

IMPLICATIONS OF EMERGING BALKAN LEFT FORCES FOR THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD SOCIALIST MOVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S LEVICA PARTY

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Abstract : *Over thirty years after the end of the Cold War, the world socialist movement in Europe has experienced a pronounced low ebb, with leftist forces in post-socialist transition countries—especially in the Balkans—languishing in persistent difficulties. In recent years, however, the rise of a new left-wing political party in North Macedonia, the Levica (“Left”) party, has attracted attention. Using Levica as a case study, this article examines what insights the emergence of new left forces in the Balkans can offer to the contemporary world socialist movement. It reviews the historical background and current challenges of the left in North Macedonia and the Balkans, analyzes Levica’s origins, ideological characteristics, and political trajectory, and summarizes the party’s theoretical and practical innovations in its organizational model, mass mobilization methods, and national positioning. The study finds that Levica grew out of grassroots social movements into a parliamentary party, successfully uniting disaffected youth and workers. By steadfastly emphasizing social justice and anti-capitalism while also embracing patriotism, Levica has mounted a dual challenge to the neoliberal and nationalist order. This experience provides valuable lessons for reviving leftist forces in post-socialist states: by upholding socialist ideals tailored to national realities and deploying mass-line and populist mobilization strategies, leftist movements can still break through even in adverse conditions. This paper aims to enrich understanding of new dynamics in the contemporary world socialist movement and to offer theoretical reflection and practical reference for the global revival of the left.*

Keywords: *Balkan left; Levica Party; North Macedonia; post-socialist transition; socialist movement*

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the landscape of the world socialist movement has undergone profound changes. In Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans in particular, the former ruling communist parties all withdrew from the stage of history, and local left-wing movements fell into a prolonged slump [1]. Under the powerful influence of Western liberal-democratic discourse, socialist and communist ideas were stigmatized; in many post-socialist countries, leftist parties either shifted to social democracy and embraced neoliberal reforms, or else became marginalized in the political arena [2]. Entering the 21st century, despite the emergence of a left-wing “Pink Tide” in regions like Latin America, leftist forces in Europe—especially in Southeastern Europe—have long failed to reverse their disadvantage. In recent years, however, several new leftist political forces have appeared in the Balkans, attracting notice. Among them, North Macedonia’s Levica party (whose name means “Left”) has, since its founding in 2016, grown rapidly—winning seats in parliament and drawing a sizable base of supporters. This phenomenon has prompted scholars to consider the possibility of a left-wing revival in “post-socialist” countries.

On the one hand, the Balkans region, where North Macedonia is located, once shared in the socialist federal legacy of Yugoslavia, yet after the Cold War it was deeply affected by nationalist conflicts and economic crises. In the early 2010s, amid public disappointment, the Western Balkans finally saw its first batch of new social movements and left-wing initiatives. Levica emerged at this historical juncture as a representative of this new wave of left-wing forces [3]. On the other hand, this new experiment in the Balkans carries broader practical significance. The

article is situated within the scholarship on contemporary socialist movements: it draws on Levica's official program, election data, and relevant research findings by scholars at home and abroad to delve into the background, ideas, and practices behind Levica's rise, and distills its implications for socialist revival. The following sections are structured accordingly. First is an overview of the historical evolution and current predicament of the left in North Macedonia and the Balkans, to reveal the historical soil from which Levica emerged. Next, it elaborates Levica's birth, ideological orientation, and political practice path. Then, it summarizes Levica's innovative practices in terms of organizational form, mass mobilization, and the party's positioning of the state. The following conclusion provides an overall summary and offers an outlook on the future prospects of leftist forces regionally and globally.

II. Historical Background and Present Predicament of the Left in North Macedonia and the Balkans

The Balkan left-wing movement has a long and distinctive history. In the case of North Macedonia, the seeds of socialist thought date back even before the Yugoslav era: the 1903 Ilinden Uprising and the short-lived Kruševo Republic are regarded as exemplars of early republican-style socialist self-governance in the Balkans. During the Yugoslav federation period (1945–1991), as one of the constituent republics, Macedonia's people were imbued with progressive ideas under a socialist system, upholding ideals of national independence, social justice, and internationalism, and taking particular pride in the Non-Aligned Movement's independent foreign policy ethos. The socialist identity forged in this period became an important part of Macedonian sociopolitical culture. However, the post-Cold War upheavals plunged the Balkan left into a trough. In 1991, North Macedonia seceded peacefully from Yugoslavia and became independent. In the process, Western liberal values flooded in and the newborn state's political trajectory was steered onto a Western-style "democratic transition" track. Western governments and international organizations, through political and economic intervention, promoted Washington Consensus-style reforms that institutionally dismantled the remaining socialist legacy. In this climate, socialist and leftist ideas were marginalized or even demonized: in public discourse, "left" and "red" were equated with backwardness and authoritarianism, seen as irreconcilable with democratic progress. European institutions even condemned communism alongside fascism as totalitarian, effectively denying socialism any legitimacy at the ideological level. As a result, although left-wing parties were not banned by law in North Macedonia, they became socially isolated and politically marginal. For a considerable time in the post-socialist period, leftist ideas in Macedonian society were no longer viewed as a progressive or respectable option.

Meanwhile, the former ruling party—the League of Communists of Macedonia, reorganized as the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)—although superficially inheriting the mantle of the left, quickly transformed. It embraced free-market reforms and fully accepted the Western liberal-democratic paradigm, becoming indistinguishable from typical center-left social-democratic parties. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, SDSM and the main right-wing party (VMRO-DPMNE) alternated in power, but neither fundamentally challenged the neoliberal policy course. Leftist ideology virtually disappeared from mainstream politics, surviving only on the fringes in the form of small communist splinter groups with negligible influence. In sum, in the early 21st-century North Macedonia and the Balkans, leftist forces faced a twofold predicament. First was an ideological predicament: socialist ideology was suppressed by a powerful hegemonic

discourse, and leftist ideals lost prestige. Second was a practical predicament: traditional left-wing organizations were either co-opted into the neoliberal order or marginalized. Only in the mid-2010s did the region finally see the emergence of a new wave of left-wing activism.

Around 2015, a nationwide political crisis and mass protests in North Macedonia provided an opening for leftist forces to regroup. The Levica party, which will be discussed below, was born at this historical juncture as a representative of this new wave of left-wing forces [3]. North Macedonia's Levica party was formed in late 2015 and officially registered in early 2016, as the product of a convergence of several domestic left-wing movements. Its main initiators came from two activist streams: one comprised the leaders of social justice and anti-austerity movements (such as the student movement "Sloboden Index" and the leftist movement "Solidarnost" – "Solidarity"), as well as a few members of the (old) Communist Party of Macedonia, trade union activists, and others. In 2015, Macedonia was mired in a political crisis triggered by a wiretapping scandal involving the ruling party. Then-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, leader of VMRO-DPMNE, was accused of massive corruption and abuses of power, sparking widespread protests that rocked the government. Amid this turmoil, diverse opposition forces took to the streets. In this context, veteran left activists saw an opportunity to institutionalize their struggle by forming a political party. By late 2015, they launched the signature collection for registering the party, and Levica officially completed registration in February 2016.

III. The Rise of the Levica Party: Origins, Ideological Features, and Political Trajectory

A. Origins: From Street Movements to Political Party

North Macedonia's Levica party was formed in late 2015 and officially registered in early 2016, as the product of a convergence of several domestic left-wing movements. Its main initiators came from two active grassroots social movement organizations – the "Lenka" movement for social justice and the leftist movement "Solidarnost" ("Solidarity") – as well as a few members of the (old) Communist Party of Macedonia, trade union activists, and others. In 2015, Macedonia was mired in a political crisis triggered by a wiretapping scandal involving the ruling party. Then-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, leader of the nationalist right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, was exposed for massive illegal surveillance and corruption, sparking nationwide protests. Although the main opposition party, SDSM, seized the opportunity to mobilize the public to demand the Prime Minister's resignation, many radical youth and leftists did not trust SDSM. They believed SDSM likewise pursued neoliberal policies and lacked genuine concern for workers and the poor, being essentially just another elite faction vying for power. In this context, leftist groups like Lenka and Solidarnost decided to unite to form a new party, aiming to create "a left-wing movement that truly represents the voice of the poor and the silenced." As the party's founding manifesto stated, the situation in Macedonia required a serious and resolute team to unite the scattered resistance movements into an organized force, led by a new generation of young people with class consciousness to continuously voice the demands of the oppressed. The party was named "Levica" (meaning "Left"), reflecting its goal of reviving left-wing politics. One of the party's organizers, Zdravko Saveski, emphasized that the new party was not created to split the opposition camp, but to mobilize those voters who opposed Gruevski's regime yet did not trust the existing opposition parties. He stated clearly: "We are forming a party not to divide the opposition, but to put an end to the dictator's rule".

During its preparation, Levica was greatly inspired by other new left parties in Europe, and it explicitly expressed identification with and sympathy for Greece's radical left Syriza coalition. At

that time, the rise of the radical left in Greece was seen as a model for left-wing revival in Southern Europe, and it provided an example for the Macedonian left. Levica announced on November 14, 2015, the launch of signature collection for forming the party, and it officially completed registration in February 2016. Shortly after its founding, Levica faced a stern test. In the spring of 2016, Macedonia was swept by large-scale street protests and the “Colorful Revolution” movement, with various groups jointly demanding the ouster of the corrupt government. For the fledgling Levica, this was a moment of decision between participating in the social movement or maintaining political independence. A portion of party members believed they should join the SDSM-led united front in the streets to help topple Gruevski’s regime, but more members feared that getting too close to SDSM would cause the new party to lose its independence and turn into an appendage of the traditional opposition. In the end, the majority of members decided to preserve Levica’s independent identity as a party, choosing to contest elections alone rather than ally with the mainstream parties. This internal dispute over the party’s course led a few members to leave and defect to SDSM, but Levica’s core managed to safeguard the organization’s autonomy. From its very founding, one can say, Levica solidified its political stance of “not being subordinated to the established forces”.

B. Ideological Characteristics

As one of the few radical left-wing parties in the contemporary Balkans, Levica’s ideological spectrum encompasses elements of socialism, patriotism, and populism, exhibiting a unique synthetic character.

First, socialism and anti-capitalism are the party’s core principles. Levica defines itself as a socialist party, advocating the advancement of social justice and workers’ rights, opposing privatization and austerity policies under neoliberal hegemony, and emphasizing resistance to the inequality and poverty caused by capitalism [4]. In its economic program, Levica calls for strengthening social welfare and public services, champions free healthcare and education, and regards neoliberalism and “savage capitalism” as the root of Macedonia’s socio-economic problems. Its electoral platform explicitly rejects any development model that comes at the expense of workers’ rights, and it calls for restoring worker organization and raising wages in order to achieve genuine social equity. The party’s statute lists fundamental values including “the path to socialism,” “socialist patriotism,” “anti-imperialism,” and “secularism” [11]. Clearly, traditional Marxist-Leninist concepts (such as class struggle and anti-imperialism) coexist in Levica’s thought alongside newer issues of the contemporary era (such as democratic participation and environmentalism).

Second, left-wing patriotism is a prominent hallmark of Levica, one especially noteworthy in the Balkan context. In most Eastern European countries, nationalist discourse is typically monopolized by the right wing, while the left—due to its internationalist stance—is often seen as “unpatriotic.” Levica seeks to break this dichotomy by combining the pursuit of socialism with the defense of national sovereignty and dignity. Party leader Dimitar Apasiev and others have repeatedly stressed that “Macedonian patriotism is not in conflict with socialist ideals,” arguing that the left should care about national issues and defend state sovereignty and national identity. This position has led Levica to take hardline stances on certain major issues of national identity. For example, the party staunchly opposed the 2018 Prespa Agreement and the resulting “North Macedonia” renaming, viewing it as a Western-imposed “humiliating compromise” that erased the history and rights of the Macedonian nation. Levica declared that if it one day held power, it would consider abolishing the name-change agreement to restore the country’s dignity. Likewise, in domestic inter-ethnic

relations, Levica opposed what it saw as excessive expansion of minority-language policies, criticizing the 2018 law broadening Albanian-language usage as something that would only exacerbate ethnic divisions. It argued instead for replacing narrow ethno-national divisions with a unifying civic identity. The party bills itself as a “supra-national party,” hoping to transcend the prevailing “two-ethnic-group divide” between Macedonians and Albanians in national politics. In summary, Levica’s national stance can be described as a form of “socialist nationalism” or left-wing nationalism: it opposes national oppression and the denial of identity, while also opposing extreme nationalism and ethnic chauvinism, seeking to achieve equality and solidarity among all ethnic communities under the premise of safeguarding national sovereignty.

Third, an anti-Western, anti-imperialist and critical geopolitical stance pervades Levica’s foreign policy positions. Since independence, North Macedonia’s state strategy of “turning to the West” (i.e. joining NATO and the EU) has been an unquestioned consensus among the political elite, yet Levica is the only party to openly challenge this consensus. The party sharply criticizes NATO, calling it a tool for waging imperialist wars and threatening world peace, and it has at times demanded a halt to North Macedonia’s NATO accession. Levica activists have long participated in anti-NATO demonstrations, and the party even wrote an “anti-NATO” stance explicitly into its platform. On the question of the EU, Levica is not categorically against European integration, but it holds a critical view of the current EU, arguing that it has degenerated into “a corporate and militarized entity” that marginalizes small countries like Macedonia. The party rejects North Macedonia’s accession to the EU under the present “humiliating” terms, insisting that only if national sovereignty and dignity are not sacrificed should EU integration be considered. In interviews, Apasiev has even suggested exploring alternatives to the EU, such as a potential “Eurasian Union” or closer ties with BRICS nations, hinting that deeper cooperation with non-Western powers like Russia and China could be an option for Macedonia [5]. In the context of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine conflict and the accompanying Western sanctions, Levica explicitly took a stance against sanctioning Russia, condemning the Macedonian government for “following NATO and the EU’s orders to the letter,” and arguing from an anti-imperialist and national economic-interest perspective against joining the sanctions. The party’s two MPs even met with the Russian ambassador in March 2022 in a gesture of friendship, which provoked outrage from the pro-Western camp at home [6]. By and large, Levica’s geopolitical posture is viewed by outsiders as quintessentially “anti-Western” and “pro-Russian.” Its array of positions and actions have made it subject to wariness or even blacklisting by the establishment, both domestically and internationally. Some Western media and think tanks have gone so far as to depict Levica as an extreme-right or populist offshoot, accusing it of “borrowing far-right policies” on certain issues—such as being anti-immigrant or anti-LGBT (Levica denies being anti-LGBT and supports LGBT rights, but its strident nationalist rhetoric has prompted such suspicions). Especially due to Levica’s open sympathy for governments opposed to U.S. influence (for example, expressing support for Venezuela’s leadership), its support for causes like Palestinian and Catalan self-determination, and its opposition to recognizing Kosovo’s independence, mainstream opinion in the West has tagged it as “pro-Russian” and “anti-Western.” Nevertheless, Levica insists that its foreign-policy stance is guided by anti-imperialist principles and the need to safeguard Macedonia’s national interests.

Lastly, a populist political style has been an important factor in Levica’s ability to attract grassroots support. The party’s very emergence stemmed from social movements, and its blistering critique of elite corruption and institutional failure gives it a sharply anti-establishment character. Apasiev

and other leaders employ scathing rhetoric on social media and at rallies to denounce entrenched interest groups and the political oligarchy—dubbing them a “kleptocratic alliance”—and they call upon “the people” to unite and take back national sovereignty. This language conforms to the classic features of populism (delineating “the people” versus “the elite” and claiming to represent the people’s interests). Researcher Ivo Bosilkov classifies Levica as a “polyvalent populist party,” suggesting that although it professes to be far-left, in practice it displays certain right-leaning populist tendencies, such as a lack of the inclusiveness typically expected of left-wing populism [7]. However one labels it, the party’s use of populist strategies to win hearts and minds is unmistakable. By exposing Western interference and the collusion of domestic corrupt elites, Levica has successfully cast itself as an outsider “agent of the people” [8]. In the age of social networks, this kind of clear-cut oppositional narrative is easy to spread and resonates with many voters who are disappointed in the traditional parties. Thus, it can be said that Levica’s ideological profile blends the left’s demands for social equality, the quest for national self-determination, and populist appeals to “the people,” forming a distinctive political line of “left-wing populist nationalism.” This remains a rare phenomenon in post-socialist countries, but it has proven effective in rallying a particular social base.

C. Political Trajectory: Rapid Rise and Parliamentary Breakthrough

After its founding, Levica chose a strategy of pursuing influence through electoral politics. In the short span from 2016 to 2024, the party grew from a fringe micro-party into a force that cannot be ignored in North Macedonia’s political scene, creating an example of a Balkan leftist party’s rise. Its development trajectory can be divided into several key stages:

- **Initial exploratory stage (around 2016):** In the Macedonian parliamentary elections of December 2016, Levica—a brand-new party barely a year old—participated for the first time. Despite a lack of resources and name recognition, the party still obtained about 12,120 votes (roughly 1.05% of the nationwide total), ranking eighth place. Since it did not meet the threshold to enter parliament (at the time, Macedonia had a single nationwide constituency with a 5% threshold), Levica won no seats. However, considering the party’s very short existence and tiny size, this result indicated that a notable number of voters were willing to support an entirely new left-wing option. In the 2017 local elections, Levica further tried to contest municipal positions, laying groundwork at the grassroots even though it did not secure notable victories.
- **Parliamentary breakthrough stage (2019–2020):** The year 2019 was a turning point for Levica. In late 2019 the party held a congress, reorganizing its structure and for the first time electing a formal party chairman, with co-founder Dimitar Apasiev chosen as party president. This indicated that Levica had transitioned from a loose collective leadership to a clear leadership core with Apasiev at the helm. In July 2020, North Macedonia held early parliamentary elections. Levica campaigned with highlights such as opposing the Prespa name-change agreement and opposing NATO membership, which galvanized a segment of voters disappointed in the mainstream parties [9]. When the election results came in, Levica received 37,426 votes—around 4.1%—and captured 2 seats in the Assembly [10]. This marked the first time since Macedonian independence that an extreme-left party entered parliament, and one of the very few cases of a radical left party winning seats in any post-Yugoslav country. Apasiev himself won election as an MP, and the other winning candidate was Boris Krmov. Notably, after the 2020 election it was rumored that the ruling SDSM party attempted to co-opt or buy off Levica’s MPs to shore up its fragile majority,

but Krmov rebuffed the inducements and stood firm with Apasiev as an independent two-member opposition group. This act boosted the reputation of Levica's deputies, demonstrating that their political integrity set them apart from mainstream politicians, and it further earned the trust of supporters. Upon entering parliament, Levica made full use of the platform to promote its positions. For example, they once used protracted debate procedures (filibustering) to successfully block a government bill (one that involved hefty subsidies to mostly pro-government media outlets) from coming to a vote, in protest against the incumbents' control of the media. This was seen as an example of a small party cleverly using parliamentary rules to check the big parties, although it also drew hostility from the ruling coalition.

- **Expansion of local base stage (2021):** After its initial parliamentary victory, Levica continued to advance at the grassroots level. In the October 2021 local elections, the party made eye-catching gains: it won a total of 49 municipal council seats across the country, an increase of 46 seats compared to the previous cycle, becoming an important force in local politics. Its total vote count exceeded 50,000, a several-fold increase over the last local elections. Although the party did not secure any mayoral positions, it became one of the top three parties in the city councils of multiple municipalities. Some media described Levica as one of the “fastest-growing leftist parties in all of Europe” at that time. Success at the local level solidified Levica's organizational network: to date the party has established branches in 21 cities and municipalities nationwide. Many young people and activists have gained experience by serving on local councils, providing a pool of talent for the party's future bids for higher office.
- **Consolidation and growth stage (2022–2024):** Levica's influence continued to rise after 2022. In the parliamentary elections held in 2024, the party further increased its vote tally to over 67,000, roughly 6.75%, and expanded its seats to 6. Given that the Macedonian Assembly has 120 seats, this meant Levica could now officially form its own parliamentary group (which requires at least 5 members). The party had grown from a fringe micro-party into the fifth-largest party in parliament, greatly elevating its voice within the opposition. During this period, Levica's societal appeal also broadened, continually attracting voters dissatisfied with the status quo – including unemployed youth and working-class constituents. People who felt betrayed by the post-socialist transition's unfulfilled promises increasingly saw Levica as an outlet for their grievances. By expanding internal grassroots participation after 2020, Levica also maintained an internal dynamism and cohesion not commonly seen in new parties.

Overall, Levica achieved a leap from nonexistence to prominence—and from very small to significantly larger—in less than a decade, propelled by multiple factors. From a social base perspective, the Macedonian public's discontent with long-term poverty and corruption, and anger over the erosion of national dignity, provided the “popular soil” for a radical left force to emerge. From an organizational strategy perspective, Levica's choice to remain independent in electoral politics and to contest every level of elections built up valuable experience and a support base, each campaign further expanding the organization and creating a virtuous cycle of “election → mobilization → more election.” In terms of leadership, Apasiev and the core team are passionate and strategic; at critical junctures they have stuck to principles and refused compromise (for example, not allying with the old ruling parties, and firmly maintaining an anti-NATO stance), thereby establishing a political image distinct from all others. In terms of timing, between 2015

and 2020 Macedonia was experiencing the collapse of an old regime, missteps by a new government, and mounting external pressures—society was in a period of uncertainty and transition, which gave an upstart force an opportunity to break through. All these elements contributed to Levica’s rise. This case also breaks the stereotype of “no left in the Balkans”: in other former Yugoslav countries, openly socialist radical left parties have seldom entered parliament (only a few exceptions, such as Slovenia’s Levica party and Croatia’s green-left coalition). The success of North Macedonia’s Levica has undoubtedly provided new hope and a model for leftist revivals in the Balkans and across post-socialist Europe.

IV. Levica’s Innovations in Theory and Practice: Party Organization, Mass Mobilization, and the Role of the State

Levica’s development is reflected not only in changing electoral numbers, but also in a series of explorations and innovations in its organizational form and political praxis. These explorations set it apart from traditional left parties and have been key to its ability to adapt to a difficult environment. Below, we analyze three aspects: the party’s organizational model, its methods of mass mobilization, and its positioning on the role of the state.

A. Party Organization Model

Levica was born out of social movements, but it did not remain a loose coalition of movements; rather, it evolved organizationally toward a classic political party form while still retaining a degree of flexibility. This innovation and balance in organizational model has given it a structure that provides both cohesion and grassroots vitality. Firstly, from its inception Levica established the organizational principle of democratic centralism. This is evident in the party’s statute and its actual operations: the party constitution explicitly stipulates that the party will employ democratic centralism in its internal decision-making. A certain centralization of authority, combined with internal discipline, has ensured unity of action—Levica has maintained cohesion and avoided debilitating factionalism or splits to a remarkable extent. At the same time, the party has tried to incorporate grassroots input and adjust tactics (for instance, proactively strengthening internal grassroots organization after 2020) without experiencing serious internal strife or splits. This suggests that at its current stage, Levica’s organizational model has been a successful one. Secondly, Levica places great importance on building up its grassroots branches and mass base, forming a bottom-up organizational network. Although it implements centralized leadership, the party does not rely solely on charismatic leaders, but strives to cultivate local cadres across regions. According to official information, Levica has established 21 local branches nationwide, covering major cities and areas. These local organizations regularly go into communities, factories and campuses to carry out activities and recruit members. Notably, the party has its own youth wing—Red Youth—dedicated to attracting young people aged 18–30. The youth wing frequently hosts discussions and lectures at universities, and takes part in international progressive youth exchanges, thereby developing organizational strength among the younger generation. At present, young members comprise roughly 30% of Levica’s membership, forming a vibrant reserve force for the party. Moreover, Levica has drawn in quite a few left-wing intellectuals. For example, the prominent scholar Biljana Vankovska not only offers advice to the party but even ran as Levica’s candidate in the 2019 presidential election. The participation of intellectual figures has improved the party’s theoretical caliber and policy-research capacity. Through its grassroots organization and member network, Levica successfully transitioned from a social movement into a mass political organization. This has kept it from degenerating, as some new left parties have, into

merely a “parliamentary party” that speaks only in parliament without a grassroots base. On the contrary, Levica has consistently maintained a degree of social mobilization capability. Thirdly, in its inter-party relations, Levica adheres to an independent and self-reliant alliance strategy—it refuses to ally with parties whose ideologies conflict with its own just to obtain short-term advantages. This stance is both a political choice and an organizational principle. Since its founding, Levica has repeatedly declined to form coalitions with larger parties like SDSM or VMRO-DPMNE if their ideologies did not align. Even ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, outsiders speculated that Levica might team up with one camp or the other to ensure crossing the electoral threshold, yet the party ultimately insisted on running independently, and it managed to clear the threshold and enter parliament on its own. After the 2020 election, Levica announced that it would not join any governing coalition unless a government were willing to revoke the Prespa name-change agreement. This uncompromising position demonstrates that Levica is unwilling to act as a junior partner or bargaining chip for the traditional parties, but is determined to preserve its distinct political identity. Such a strategy might lose the party chances to enter government and gain resources in the short term, but in the long run it has preserved the purity of the organization and avoided being absorbed or sidelined by the big parties. This has strengthened members’ conviction and made supporters trust its principled stance. Such an independent line is something many small parties find hard to stick to, but Levica has managed it so far without major internal splits.

B. Mass Mobilization Methods

In terms of propaganda and mobilization, Levica has kept pace with the times, flexibly combining new media and street politics to craft a highly effective mass mobilization model that differs from traditional left parties. Firstly, Levica places a strong emphasis on social media and the internet as tools of mobilization. Given that in North Macedonia most mainstream television and radio outlets are controlled by establishment forces, Levica has chosen to make its voice heard online. Party leader Apasiev is very active on platforms like Facebook, where he regularly posts sharp critiques and patriotic pronouncements, attracting tens of thousands of followers. His social media posts are sometimes provocative or even crude in tone, but precisely because of that they exude a more “grassroots” style, sparking widespread sharing and discussion. Levica also operates its own official website and disseminates party programs and policies through online media, and it cooperates with some independent news websites (such as the left-leaning portal *Antropol*, etc.) to spread its ideas. According to reports, as Levica’s appeal among young people grew, the mainstream media responded by virtually blacklisting the party—Levica representatives were rarely, if ever, invited to televised interviews or debates. Confronted with this situation, social media became almost its only space for free publicity. Through the internet, Levica has been able to connect supporters scattered across different regions and to quickly relay calls-to-action and mobilization directives. This kind of decentralized communication is not only low-cost, but also bypasses the filters of traditional media, which is extremely effective for a small party. In a sense, Levica’s rise is a successful case of political mobilization in the age of social networks.

Secondly, although it focuses on the online arena, Levica has not abandoned street politics and the tradition of direct mass action. As a party that originated from protest movements, Levica’s leaders and members frequently show up at various street demonstrations, citizen rallies, and labor rights actions, standing with the people and providing on-the-ground organization. It is noteworthy that at the party’s founding, the initiators explicitly stated that forming a party would not mean “shutting down” the existing movement organizations; rather, the aim was to bring the struggle

into parliament while continuing to maintain strength in the streets. Levica has on many occasions either organized or participated in nationwide protest activities. For example, during the campaign against the name-change referendum in 2018, the party called on citizens to boycott the referendum, and it organized a rally in the capital at which participants held banners and chanted slogans like “Resist imperialist interference!” [12]. Similarly, when in the later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic the government implemented certain austerity measures, Levica mobilized trade unions and students to take to the streets in protest. In 2023, local media reported that Levica held a “People’s Assembly” event in the city of Bitola, where the party’s presumptive presidential candidate Biljana Vankovska delivered a speech to the crowd outlining Levica’s policy positions. This “People’s Assembly” format emulated the mass gatherings used by Latin American leftist movements, aiming to close the distance between the party and grassroots communities. Through sustained street actions, Levica has both maintained media attention on its cause and reinforced its image as a vanguard of popular struggle. This stands in stark contrast to some leftist parties that, once they become focused on parliamentary politics, sever their ties with mass activism.

Thirdly, Levica has employed a measure of populist mobilization strategy to broaden its support base. This is evident in its rhetoric and choice of issues. As mentioned earlier, Apasiev habitually uses a “people vs. elite” narrative, painting the domestic ruling clique as treacherous, corrupt “sellouts,” while praising ordinary people as the true masters of the country. He once referred to those who participated in the 2016 protests but later joined the government as “failures draped in the mantle of progress,” exposing what he deemed the true face of the ruling party’s fake reforms. Such strongly worded barbs cater to grassroots anger toward the established political class. In addition, Levica zeroes in on the issues of greatest concern to the public when mobilizing support: employment opportunities, cost of living, punishment of corruption, and national dignity. For instance, the party has repeatedly condemned foreign corporations for enjoying incentives in Macedonia while exploiting workers, and it promises that if it held decision-making power it would raise the minimum wage and protect domestic industry. Levica also taps into national sentiments—on issues like the country’s name change or history textbooks, it emphasizes that government concessions have led to national “humiliation,” and it urges citizens to stand up and defend their dignity. By these means, the party’s strategy of combining economic livelihood issues with national pride has attracted a cross-class spectrum of supporters: not only urban youth and intellectuals but also rural residents and war veterans. One political scientist described Levica’s supporters as “people who are disappointed with the system and yearn for a radical change.” In sum, Levica’s populist mobilization is not empty demagoguery; rather, it embeds leftist demands in straightforward, people-centered language, thereby enhancing their resonance. Admittedly, as the party’s support base expands, its voter composition becomes more complex, and balancing the demands of different groups will pose a challenge in the future. But at least at its current stage, this mobilization approach has propelled the party’s rapid growth.

C. Rethinking the Role of the State

Levica’s thinking on the role and positioning of the state reflects some of its theoretical and practical innovations. As socialists, Levica’s leaders have had to address the relationships between the state and class, and between nationalism and internationalism. In North Macedonia’s particular domestic and external context, Levica’s approach to the state exhibits a pragmatic yet distinctive set of ideas.

Firstly, on domestic governance, Levica advocates rebuilding the functions of the welfare state to correct the distortions in the state’s role during the transition period. Since the start of the post-

socialist transition, the Macedonian state had gradually withdrawn from the economic and social spheres, and public services atrophied. Levica regards this retreat as a grave error. The party stresses that the state should be the guarantor of social justice, not the enforcer of market fundamentalism, and it proposes strengthening state control over key industries and expanding public welfare investment. For example, Levica calls for restoring sovereign control over sectors like energy and electricity to prevent foreign capital from monopolizing vital resources; it advocates establishing a universal basic income or expanding unemployment protections to counteract the social instability brought by high unemployment. In the realms of education and culture, Levica criticizes the government for excessive marketization and for neglecting the state's responsibility in cultivating citizens and safeguarding cultural sovereignty, urging increased funding for public education and measures to protect the Macedonian language and culture from the erosion of commercialization [13]. These proposals embody a kind of “progressive statism” — essentially reassigning the state an active role in intervening in the economy, protecting vulnerable groups, and defending national culture, standing in clear contrast to the laissez-faire tendencies of the past few decades.

Secondly, in terms of the nation-state's orientation, Levica is practicing a new paradigm of socialist patriotism. Twentieth-century socialist movements often emphasized proletarian internationalism and were critical of nationalism. Levica, however, contends that in the current struggles of a small country resisting external great-power domination, the left can and indeed should play the role of a patriotic force. The party regards the defense of national independence and the advancement of socialism as complementary, not contradictory. This concept is not unfamiliar in the context of national-liberation movements in developing countries, but it is relatively uncommon in today's European left. By espousing socialist patriotism, Levica has both widened its own appeal and, to an extent, revised the traditional dogma that set internationalism against patriotism. Importantly, Levica does not equate patriotism with xenophobia or isolationism; rather, it frames patriotism in inclusive and anti-imperialist terms. It opposes foreign domination and neoliberal globalization, while supporting international solidarity on terms that respect national sovereignty. Levica's stance suggests that the left need not abandon patriotism, but should imbue it with progressive meaning; and that the left should have a world-minded vision but not blindly obey a single model of globalization, instead advocating a new international order of multipolar coexistence [15].

Thirdly, on global alignment, Levica takes a non-aligned approach reminiscent of the Cold War-era Yugoslav stance. It advocates a multipolar world where small countries can pursue independent foreign policies rather than choosing camps. The party has explicitly praised the old Non-Aligned Movement's spirit in this regard. Levica opposes joining any great-power military blocs and calls for North Macedonia to chart a neutral, sovereign course in foreign affairs. In practice, this means maintaining relations with both East and West while being subservient to neither. The party's leaders have met with diplomats from various countries (East and West) to present their views. They emphasize principles of peace, non-intervention, and mutually beneficial cooperation in international relations. In this way, Levica aims to carve out a principled foreign-policy identity that is neither aligned with Western hegemony nor merely a proxy of other powers.

V. Implications and Lessons for the World Socialist Movement

The rise and practice of North Macedonia's Levica party offer many valuable insights and lessons for the broader world socialist movement, particularly for leftist forces in other post-socialist

transition countries. In this section, we distill a few key takeaways in light of both theory and current realities:

A. A potential path to left revival in the post-socialist context: combining social justice demands with national autonomy.

Levica's experience shows that in post-socialist countries, for the left to regain vitality, it must simultaneously address the twin agendas of economic fairness and national self-determination. On the one hand, these countries' transitions have generally produced widening inequality and rollback of social protections, and the populace's yearning for social justice provides a natural issue around which the left can rally support. Emphasizing the fight against poverty, corruption, and privatization, and rebuilding a welfare state, can help win back the working masses. On the other hand, post-socialist states often face complex questions of national identity and sovereignty (for example, North Macedonia's name dispute, or the sovereignty trade-offs of some Eastern European countries within the EU). If leftist forces can incorporate demands for national autonomy into their own program and demonstrate a patriotic dimension, they can break the right-wing monopoly on "patriotism" discourse and attract those segments of the public who both oppose neoliberalism and resent national humiliation. Levica achieved this by fusing **socialism + patriotism** to construct a unique political identity, thereby successfully expanding its support base. This suggests that leftists in other countries should, based on their national circumstances, seek to integrate the issues of *class emancipation* and *national liberation*. For example, in Poland, Hungary and similar nations, the left could place greater emphasis on defending economic sovereignty and preventing plunder by Western capital, using patriotic language to advocate taxing foreign investors and domestic oligarchs; in other Balkan states, the left could draw on Yugoslavia's anti-fascist and independent tradition, critique the current elites' slavish alignment with the West, and propose more autonomous development paths. In short, under post-socialist conditions, leftist strategy should not be bound by traditional internationalist dogma, but should boldly incorporate tasks of national and democratic revolution in order to gain broader resonance.

B. Combining social movements with party politics – the "movement-party" dual-track approach.

Levica's rise demonstrates that grassroots social movements and electoral politics need not be mutually exclusive choices; the left can very well pursue a *dual-track strategy*: on one track, deeply involve itself at the forefront of social movements, leading popular struggles, and on the other track, form a party to contest elections, converting the energy of movements into influence within institutional politics. This experience is highly enlightening for the world's leftist movements. In many countries, the radical left often agonizes over whether to remain **outside the system** resisting, or to **enter the system** to seek change from within. Levica shows that the two can complement each other – mass movements provide the grassroots foundation and moral legitimacy, while a political party provides a policy platform and a lever within the state. When Levica moved from the streets into parliament, it did not therefore abandon the streets; instead, the two fronts worked in tandem: its voice in parliament boosted the confidence of the movement, and the pressure from the movement in turn provided it stronger bargaining power in parliamentary maneuvers (for example, when it obstructed the media-subsidy bill, it enjoyed some public support in doing so). This dual-track model is worth emulating by leftists in other countries. In Latin America, some leftist forces have already taken this road (for instance, Bolivia's Movement for Socialism transformed from a mass movement into a ruling party), and in the European context it is likewise feasible to consider linking "movement and party" so as to avoid being either mere

high-minded activists isolated from power or solely election-oriented machines. The key is to maintain the movement's original spirit, so that after entering parliament the party still represents the people's interests rather than becoming co-opted by the establishment. Levica's MPs refusing to be bought off and sticking to principles is a case in point that sets an example for how a leftist party can hold its ground within the system.

C. Skillfully using populist mobilization to rejuvenate the appeal of the left.

In contemporary global politics, populism has become a ubiquitous mode of mobilization. Traditional leftists have often viewed it with caution, fearing it could slide into xenophobic demagoguery. But Levica illustrates a way to practice "left-wing populism": by deploying a clear "people–elite" oppositional narrative and infusing socialist egalitarian demands into anti-establishment rhetoric, it expanded its reach. This offers a major lesson to the world's left. In reality, Marxism inherently contains a plebeian perspective and a narrative of confronting the exploiting classes, which in essence is not at odds with populism's "anti-elite" stance. The crucial point is that the left must ascribe the term "the people" a correct meaning (i.e. the workers and laboring masses, not a narrow ethnicity), and direct the critique of "elites" toward the capitalist class and imperialist structures, rather than scapegoating immigrants or minority groups. If this is done, a left populism can become a powerful weapon. Indeed, the rise of right-wing populism in many countries (from Europe to the U.S.) is in large measure due to the left having abandoned grassroots-oriented language, leaving a vacuum that the right exploited. If the left can reclaim a simple, vivid, and emotionally resonant vocabulary—and boldly declare "we represent the common people against the corrupt elites"—then it absolutely has a chance to win back those voters who were snatched away by the right wing. The partial successes of figures like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn have parallels to Levica's approach. In the future, leftists globally should study the theory and practice of "left populism" in depth, so that they are no longer at a disadvantage in the battle of discourse.

D. Strengthening organizational discipline and ideological cohesion to avoid repeating the fragmentation of traditional left parties.

In many post-socialist countries, leftist forces splintered after the transition, and a key reason was loose organization and internal factional strife. Levica, by instituting clear democratic centralism and centralized leadership, has managed to overcome this problem fairly well. Although such a model has its drawbacks, its strength lies in forging a united, fighting collective and enhancing the ability to withstand a hostile environment. The history of the world socialist movement has proven time and again that without a tight organization and discipline, a leftist party can hardly stand up against the powerful machinery of the bourgeoisie. From Lenin's doctrines on party-building to today's ruling communist parties, all have stressed iron discipline and unity of will. Of course, how to strike a balance between democratic participation and centralized leadership remains an ongoing challenge. Levica itself went through an internal line struggle (during the Colorful Revolution) and resolved it by imposing unity through centralization. This experience warns other leftist forces: they should clarify their programmatic line as early as possible—avoiding ambiguity that leads to internal dissipation—and in party-building they should select leadership cores that are both capable and committed, and strengthen political education for members so the whole party shares common goals. Only if internally united can the left fight externally. Especially given that capital and Western actors can exploit media and money to divide the left, there is all the more need to stay vigilant and establish firm "red lines." Levica's MPs holding out against attempts to buy them off is a rare and commendable example. By contrast, in some countries when left-wing

individuals are co-opted or defect, it inflicts enormous damage on the movement. Therefore, enhancing discipline and socialist conviction is a lesson all left parties should take to heart. To be sure, centralism does not equate to inflexibility—Levica has also adjusted itself over time (for instance, by expanding internal grassroots participation after 2020). Going forward, the world left needs to explore new models that dialectically unite democracy and centralism, in order to adapt to the openness of modern society while still preserving the necessary concentration of will.

E. Prioritizing youth and new media to revitalize the socialist movement.

Levica attracted a great number of young participants and made adept use of new media platforms, which allowed a small party to radiate tremendous vitality. A common challenge for socialist movements worldwide today is a generational gap and a disconnect with the modern era. Many left parties suffer from severe aging of their membership and outdated methods of outreach, struggling to resonate with the younger generation. Levica presents a different picture: its leadership and membership are relatively youthful, and by harnessing the Internet and social networks it has repackaged leftist ideas into forms that young people find accessible. This suggests that leftists in all countries must accelerate generational renewal, entrusting more responsibility to young activists, and boldly utilize new technologies to broaden their influence. For example, parties could produce short videos that connect with youth culture, use online forums to discuss current issues, or convey progressive messages through popular music and art. In China, some young leftists are spreading Marxist ideas with trendy expression on platforms like Bilibili and Weibo—echoing Levica’s approach. Only when socialist ideals appear in a lively and vivid guise on the new media of the 21st century can they be accepted and spread by the digital generation. Levica’s rapid rise is inseparable from its savvy use of the online public sphere, and this is something the global left would do well to emulate.

F. Combining international vision with local action to build a new kind of socialist internationalism.

Levica, while rooted in its own country, has actively participated in international anti-imperialist platforms, demonstrating a certain spirit of internationalism. Today’s world socialist movement indeed needs to rebuild networks of international solidarity—but this solidarity should be **open and diverse**, rather than the rigid single-camp model of the Cold War era. In this respect, Levica’s participation in initiatives like the emerging “**World Anti-Imperialist Platform**” (an international network uniting leftists from various countries) and its efforts to mutually support other left forces abroad offer a pathway. It suggests that socialists seeking to revive international alliances can do so by organizing transnational cooperation around common issues (such as opposition to imperialism and neoliberalism), without getting bogged down by minute ideological differences. For major socialist forces like China, this could also mean engaging more with these new left-wing movements. At present, some Western leftists lack understanding of China’s experience, and Chinese left scholars similarly know little about emerging forces like Levica. Through dialogue and exchange, both sides can enhance understanding and find points of convergence. For example, jointly opposing unipolar hegemony and advocating a multipolar world order is one natural point of unity between Chinese and foreign leftists. If initiatives proposed by China—such as the Global Development Initiative or Global Security Initiative—can gain the echo of these progressive parties, their impact would be amplified; conversely, China can also use international forums to speak up for these leftist forces from small countries to help safeguard their interests. This new type of international solidarity would not be a traditional state-to-state alliance, but rather mutual support at the level of social movements. In the past, the Non-

Aligned Movement provided a platform for Global South nations to cooperate and resist the pressure of two superpower blocs; today's world left likewise needs a "broad united front" that transcends national and ideological boundaries, focusing on anti-imperialism and opposition to monopoly capital. Levica's practical participation in such efforts is certainly worthy of recognition.

In summary, Levica's experience shows that under the conditions of imperialist globalization and the shadow of a new Cold War, the socialist movement still possesses tenacious vitality—if the tactics are appropriate, one can find brightness at the end of the tunnel. For today's world left, which is in a difficult situation, this case provides an inspiring signal. Of course, we must also recognize the risks and limitations faced by Levica and similar movements: they continue to confront repression from domestic conservative forces, the predicament of having their ideology stigmatized, and challenges such as how to prevent populism from veering into extremism. But as Macedonia's experience demonstrates, so long as leftists seize on the issues most salient to the masses and stick to their principles, it is entirely possible for the socialist movement to regain a foothold in the 21st century. The following conclusion will offer some theoretical reflections and consider real-world challenges to project the future prospects of leftist forces regionally and globally.

VI. Conclusion

The emergence and development of North Macedonia's Levica party is a bright spot in the contemporary world socialist movement. By systematically examining its historical background, ideology, and practical strategy, this article has illustrated how a left-wing force in a small post-socialist country managed to rise up against strong headwinds and achieve a breakthrough. Levica's rise was enabled first by certain socio-historical conditions—the failures of the neoliberal transition and a crisis of national identity intertwined to breed new forces of resistance. More importantly, the party dared to innovate in its ideas and tactics: it combined socialist demands with national autonomy in clever ways, moved from mass street movements into the parliamentary arena, effectively used populist language to compete for public support, reinforced organizational discipline to ensure unity, and leveraged new media to draw the attention of youth. These efforts allowed a previously inconsequential radical left group to grow into a political force that can speak in parliament and influence state policy. This process in itself is a powerful rebuttal to the argument that socialism has no future in Eastern Europe [14].

Naturally, Levica's path has not been without controversy and challenges. As noted, some Western observers criticize the party for "using nationalist mobilization with a whiff of right-wing populism," worrying that it could evolve into so-called "Red Fascism." Additionally, in domestic politics Levica has no experience governing yet, and the feasibility of its policy proposals has not truly been put to the test. If in the future it gets the opportunity to assume greater responsibility for governance, whether it can maintain its integrity and effectiveness will be a severe trial for the party. At the same time, on the external front, with geopolitical rivalries intensifying, a small left-wing force that insists on an independent stance may face even greater pressure or even suppression. Yet precisely because very real challenges exist, it is all the more important to theoretically sum up the significance of this case, so as to help left movements avoid unnecessary detours on the road ahead.

Based on Levica's experience, this article argues that for post-socialist countries, a possible way out of the transition morass and a path to revitalizing socialist movements lies in the following: re-coalescing the marginalized working people and reasserting social equity as a core value; critically

inheriting the positive legacies of the socialist period while boldly reflecting on the lessons of the Soviet and Eastern European collapse, thereby reshaping the left's social image; and most crucially, having the courage to propose alternatives to the ills of the Western capitalist model. Such alternatives include economic ones (for example, pursuing public ownership alongside mixed economies, and opposing over-marketization), political ones (developing broader participatory democracy), and cultural ones (defending the nation's sovereign dignity and pluralistic values). In doing so, leftists need to properly handle the relationship between leftist ideology and patriotism, and between global outlooks and local concerns. Levica offers one possible approach: the left need not abandon patriotism, but should imbue it with progressive meaning; and the left should have a world-minded vision but not blindly obey a single model of globalization, instead advocating a new international order of multipolar coexistence [15].

For the global socialist movement, Levica's example underlines the value of adhering to the mass line and keeping the revolutionary spirit alive [16]. No matter how unfavorable the circumstances, as long as a movement represents the fundamental interests of the vast majority of people, it will have the soil in which to survive and grow. The recurring crises of contemporary capitalism and the glaring social injustices and environmental challenges are giving rise to new discontent and resistance in many places. The left must seize these opportunities and proactively step to the front lines of struggle. Just as Levica drew strength from Macedonia's street movements, leftists in all countries should immerse themselves among workers, in communities and on campuses—listening to the people's calls and organizing struggles over issues that affect their vital interests. In this sense, the source of vitality for the socialist movement has always been among the people, not in parliamentary halls or ivory towers. When the left re-roots itself in the populace, the people will once again choose the left.

Finally, we should look to the future of regional and global leftist forces with a dialectical perspective. On the one hand, Levica's success demonstrates that even on seemingly barren ground, a socialist flower can bloom—this gives tremendous confidence and inspiration to the global left. Its success has even drawn attention from major international actors [17]. On the other hand, clear-eyed sobriety is needed about the obstacles ahead. The accelerated flow of information and the forces of globalization mean that progressive ideas can spread more rapidly, but they also enable hegemonic powers to more quickly coordinate against emerging socialist forces. In the coming period, international capitalism will surely continue to exert pressure—directly or indirectly—on any left-wing movement that threatens the status quo. Yet the lesson of Levica shows that a single spark can start a prairie fire. As long as leftists remain able to discover and nurture the sparks newly ignited in each country's struggles, the dawn of socialism may once again emerge on the world's horizon.

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