responsibilities to the county level without providing the funds necessary to perform them (or providing funding subject to significant delays). They could also influence county elections by reducing central budget investments in the region, and thus aggravating the economic situation. Or they could simply overtake county responsibilities by changing the national legislation. Overall, although the process of regionalization is much more developed in Croatia than in Bulgaria, the changes it has initiated are not deeply rooted, and could be easily reversed by a change in legislation. In short, as far as national-regional relations are concerned, counties remain in a subordinate position to the centre, which controls the legislative and judicial branches, and through them, ultimately the depth of regionalist processes.

This research has also confirmed findings based on other Central and Eastern European countries regarding the very limited jurisdiction of supranational EU institutions over Member States' regional policy. No EU directive prescribes a model of regionalization or decentralization, and EU conditionality is not available as a mechanism to trigger change once a country becomes an EU member. So far, the role of the European Union over the

process of regionalization in Croatia and Bulgaria has been two-fold. On the one hand, EU accession has contributed to the shaping of the national legislation and the territorial and administrative organization in the two countries. On the other hand, it has created opportunities for funding of projects and establishing of cooperation on county and local level, and has assisted the formation of new actors and interests. Overall, EU accession has reinforced regionalization in Bulgaria and Croatia, which has in its turn provided opportunities for the emergence of some forms of regionalism in those countries. In contrast, however, EU conditionality was not applied to the process of regionalism in Bulgaria and Croatia, and it has not had a direct effect on it. The influence of EU integration on the politicization of regional identities in Pirin Macedonia and Istria has been to a large extent non-deliberate and non-institutionalized. Firstly, some regional actors have used EU accession as a "carrot" for their electorates, associating their own values with EU values, using Europe to further their own political goals (for example, regional actors looking for enlarged political power, central governments looking for a new political agenda, and minority groups looking for increased social and political rights and an ability to shape domestic politics through outside pressures), and instilling fear that their political opponents would lead the country away from EU membership. In the case of Istria, for example, the regional self-government has publicly interpreted EU regional policy as an instrument for granting higher cultural autonomy to regions, and has skilfully united aspirations for cultural realization on the regional level with its own ambitions for higher political and economic power, thus curbing regionalist actors and issues outside of its structures and political agenda. Secondly, (regionalist) political parties have had to alter their behaviour and rhetoric, and even their political agenda, in order to be successful, i.e. to generate political and public support, in the context of EU membership. VMRO leaders' rhetoric is much more moderate in the European Parliament, or when talking with EU colleagues, than in front of their own electorate at home. Furthermore, the party has completely reversed its policy of proclaiming a Bulgarian identity for the Slav population in FYROM, focusing rather on the rights of the unrecognized Bulgarian minority there. Thirdly, there is a positive correlation between EU membership and public perceptions of a country. Once a country becomes an EU Member State, its (economic) image improves, opening room for FDI and increased tourist flows. This has prompted accession countries, despite the lack of a prescribed model for decentralisation to willingly copy and paste best practices from other Member States. The correlation between regionalism and economic prosperity in a European context, where some of the richest regions also possess significant

political and governing independence, has made regionalism an attractive political agenda for reformist governments. So far, in Croatia and Bulgaria central governments have preserved tight control over the political and economic spheres, yet decentralization as a means for stimulating growth and addressing citizens' needs has been increasingly on the political agenda since the beginning of the countries' accession negotiations.

3. The role of economic development for the emergence of political regionalism

The economy has been less of a discerning factor than initially expected, both between the two studied regions and in comparison with other regions in Bulgaria and Croatia. Globalization and European integration seem to not have influenced directly the development of a regional political identity in either Pirin Macedonia or in Istria. Although those processes have contributed to the rising standard of living in both Croatia and Bulgaria, most investments and grants have been distributed through the central authorities. EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, have not established any permanent mechanisms for communicating directly with regional or local levels of government. All communication and planning is done through the central level, which is the crucial unit for distribution, but also for absorption, of EU funding. Absorption levels on county level have been low. Similarly, FDI levels per capita in both counties are low and comparable. There is no indication in either Pirin Macedonia or in Istria that neighbouring countries are trying to influence the political situation through economic development or restructuring. On the contrary, there are no large-scale development programs run by Italy, Austria or Greece on county level. Despite the dominance of neighbouring countries as sources of private investment, the latter is not so significant, and lobbying and most economic agreements are carried out on central level which has the authority to provide investors with tax breaks or employment assistance. In other words, neighbouring countries have been interested in the Bulgarian and Croatian markets as a whole, rather than in the individual counties, and the nature of this interest has been expressly economic (rather than political). No evidence has been found that they are involved in the politicization of regional identities. In this case, a centre-periphery approach which is based on the relations between countries rather than regions provides a more plausible framework for studying inter-country relations. Overall, instead of weakening the central governments, FDI and EU funds have strengthened them by providing them with more financial power and by making regional authorities more dependent on them. They have

furthermore delayed reform efforts by providing funding for the sustaining of a large and often inefficient central bureaucracy.

An important aspect of the research has been the economic comparability of Pirin Macedonia and Istria as well-off border regions, and whether this better-than-the-national -average performance can be credited as one of the factors leading to regionalism. The two regions have traditionally low unemployment and high employment rates, their GDP per capita is higher than the national average, and economic exchange and tourism benefit from their proximity to larger foreign markets. Istria is the richer of the two regions, primarily because of its tourist sector which generated 2.4 billion euros in 2013, but for the purposes of this research, a parallel with other counties within the same country is more relevant. Classical theories of the relationship between the centre and the periphery within a country tend to portray that relationship as one of exploitation: the stronger and better developed centre uses the (raw) resources of the weaker and lagging behind periphery in order to further its own development.[3] The formation of a regional political identity thus is done in opposition to the power of the centre, whereby the periphery revolts against it. According to such theories, regionalism can be predicted to be stronger in poorer regions.[4] In contrast, another school of thought suggests exactly the opposite – prosperous peripheries would demand a more central position and higher political and economic independence from the centre to match their economic power.[5] The author's initial premise has been that since both Istria County and Blagoevgrad County are some of the most economically developed regions in their respective countries, the theory of internal colonialism must not apply to them. And indeed, there is a direct fiscal incentive for regional administrations in both counties to demand economic and political decentralization. The higher levels of employment and GDP per capita in Pirin Macedonia and Istria support the positive correlation between economic development and regionalism, as rich regions are better off if they have direct control over the taxing of their population, and are interested in finding political means to gain such control. Such kind of rationale, however, does not place the regions in a historical and international context.

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[3] Dahl Fitjar, Rune. "Building Regions on Economic Success: Prosperity and Regionalism in Rogaland." *Scandinavian Political Studies,* 2006, 29 (4), p. 335. The relationship between centre and periphery in globalization theories is portrayed in the same way.
[4] *ibid*
[5] Keating, Michael. *State and Regional Nationalism: Territorial Politics and the European State.* Hemel Hampstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988./ Dahl Fitjar (2006). Dahl Fitjar presents Catalan regionalism, Slovenian succession from Yugoslavia, and the success of the Lega Nord in Northern Italy as examples of economically-triggered politicization of regional identities.

Firstly, although Pirin Macedonia and Istria's economic performance has been above average in the last few decades (roughly speaking, since the 1970s), that has not always been the case. Up until the end of World War II both regions had been both poor and underdeveloped. Their border status had frequently meant that they had been the periphery of the periphery, that part of the population had always been an unwelcome "other" regardless of which state the regions were part of, and that war and depopulation had left the regions on a number of occasions in a poor economic state. Secondly, although Pirin Macedonia and Istria are prosperous regions within the framework of their own nation-states, when compared to the more prosperous EU countries or regions, they are certainly not so. Their economies are insignificant and lack the power to be independent international players, as is for example the case with some German regions. The relationship between economic performance and regionalism is thus inconclusive.

On the one hand, there are indications that regionalism is stronger in better-off regions, which is also proven by the fact that regionalism is stronger in the richer of the two regions (Istria). Within such a reading of the facts, the effect of economic growth over regionalism could be both direct and indirect.[6] It could be indirect in the sense that it could help finance and develop the cultural life in a region, which could in its turn contribute to the building of a stronger regional identity and even regionalism. Economic growth could also boost self-esteem, building inhabitants' assertiveness and political activism.[7] The direct effect is, as already said, that it makes it more rational to demand greater political autonomy and economic independence from central governments. People, including political and economic leaders, seem more likely to politicize their regional identity if their region, and they themselves, would gain economically from the process,[8] or reversely, lose if they fail to do so (for example, conflict with the national centre might occur if it tries to curb or jeopardize the periphery's economic exchange with the EU core).

On the other hand, however, the historical foundations of regionalism in economic underdevelopment and political instability are strong in Istria and Pirin Macedonia. The initial politicization of the regional identity of Istria took place in the early 1990s when the economy was seriously and negatively affected by the war in ex-Yugoslavia. At that moment, certainly, Istria was not acting as a rich region demanding more autonomy from the central level, but rather as a region attempting to avoid destitution. Because of its

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[6] Dahl Fitjar, p. 352.

[7] *ibid*

[8] *ibid*

overdependence on tourism as a source of financial inflows, Istria was risking to be disproportionately impacted by the warfare, and knowing well the poverty associated with war, the regional population was more prone on embracing regionalism out of fear rather than opportunism. This last point is supported by the fact that even nowadays, financial flows, including FDI, EU funds and economic exchange, to both regions are not consolidated and institutionalized, and thus do not serve as a too large temptation for regional players to seek higher independence from the centre.

An exception is the tourist sector in Istria which has generated significant financial inflows to the region, thus boosting the regional economy, and indirectly, contributing to the reinvention of regional culture. The latter process has in its turn led to the elaboration of a new political project on regional level. Pirin Macedonia, which has a significant potential for the further development of its own ski and spa sectors, has been increasing its capacities in tourism, and it would be useful empirically to follow that process and assess whether it is paralleled by the deepening of regionalist tendencies.

Overall, the research confirms findings that regionalism is positively related to economic development if the latter is successfully controlled and used for the progressing of a regionalist agenda. In other words, regionalism grows with economic development. Furthermore, and more conclusively, the research indicates that economic prosperity is insufficient to trigger the emergence of regionalism. A significant crisis which threatens the (economic) wellbeing of regional populations is needed to initiate such a process.

Theories on regionalism have been based predominantly on quantitative research of a large number of regions, which has often spanned across continents and time. Few contextual case studies have been carried out, in particular in "new" EU Member States where regionalism is altogether not widespread or at least not well articulated politically. This research provides detailed empirical backing of theories focusing on the factors leading to regionalism, in particular those developed by Rune Dahl Fitjar. On the one hand, it demonstrates the validity of Fitjar's findings regarding the need to study regionalism through the interrelations of a comprehensive web of factors, namely economy, culture, institutional framework and political parties. On the other hand, it fine-tunes the separate factors found by Fitjar to be positively related to the level of regionalism by demonstrating

how specific sub-factors might bring about different results in otherwise comparable regions. For example, the politicization of regional identities in Pirin Macedonia and Istria has historically taken place in extreme political situations, i.e. at times of violent conflict, when regional populations' interests have differed from national ones or when the region has played a pivotal role for the political situation in the whole country. Thus, although Fitjar's work identifies the connection between different patterns of political support on regional and national level as one of the factors leading to stronger regionalism, my research indicates that this correlation plays a critical role only at times of instability or conflict. Even in such cases, limitations in the legal framework have necessitated the use of alternative methods for the achieving of regional objectives and the gaining of higher autonomy on regional level. Those methods have varied from the establishment of guerrilla movements and the blackmailing of national authorities with the threat of violence to skilful negotiations and bargaining. Their wide span is indicative of the precariousness of regional environments in which violence is just as common as tolerance, multiculturalism can be easily replaced by ethnic nationalism, and regional interests can be sought both through conflict and malleability. In other words, the same pre-conditions might bring about different processes and outcomes, and I have demonstrated both how and why that has been the case in Istria and Pirin Macedonia.

Those two regions present excellent cases of the fluidity of regional identities but also of political projects. Istria and Pirin Macedonia are examples of peripheral regions with developed in national context economies, distinct multicultural identities established on the border between different nation-states and through the mingling of different ethnicities, relatively unique regional political identities, and limited opportunities for increased autonomy. From a cultural perspective, regionalism in their case is manifested through the sharing of common traditions, lifestyles, everyday practices and a special relationship with the territory. From a political perspective, it is about the ability to negotiate rights and responsibilities in centralized states, and to derive benefits from the geographic proximity to foreign markets and international developments, such as globalization and EU integration. There is an inherent conflict in those two aspects of Pirin Macedonian and Istrian regionalism - while regional cultures and lifestyles can be emancipated through the increasing of regional autonomy and individual responsibility and accountability, the covert nature of informal political negotiations frequently undermines those processes. Thus, unlike the wide majority of research on regions which depicts modern-day regionalism as a progressive process aimed at improving democratization,

political accountability and efficiency, my research does not indicate that any of those processes have taken place in either Istria or Pirin Macedonia. On the contrary, the small size of those regions limits the existence of competitive political and economic factions and interests, and the associated with them checks and balances, and leads to the consolidation of political power on the regional level. Because of IDS's success in Istria that process has been much more wide-spread in that region than in Pirin Macedonia, where the central state has served to a larger extent as a controlling mechanism of regional and local action. In addition, the incorporation of the largest minority group (the Italian one) in IDS's structures and strategy has also effectively eliminated it as a political rival in the region. Thus, on the one hand, the gaining of larger political and financial autonomy on regional level in Istria has enabled the region to support the political articulation and institutionalization of the regional culture, and to successfully use it for the further growth of regionalism. On the other hand, it has also provided the regionalist political party IDS with control over major administrative, self-governing and economic institutions, effectively limiting political competition and creating rigid vested-in interests which are not compatible with democratization processes. In the case of small regions like Pirin Macedonia and Istria, proximity to electorates is one of the major identifiers of regionalism, and that proximity is simultaneously one of the inherent weaknesses of regionalism, as democratization can be easily replaced by usurpation of power and informal political bargaining, and accountability and efficiency by disregard for the rule of law. The historical examples for the instability and subjectivity of regional self-governance are numerous, and it appears that the dichotomy will likely persist in the future. Ironically, in the absence of a strong civil society which could overtake the responsibility for carrying out the checks-and-balances over regional political parties and governing bodies, the only other available mechanism for the control of their power would be through central government institutions. It is thus little likely that the centralized nature of Bulgaria and Croatia will be questioned and eroded, as even regional and local electorates find it in their interest in the long run to deal with more distanced but also more objective institutions. In the event Bulgarian ethnic nationalism in Pirin Macedonia persists to grow, the influence of VMRO in the region would also increase significantly, and it would be fruitful to follow whether any further politicization of the regional identity would take place. The precarious political situation in FYROM and Greece, and the existence of a large and well-represented politically Muslim minority in the region could exacerbate the process. Those factors might

also serve as a source of conflict in the broader Macedonian region, although at this stage both internal and international conflicts seem unlikely.

When traveling in Istria and Pirin Macedonia, one gets the feeling of being in sleepy, peaceful and prosperous provincial regions. Under the surface, however, dilemmas regarding the regions' collective identities persist and await new political interpretations and potential new conflicts, as the only certain aspect of regionalism in "new" EU Member States appears to be its instability. Confronted with numerous external interpretations of their collective identity, regional populations are attached to the territory they inhabit and the lifestyle they have built for themselves, and view everyone coming from outside of the region as an "outside other." A simple "us" versus "them" dichotomy, however, does not capture well the specificity of regional identification, as the "us" can become part of any outside "them," and regionalism can be engulfed by both majority and minority nationalisms. This research indicates that economic and political uncertainly is more conducive for the emergence of regionalism than economic prosperity and political routine, but also that regionalism is more likely to be stable in the longer run if it is built on affluence, cooperation and peaceful tackling of regional issues. The findings are aligned with the fluidity and multifacetedness of border identities whereby adaptability, the pursuit of one's self-interest, and the lack of a rigid value system have ensured regional inhabitants' survival and the preservation of their cultural specificity.

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