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Government and Opposition on the Road to EU Accession: Responsibility, Responsiveness and the Salience of Gender Equality

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Abstract
We theorize party attention to gender issues within the responsibility-versus-responsiveness framework, deriving and testing novel hypotheses in six Western Balkan countries (2012–2021) that aspire to European Union (EU) membership. We analyse gender-related responsibility in European Commission (EC) recommendations and examine party discourse to assess whether, how and to what extent parties and the EC align under conditions of supportive/opposing public opinion (responsiveness). Generally, attention to gender issues is low, especially on controversial topics like LGBTIQ+ rights ('thick' gender equality), compared to broadly accepted women's rights ('thin' gender equality). Governing status influences attention to 'thin' gender issues, while 'thick' issues are highlighted mainly by green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) opposition parties. Our study advances knowledge of how public opinion, governing/opposition status and party ideology shape party attention to gender issues in aspiring EU members.

Gender equality is a fundamental value of the European Union (EU); it is part of the *acquis communautaire* and has been integrated into all Community policies and activities within the framework of 'gender mainstreaming' (Forest and Lombardo 2012; Spehar 2012). It is thus an important indicator for monitoring the progress of each candidate country for EU membership in integrating this *acquis* into national legislation. The European Commission (EC) guides and evaluates this process, issuing reports with specific recommendations. Through these reports, the EC defines 'responsible government' in candidate countries. To make their commitment to EU accession sound credible, parties in candidate countries may try to signal that they follow the

Commission's recommendations and honour agreements (responsibility). Signals of responsibility can be communicated, inter alia, via party programmes, the documents that parties issue for electoral competition. Hence, we ask: *To what extent do party programmes in candidate countries pay attention to gender-related issues highlighted in EC reports?*

In pursuit of this question, we make three significant contributions to scholarly debates in three literatures: Comparative Politics, European Union Studies and Politics and Gender. First, we theorize the conditions under which parties are (not) likely to pay attention to gender-related issues in their manifestos. Using the theoretical framework of the 'responsiveness versus responsibility dilemma' (henceforth RR dilemma; Karremans and Lefkofridi 2020; Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020; Mair 2013, 2014), we derive three novel hypotheses and advance knowledge of how public opinion, governing/opposition status and party ideology shape party attention to gender issues in aspiring EU members. Second, we make a twofold empirical contribution: on the one hand, we test these hypotheses against data from the understudied Western Balkan region. On the other hand, we innovate by synthesizing primary and secondary data at three levels of analysis: European Commission reports, public opinion data and political party programmes. We empirically analyse party attention to EU pressure for gender-related responsibility versus public opinion pressures for gender-related responsiveness in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,[1] Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia in the period from 2012 to 2021, when all these countries entered their third decade of transition to liberal democracy and market economy and their second decade since the EU Western Balkan Thessaloniki Summit confirmed the future of the region into the EU.

Third, we use Anna Gwiazda's (2023) 'thin' and 'thick' conceptualizations of gender to differentiate between different types of understandings of gender equality; this distinction proves to be very useful empirically, as both public opinion and party behaviour differ depending upon the concept used (thin versus thick).

We find that attention to gender-related issues is generally low. Against the background of new gender lines of conflict in Europe (Lane 2007) and alongside the ever-increasing efforts to mainstream gender issues into EU social policy (Spehar 2012), our study informs us about the potential contestation of thin and thick gender equality agendas. Although parties in aspiring EU members can use party programmes to address both their electorates and the EC (see also Karremans 2024), the extent to which parties pay attention to the gender-related issues identified in EC reports is mediated by three factors, which we elaborate below and later form our hypotheses.

First, public opinion varies across gender-related issues: in all six country cases under study, the average voter is supportive of gender equality based on a thin concept of gender (women's rights) but is opposed to gender equality based on a thick concept of gender (LGBTIQ+). As expected, parties' attention to gender-related issues is lower when public opinion and EU responsibility clash than when domestic publics and Eurocrats agree (becoming our Hypothesis 1); the salience of 'thin' gender issues is higher than that of 'thick' ones. Strategic parties are cautious when public opinion disagrees with EC recommendations. Though discourse in alignment with the accession criteria may signal political maturity and commitment to the EU, parties are under

pressure if what the Commission recommends is incompatible with what most voters want.

Second, our study shows how the dynamics of governing versus opposition shape party discourses on issues identified in the EC reports. We find that government parties are more likely than opposition parties to pay attention to 'thin' gender equality (in line with our Hypothesis 2 below). Third, the degree of compatibility between gender-related EU responsibility and party values and positions (green/alternative/libertarian–traditional/authoritarian/nationalist – GAL–TAN) also matters for understanding the politicization of gender-related issues. Crucially, when public opinion and EC recommendations diverge, political parties are more likely to silence or marginalize these issues. Under these strained conditions, gender-related issues are politicized mainly, though not exclusively, by GAL parties whose ideology is compatible with EU responsibility (partial support for our Hypothesis 3 below). These findings bear implications for our understanding of party competition and the politicization of gender issues, as well as of party behaviour during the EU accession process.

In the following section, we outline our theoretical framework and derive the hypotheses driving our empirical analysis. Next, we explain our methodological approach and data sources, followed by the presentation of our findings. In the final section, we discuss our findings and highlight the key takeaways.

EU responsibility and responsiveness in candidate countries: hypotheses

Accession to the EU comes with strings attached: candidate countries are expected to internalize EU values and establish them as norms, to adhere to the EU's legal framework and endorse its policy directions. The Commission issues reports setting goals for the candidate countries, and accession is conditional on 'responsibility' in implementing EU guidelines (see e.g. Becker 2024; Cremona 2003; Kacarska 2023; Schimmelfennig 2005). In this context, 'responsible' government means respecting EU legislation and committing to EU partners. These reports not only assess the continuous progress of countries but can also serve as an accountability mechanism for governments that are ultimately responsible for implementing policies and taking action. Governments that do not want to jeopardize their country's EU candidacy must adhere to specific norms and procedures in certain key policy areas of EU competence. Given that EC recommendations constitute the EU's understanding of 'responsible government' towards accession, parties may incorporate the Commission's messages for their country into their own programmes to highlight their commitment to the EU accession process. This way, they can signal to both their electorates and the Commission their EU commitment.

However, political parties also need to respond to the policy preferences of electorates. *Responsiveness* involves parties being attentive and receptive to the needs and desires of the electorate, particularly in the context of representing citizens in decision-making processes (Karremans and Lefkofridi 2020; Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020; Mair 2013). Peter Mair (2013, 2014) alerted us to the potential tensions between EU demands (responsibility) and domestic preferences (responsiveness), what he called the parties' RR dilemma. Zoe Lefkofridi and Roula Nezi (2020) refined Mair's (deterministic) framework to allow for variation in how different parties (within the EU)

experience the RR dilemma. Drawing on this work, below we will argue why party behaviour is likely to vary in candidate states. We assume that parties are purposeful actors seeking votes for office and votes for policy: parties aim at increasing their electoral shares to attain/maintain executive power and/or to enhance the advocacy of their party ideology (Bartolini 1999, 2000; Müller and Strøm 1999; Pedersen 2012; Strøm 1990).

To begin with, strategic parties will consider public opinion; the public's stance on these issues may facilitate or constrain the parties. Even though gender equality is a fundamental principle in EU legislation that is mainstreamed in EU policies (Spehar 2012) and conditions the admission of new member states (see also Chiva 2021), political parties within and outside the EU are constrained by their electorates. Importantly, public opinion on gender equality issues may vary across space, time and issue areas. For instance, gender issues can range from equality between men and women to a broader concept of equality that includes equality of other minoritized groups (e.g. LGBTIQ+ rights). These connect to Gwiazda's (2023) 'thin' and 'thick' conceptualization of gender. Both conceptualizations should be visible in the EC progress reports for candidate countries, guiding them in implementing laws and policies in line with the EU. This is because the definition of gender has been transformed at the EU level to include a broader conceptualization (see Spehar 2012; Sümer 2009). While political parties in the Western Balkan region may have increasingly become more pro-EU (see Stojić 2018), compliance with EU policy and endorsement of EU values, and of 'thin' and 'thick' gender equality in particular, is a different matter. The attention parties give to specific topics may depend on constraints posed by public opinion. Thus, if and how (much) parties talk about these issues depends upon the degree of congruence between what the EU recommends and what the public wants.

Even if all candidate countries are subject to the same pressures for responsibility (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020) in pursuit of EU accession, the pressures for responsiveness will vary. In the ideal scenario of alignment between the definition of EU responsibility and the preferences of the country's electorate, parties can send responsibility signals to the EU *and* respond to their voters.

A problem arises, however, if public opinion opposes the policy direction recommended by the Commission (see also Karremans 2021). In this scenario, parties in candidate countries face the dilemma between signalling a commitment to EU values towards the Commission (responsibility) and responding to what the public wants (responsiveness) (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020; Mair 2013, 2014). As parties compete in elections for citizens' votes, they cannot ignore public opinion. To minimize electoral costs, parties in candidate countries are likely to refrain from politicizing the issue under the condition of the RR dilemma, which implies low discursive salience. Thus, we formulate our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *The discursive salience of gender equality issues will be lower when public opinion clashes with EU responsibility compared to when public opinion aligns with EU responsibility* (RR dilemma)

All candidate countries are subject to the same pressures for responsibility (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020), in pursuit of EU accession, and all parties within each

country are subject to the same pressures for responsiveness to their (country's) public opinion; however, we argue that the degree of tension faced by individual parties will vary. Previous work has shown that parties often face conflicts between their key goals (Müller and Strøm 1999): though all parties are trying to increase their electoral shares, some prioritize the attainment/maintenance of executive power, whereas others focus on the advocacy of their party ideology (Bartolini 1999, 2000; Müller and Strøm 1999; Pedersen 2012; Strøm 1990). We discuss office- and policy-related considerations separately below.

Acknowledging the restrictions of public opinion for *all* parties within candidate country x, we expect parties in office and parties whose ideology is compatible with EU responsibility to be more inclined to make references to what the EC prescribes. First, we argue that it is important for parties in office to signal responsibility to the Commission. Though the Commission reports should, in principle, motivate all parties of countries aspiring for EU membership towards its policy goals, 'responsibility' is particularly expected of parties in government. As responsibility relates to the governing role of parties in fulfilling their country's obligations towards the EU, incumbents should be, in principle, more eager to send signals of responsibility towards the Commission. Opposition parties are less constrained by pressures to demonstrate alignment with the Commission through rhetorical commitments; in other words, their status offers more leeway to silence/ignore/marginalize the issues raised by the Commission – especially under the conditions of the RR dilemma, given that responsiveness to the public opinion comes with electoral costs. In sum, because EC progress reports matter more for governing parties, incumbents should be more likely to integrate issues related to the Commission's recommendations in their party programmes – in an effort to show responsibility and commitment to the EU accession process. We thus hypothesize that parties in government will be more likely than opposition parties to mention gender issues in their electoral programmes as signals of a responsible cabinet in pursuit of EU accession. Hence,

Hypothesis 2: *Compared to opposition parties, governing parties will exhibit higher discursive salience regarding gender equality issues.* (government vs. opposition)

Second, the parties' degree of compatibility with the requested policy (i.e. what the Commission recommends for the country as a whole) is likely to vary (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020), given that EC recommendations in this domain may be (in)congruent with parties' policy goals. Due to ideological differences between political parties, some party ideologies will be more compatible with EC reports than others. When faced with the RR dilemma, parties whose ideology and policy goals are compatible with EU responsibility in the area of gender equality are more likely to reference gender-related issues than those whose ideology conflicts with what is recommended by the EU. In other words, EC reports are more constraining for some but facilitate others' policy goals. If the degree of compatibility between party ideology and the EU's recommendations matters for discursive salience, then the higher the congruence, the higher the likelihood of emphasizing these issues. In contrast, parties whose ideology does not align with EU responsibility are more likely to silence or marginalize the issues in their manifestos.

Political competition concerns party positions on two dimensions: the economic left–right dimension and an increasingly important non-economic, sociocultural left–right dimension pitting libertarian-universalist and traditionalist-communitarian values against each other (Bornschier 2010). Gender equality issues connect to both, but especially to the latter dimension, which is widely known as GAL–TAN (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Jolly et al. 2022; Vachudova 2021). Research on party positioning within the EU shows that on the sociocultural divide, radical-right or radical-nationalist parties are TAN parties and that green and social-liberal parties, as well as new left parties, are GAL parties (see Chapel Hill Expert Survey classification; Jolly et al. 2022). In detail, GAL (green and left) parties are more likely to voice (positive views on) gender-related issues than TAN (right and nationalist) parties.

Even if public opinion is predominantly against gender-related issues, policy-seeking parties committed to the values promoted by the EU may see the EC recommendations for reforms as an opportunity: they can signal a commitment to their own policy goals and values and EU responsibility to their core supporters (partisans). If this is the case, we should observe that opposition parties, which are *less* constrained by pressures for responsibility and have more leeway to silence, ignore or marginalize gender-related issues, and will politicize these even under the conditions of the RR dilemma. While this may be interpreted as evidence of a lack of responsiveness to the general public opinion, it would manifest evidence of loyalty towards the party's values and policy goals – which matter to their core constituencies. As Lefkofridi and Nezi (2020) point out, this behaviour is more likely in proportional systems with multiparty coalition governments; in these systems, the pressure to respond to the average voters is lower than in majoritarian, winner-take-all systems. This leads us to formulate a final expectation:

Hypothesis 3: *GAL parties will exhibit a higher discursive salience of gender equality than TAN parties.* (GAL–TAN)

Case selection, data and methodology

To test our hypotheses about discursive salience, we conduct a comparative study of parties in six Western Balkan countries aspiring for EU membership: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Country case selection

Although countries in our sample have some considerable differences,[2] they nonetheless have similar historical and cultural backgrounds and, overall, comparable levels of economic development. They are also similar in their political and electoral systems. All six countries are parliamentary, multiparty systems with coalition governments. While there is some variation in the quality of democracy[3] and the specific design of the electoral systems[4] (for specifics, see Bursać et al. 2021), all countries in our sample use (mixed) proportional representation. This is important, as previous work has theorized different party strategies under the RR dilemma in majoritarian versus proportional systems (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020). The countries mainly differ in the progress of their

accession to the EU, with Montenegro and Serbia being the most advanced countries, followed by North Macedonia and Albania and then by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo;[5] our analysis takes into account this potential source of variation by examining the EC recommendations in detail (see below Pressures for responsibility).

Operationalization and data

The policy paradigms of governments and supranational organizations vary over time – and so does public opinion (Hall 1993: 279; see also Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020). Hence, we need to put empirical content on what the EU understands as 'responsible' government; only when this is done can we look at the preferences of public opinion to see whether EU responsibility and the average citizen (in the candidate country under investigation) are in alignment or not.

Pressures for responsibility

To operationally define 'EU responsibility' with regard to gender-related issues, we study the so-called Country Reports of the EC on the candidate and potential candidate countries.[6] These reports serve as essential tools on the path towards European integration, providing guidance and encouraging reforms. They also act as a mechanism for monitoring progress in the reform process, highlighting areas that need improvement and providing policy recommendations. We focus specifically on the recommendations on gender-related issues, which we further divide into recommendations focusing more narrowly on the equality between men and women (a 'thin' conceptualization of gender) and those referring also to equality of other gender-related marginalized groups, for example, LGBTIQ+ rights (a 'thick' conceptualization of gender) (Gwiazda 2023). These recommendations serve as the EC benchmark of what is understood as 'responsible' on gender-related topics. Although the EC reports are typically published every year, we focus here only on those reports that are published close to a national election and, therefore, close to the election-specific party programmes and thus most suitable for evaluating whether and how (much) parties in candidate countries send signals of responsibility through their party manifestos.

Party programmes may encompass a wide range of issues and, therefore, be less detailed on specific policy areas; nonetheless, they are strategic documents that not only indicate the relevance of specific topics in the overall party agenda but also send signals of responsibility and responsiveness, especially during campaign periods. They are thus useful for understanding agenda-setting and the urgency of some issues compared to others (in the eyes of the EU and public opinion, and their integration in the political agendas during electoral times).

To evaluate whether parties send such signals, and which parties do so, we focus on the salience of gender-related issues in the programmes parties issue in their political competition, which is an indicator of issue politicization; we thus look for references to gender-related issues in party manifestos and analyse the discursive salience of such issues in 77 party programmes from six Western Balkan countries. These programmes were collected mainly by the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) database, which covers all national elections between 2013

and 2021.[7] Notably, the MARPOR collection covers both government and opposition parties across the entire ideological spectrum (see Table A1 in the Appendix in the Supplementary Material for a list of all programmes analysed).[8] The documents were analysed using MaxQDA software for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data.

To analyse the attention parties give to gender issues identified in the EC reports, we code the instances where specific gender issues are mentioned in the documents at the (quasi-)sentence level. We are only interested in discursive salience, so we only count the instances where such topics are mentioned. The coding process resulted in a variety of topics that fall under the thin framework of gender equality, such as women's employment and education opportunities, political participation and gender-based violence, and some topics that fall under the thick framework, namely support for diverse sexual and gender orientation, support to the LGBTIQ+ community, same-sex marriages and other issues that may be connected to views on LGBTIQ+ such as those pertaining to family or fertility rights (see Table 4 for a comprehensive list of codes).

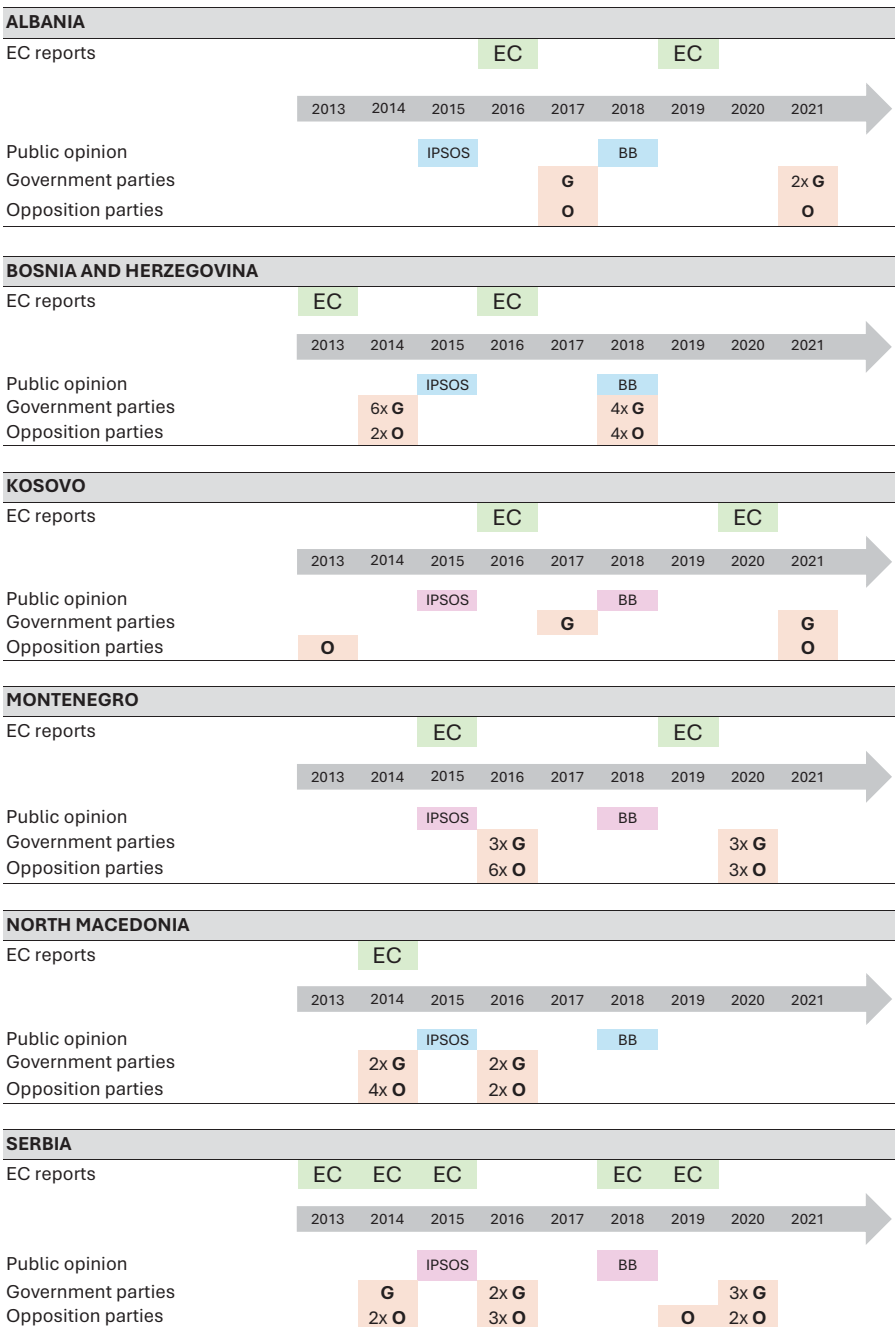### Pressures for responsiveness

Testing Hypothesis 1 necessitates data on public opinion to identify whether the conditions for the RR dilemma are present. Since public opinion data on gender-related issues in the Western Balkan countries is sparse, we have to rely on two different sources. First, we use data from multiple years of the Balkan Barometer to better understand public opinion towards equality between men and women (thin conceptualization of gender). The data covers, for example, questions on violence against women, inequality in the labour market and women's representation in politics. Since Balkan Barometer data is published every year, we select data close in time to national elections and, thus, to party programmes and EC country reports. However, the Balkan Barometer (Regional Cooperation Council 2018) does not include items that are concerned with thick gender-related issues. Therefore, we also use the aggregated data on public opinion towards LGBTIQ+ issues reported in *Attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ People in the Western Balkans* (Fecanji 2022) from 2015.

An overview of our data sources is provided in Figure 1. Figure 1 helps to show the sequence of events: when the EC report was issued, when the election took place, and when the public opinion survey we use was fielded.

Empirics I: responsiveness versus responsibility

To explore Hypothesis 1 (RR dilemma), we examine two sets of issues related to different conceptualizations of gender: On the one hand, a thin concept, referring to equalities between men and women and traditional women's rights issues; and on the other hand a thick concept, which includes broader categories of inequalities, such as of sexual minorities. We begin by identifying gender-related issues in the EC country reports and examine public opinion on the respective issues to assess if – and how far – EC recommendations might create a responsibility versus responsiveness dilemma for parties.

ALBANIA

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EC reports					EC		EC		
Public opinion			IPSOS			BB			
Government parties					G				2x **G**
Opposition parties					O				O

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EC reports	EC			EC					
Public opinion			IPSOS			BB			
Government parties		6x **G**				4x **G**			
Opposition parties		2x **O**				4x **O**			

KOSOVO

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EC reports					EC			EC	
Public opinion			IPSOS			BB			
Government parties					G				G
Opposition parties	O								O

MONTENEGRO

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EC reports			EC				EC		
Public opinion			IPSOS			BB			
Government parties				3x **G**				3x **G**	
Opposition parties				6x **O**				3x **O**	

NORTH MACEDONIA

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EC reports			EC						
Public opinion			IPSOS			BB			
Government parties		2x **G**		2x **G**					
Opposition parties		4x **O**		2x **O**					

SERBIA

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EC reports	EC	EC	EC			EC	EC		
Public opinion			IPSOS			BB			
Government parties		G		2x **G**				3x **G**	
Opposition parties		2x **O**		3x **O**			O	2x **O**	

Figure 1. Sequence of Data (Sources and Availability)
Source: Authors' own.

In the second step, we analyse party programmes to test Hypothesis 1 (RR dilemma) and then look specifically at the differences between the parties in government and in opposition (Hypothesis 2), as well as between GAL versus TAN parties (Hypothesis 3). Using the comparative method, we conduct a stringent test whereby we focus on parties that changed status, from government to opposition or vice versa. By looking at a within-case status change, we can see whether the government/opposition status affects the GAL–TAN party's attention to gender issues.

'Thin' gender-related pressures for responsibility

The EC emphasizes gender equality as a central human rights issue, which is mentioned frequently in all reports across all countries. Most commonly addressed are women's labour market participation, gender-based violence and women's political participation, as Table 1 shows. These are all traditional women's rights issues and refer to a thin conceptualization of gender. While these topics are consistent throughout all country reports, the reports emphasize some topics in specific countries. For instance, gender-based violence and human trafficking are identified as particularly concerning in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as is discrimination in employment regarding maternity rights. On the other hand, public childcare provision is only discussed in the 2016 Albanian country report.

'Thin' gender-related pressures for responsiveness to public opinion

The public appears to agree with the issues highlighted in the EC reports, as shown in Table 2. When asked about the three most urgent inequality issues, the majority of respondents in every country mention violence against women, followed – in slightly different orders – by gender stereotypes, the gender pay gap and women's representation in politics and the economy. In other words, these issues are important not only for the EC but equally for the public.

'Thick' gender-related pressures for responsibility

Recommendations that signal a thick conceptualization of gender, including LGBTIQ+ rights, can also be found in the EC reports. In fact, reports have consistently emphasized this aspect.[9] The recommendations indicate that the EC is pursuing a more liberal gender-related agenda at the EU level (Table 1).

'Thick' gender-related pressures for responsiveness

The position of the EC is in clear contrast to the public opinion on LGTBIQ+ rights, as data from the *Attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ People in the Western Balkans* report (Fecanji 2022) shows (see Table 3). Although a majority of citizens in every one of the six countries supports LGBTIQ+ rights as an abstract concept, as the agreement with the statement 'LGBT people deserve to have rights like any other citizen' shows, more specific issues receive less support. Only 36% of Montenegrins (fully) accept the marriage of sexual minorities; in North Macedonia and Kosovo, only every fifth person (20%). Similarly, the majority of citizens believe that LGBT couples should not

Table 1. Coverage of Gender-Related Topics in EC Reports for Each Country and Year of the Report

Policy area	Albania		Bosnia & Herzegovina		Kosovo		Montenegro		North Macedonia		Serbia				
	2016	2020	2013	2016	2016	2020	2015	2019	2013	2014	2013	2014	2015	2018	2019
Women's labour market participation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Gender-based violence	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x
Women's political participation			x	x		x	x	x					x	x	
Maternity leave	x				x		x	x							
Healthcare for women									x			x			x
Educational opportunities					x				x						x
Women's property /inheritance rights					x	x								x	
Gender equality in curricula													x	x	
Same-sex partnerships	x			x											
Public childcare	x														
Family planning or abortion		x													
Diverse gender identities/sexual orientation (LGBTIQ+ rights)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Source: Authors' own analytical output based on data from EC reports (see Table A2 in the Appendix for data used to create this table).

Table 2. Public Opinion Data on Most Pressing Inequality Issues by Country

Here is a list of inequalities which men or women can face. In your opinion, which area should be dealt with most urgently in your economy [up to 3 choices]			
	Violence against women	Women paid less for the same work	Women receiving lower pensions	Facing prejudice through preconceived ideas
	% mention	% mention	% mention	% mention
Albania	69.6	31.3	9.3	43.5
Bosnia & Herzegovina	60.3	26.4	11.7	22.2
Kosovo	58.9	21.9	13.1	35.3
North Macedonia	36.8	27.3	13.5	32.2
Serbia	68.7	22.3	11.5	28.1
Total	58.7	26.3	12.6	31.2
	Low number of women in politics and business	Women being more poor	Unequal distribution of housework	Boys dropping out of education
	% mention	% mention	% mention	% mention
Albania	23.7	13.8	14.8	10.5
Bosnia & Herzegovina	25.0	6.6	10.7	4.6
Kosovo	48.6	16.5	18.1	18.9
North Macedonia	35.2	15.7	23.7	5.7
Serbia	19.3	12.9	14.7	4.6
Total	29.2	13.5	15.8	8.3

Source: Balkan Barometer (2018).

have any children: 57% of the population in Kosovo agrees or fully agrees that LGBT couples should not have any children; in Serbia, it is just over two-thirds of the population (67%). Unsurprisingly, the support for Pride parades is also low, with less than a third of the population (fully) supporting their organization. In other words, support for LGBTIQ+ rights remains low across countries in the region – which is in contrast to the position of the EC.

Dilemmas of responsibility versus responsiveness?

In a nutshell, we do not observe a dilemma between responding to the EC or the public opinion in any of the countries under study regarding thin gender issues; in stark contrast, thick gender issues, specifically LGBTIQ+ rights, pose a dilemma between public opinion and EU responsibility in all six countries of the region. Overall, we expect salience to be lower on thick gender-related issues than on thin gender-related issues (Hypothesis 1).

Table 3. Public Opinion Data on LGBTIQ+ Acceptance

	LGBT people deserve to have rights like any other citizen *% (full) agreement*	I do not have anything against LGBT couples, but they should not have any children *% (full) agreement*	To what extent would it be acceptable to you if sexual minorities were allowed to get married in [country]? *% (full) acceptance*	Would you personally support the organization of the Pride parade in your country? *% (full) support*
Albania	70	59	26	30
Bosnia & Herzegovina	63	66	26	22
Kosovo	58	57	20	14
Montenegro	71	59	36	29
North Macedonia	58	65	20	24
Serbia	69	67	24	17

Source: Based on data from Fecanji (2022).

Indeed, our analysis of party programmes demonstrates higher salience on the thin dimension of gender, where public opinion and the EC agree, compared to the thick dimension, where public opinion and the EC are not aligned (Table 4). In this latter case, parties are faced with the RR dilemma: to show commitment to the EU accession process – which is of paramount importance for their country – they should signal to the EC that they are attentive to the issues that the EU cares about; yet, they are constrained by public opinion, whose preferences are not congruent with EU responsibility. The data support Hypothesis 1 (RR dilemma).

Empirics II: from government to opposition and vice versa

We conduct a rigorous test of Hypothesis 2 by zooming in on all cases where the same party has moved from opposition to government (or vice versa) to see if governing status matters for levels of discursive salience (Table 5).[10] We have, in total, six such cases, for which we place emphasis on substantive policy areas; our government versus opposition hypothesis is tested against data on both thin and thick issues. In all cases, there is an increase in salience when the party moves from opposition to government, regardless of the GAL–TAN positioning. In one case of a party moving from government to opposition (Bosnia and Herzegovina's Social Democratic Party), we also notice an increase in salience. However, this may also be affected by the party's GAL positioning. We notice the opposite effect in the case of a TAN party (the Democratic Party in Kosovo), namely a slight decrease in salience as the party moves from government to opposition.

In Albania, the Socialist Party's move from opposition to government is accompanied by increased salience on gender issues and some adjustments in the

Table 4. Distribution of General Statements and Policy Areas in the Six Countries (Number of Coded Segments)

	Albania	Bosnia	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Corpus size (words)	67700	343218	103606	224642	687244	108800
No. of coded statements	23	30	8	30	94	56
Thin						
Labour market participation	38	23	40	33	57	14
Gender-based violence	7	6	15	17	71	5
Public childcare	2	4	17	6	54	2
Women's political participation	6	11	6	11	33	7
Healthcare for women	3		5	7	39	11
Educational opportunities	11	3	16	4	23	
Wages for motherhood	5	18	3	4	1	8
Wages for parenthood		12	5	6	6	6
Family planning or abortion	2	8		4	9	
Maternity leave	2	2	2	2	7	6
Property/inheritance rights			1	1	5	2
Parental leave			4		10	
Gender equality in curricula			1	1	9	
Residential buildings for big families		1				8
Valorizing unpaid work	3			2		
Thick						
Same-sex partnerships	1	1	1	2	2	2
Diverse sexual and gender orientations		2		2	26	4
Emphasizing family as a right				1		
Traditional family	1	0	1	11	7	21
Modern family views		0		6	1	
Regulation for fertility treatments		1		3		
Total	104	122	125	153	454	152

Source: Authors' own data.

most important topics. Educational opportunities, political participation, healthcare for women and the valorizing of unpaid work are taking on importance, all in line with the party's GAL positioning.

Table 5. Results for Hypothesis 2

Country/party	GAL–TAN	Status change (independent variable) Opp →←Gov	Salience (dependent variable) ↑↓
Albania/Socialist Party	GAL	Opp → Gov	↑
Bosnia & Herzegovina/Party of Democratic Action	TAN	Opp → Gov	↑
Bosnia & Herzegovina/Social Democratic Party	GAL	Gov → Opp	↑
Kosovo/Self-Determination Movement	GAL	Opp → Gov	↑
Kosovo/Democratic Party	TAN	Gov → Opp	↓
Serbia/Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians	TAN	Opp → Gov	↑

Source: Authors' own data.

In Bosnia, we have two cases of status change. While we found no content in the Party of Democratic Action programme when it was in opposition, the picture changes upon its obtaining governing power: the party addresses gender issues in more policy areas. For the Social Democratic Party in Bosnia, transitioning from government to opposition meant more attention to gender issues for the party. Specifically, we observe an increase from three to 11 codes across three policy areas (with wages for mother-hood being the most salient, followed by labour market participation and maternal leave).

In Kosovo, we also have two cases: the Democratic Party shows a slight decrease in salience when moving from government to opposition, but the overall difference is small. Maybe, once a party has had governing power, it carries on with its agenda, also because in the less advanced countries in the accession process, basic gender issues are still unresolved. For the Self-Determination Movement, once governing power is obtained, the salience of gender issues increases, and the party focuses more on topics that are salient both to public opinion and the EC in the thin dimension, like women's labour market participation and domestic violence.

In the case of Serbia, for the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, we see very little attention to gender issues. Specifically, we coded only the topic of wages for mother-hood in 2016 and the labour market participation and healthcare for women in the 2020 programme, as the party was part of the government coalition. When the party was in opposition, we found no gender-related content. Despite the small number of codes, there may be a slight government effect as the party addresses one of the most consistent topics of the EC report, which is also endorsed by public opinion: women's labour market participation.

Empirics III: the role of ideology and gender-related advocacy

We argued that the RR dilemma (i.e. where EC reports and public opinion diverge) would stifle competition on thick issues of gender equality; Hypothesis 3 posited that under these strained conditions, attention to gender-related issues would be most

likely among GAL parties, as opposed to TAN parties. A rigorous test of Hypothesis 3 concentrates only on the thick gender-related issues, where parties face a tension between responding to the EC or the broader electorate. We are particularly interested in whether GAL parties will refer to LGBTIQ+ issues *despite* the RR dilemma.

Focusing on LGBTIQ+ issues, we identify which parties express support for LGBTIQ+ rights (in accordance with the reports) and which are against them (in accordance with public opinion). Table 6 shows all the LGBTIQ+ statements in our sample of documents. Very few parties explicitly focus on issues concerning the LBTIQ+ community; the few that do are mainly opposition parties (against Hypothesis 2). In detail, we found related issues only in the programmes of eight parties, either centrist or left-leaning parties (partially in support of Hypothesis 3). The case of North Macedonia is worth mentioning: the majority of statements come from a GAL party (a green party in a coalition government) but it is also the only case where an opposition party on the right (the centre-right Alliance of Albanians) is openly against same-sex marriages (a clear TAN message).[11] We interpret this as some first evidence of the politicization of LGBTIQ+ (both GAL and TAN refer to them and have competing positions).

Discussion and conclusion

A recent report about women's rights in the Western Balkans by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation found that 'rather than progressing, however slowly, indicators show that women's rights are indeed regressing'; the evidence ranges from 'declining access to social and economic rights' to 'increased violence and threats against women's human rights defenders' and 'rising femicide rate' (Danaj et al. 2023: 7). This is troubling, given that gender equality is a condition in countries' paths to EU accession. Gender equality is not just part of the EU *acquis* but a whole set of values and principles of the Copenhagen criteria, based on the charts of fundamental human rights and freedoms. Beyond the domain of legislation, gender equality concerns a deep and complex change in attitudes that is difficult to achieve even in many EU member states.

Against the background of new gender lines of conflict in Europe and alongside the ever-increasing gender mainstreaming efforts into EU social policy, this study focused on party attention to gender-related issues in Western Balkan countries aspiring for EU membership. We limit our analysis to the Western Balkan region's third decade into liberal democracy and market economy; our selection of country cases sample manifests relatively similar levels of development, institutionalization and political maturity, although some considerable differences remain between them. We expected that pressures to align with the EU agenda could lead to higher levels of attention to gender issues, along the lines of government and opposition or GAL–TAN orientation. We relied on EC country-specific reports published regularly, serving as a definition of EU responsibility on gender-related issues – and a benchmark for the alignment of candidate countries with the *acquis*. Parties in candidate countries need to show commitment to the country's EU trajectory: the endorsement of EU values, legislation and policies includes gender equality, so making references to gender equality can send positive signals to the EU. Since political parties have to behave responsibly towards EU membership requirements but are also mindful of citizens' attitudes, we argued that

Table 6. Party Statements Mentioning Specifically the LGBTIQ+ Community and Issues

Country/party	Statement	Gov/opp	Ideology
Albania			
Socialist Party	Professional adaptation to the country's requirements; merit-based work will be guaranteed through continuous education and effective training to enable each individual to develop knowledge throughout the life cycle, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, identity, cultural, political and religious beliefs and sexual orientation	Gov	Centre-left
Montengro			
Social Democratic Party	We will advocate for the creation of a social and political environment in the state in which women, men and persons of other gender identities will have equal chances to exercise their rights and participate in decision-making	Opp	Centre-left
Democratic Montenegro	Respect for diversity in terms of political belief, national and religious affiliation and gender	Opp	Centre-right to centrist
North Macedonia			
Social Democratic Union	The government also stimulated intolerance towards various social minorities or marginalized groups, such as members of the LGBT population, which even caused outbreaks of group and individual violence against them by extreme groups and individuals	Opp	Centre-left
Citizen Option for Macedonia	To prevent and protect against discrimination, it is necessary to improve the legislation, including the Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, in compliance with European directives, including the explicit inclusion of sexual orientation as a basis for discrimination	Opp	Centrist
	No individual must be subjected to discrimination based on gender, ethnic or religious affiliation, disability, age, or sexual orientation		
Liberal Democratic Party	Respect for diversity of any kind: national diversity, sexual orientation	Opp	Centrist
Alliance of Albanians	In this sense, the Alliance for Albanians will engage in the cultivation of family values, respecting them in every aspect, but this only applies to families originating from marriages between two adults of the opposite sexes	Opp	Centre-right

(*Continued*)

Table 6. (*Continued.*)

Country/party	Statement	Gov/opp	Ideology
Democratic Renewal of Macedonia	Non-discrimination of every single person, regardless of affiliation – party, ethnic, religious, non-depending on attitude, physical condition, sexual orientation, age	Gov	Green
	The rule of law implies the realization of rights for everyone, regardless of their political, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual and other determination or affiliation		
	The Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination was submitted by MP Liliana Popovska, in which the grounds for discrimination in Article 3 are expanded with the words 'sexual orientation and gender identity'		
	The law will explicitly prohibit discrimination on this basis, which is an essential need for full protection against discrimination against LGBT people		
	In order to realize the rights and needs of the LGBT community, the DOM [Democratic Renewal of Macedonia] highlights the following commitments: raising awareness of respect for diversity in society and opposing intolerance towards LGBT people in the Republic of Macedonia		
	Increasing the visibility of the LGBT community through presence in media and education		
	DOM will promote policies of reconciliation, cooperation and rapprochement of young people regardless of their ethnic, religious, party, social, sexual or any other affiliation		
	In a particularly difficult situation are the representatives of the so-called vulnerable groups, which include addicts, people with special needs, single parents, victims of domestic violence, homeless people, LGBT people, Roma and other minority groups, who also bear the burden of social exclusion due to stereotypes and prejudices		
	Discrimination is any unjustified legal or physical, direct or indirect difference or unequal treatment, i.e. omission (exclusion, restriction or priority) in relation to persons or groups based on sex, race, skin colour, gender, belonging to a marginalized group, ethnicity, language, citizenship, social origin, religion or religious belief, sexual orientation and gender identity, education, political affiliation, personal or social status, mental and physical disability, age, family or marital status, property status, health status or any other basis		

(*Continued*)

Table 6. (*Continued.*)

Country/party	Statement	Gov/opp	Ideology
	Some of the more important commitments of DOM regarding the protection of the rights of LGBT people in Macedonia are: an amendment submitted by MP Liliana Popovska to change the allowance for extramarital union from the proposed amendment to constitutional article 40, according to which marriage and extra-marital union are a partnership 'exclusively between only one woman and only one man' because in that way not only the LGBT community will be discriminated against, but also other categories of citizens		
	LGBT people in the Republic of Macedonia suffer from discrimination, violence and homophobic media content that, through hate speech, encourages an increase in homophobia and violence towards LGBT people in our country		
	Enabling equal access and non-discrimination in the employment of marginalized groups of citizens in society, including the LGBT community in the Republic of Macedonia		

Source: Authors' own data and authors' translations.

they might be faced with a responsibility versus responsiveness dilemma (Mair 2013, 2014) and tested specific hypotheses on how discursive salience would depend upon the presence of the RR dilemma (Hypothesis 1), but also on parties' governing status and their ideology. As reports are typically aimed at governments, we anticipated differences between parties in government and those in opposition, with governing parties making an effort to appear more responsible towards the EU by aligning their gender equality agendas with the Commission's recommendations (Hypothesis 2). We also hypothesized that TAN parties would be less likely to refer to gender-related issues than GAL parties (Hypothesis 3).

The broader message of the present study is that gender-related issues are generally not politicized in this region; when they are, they are usually of the thin type, namely focusing on women's rights. This is where public opinion and the EC agree, and parties are not faced with an RR dilemma. Even in the ideal world, where EC reports and public opinion align, most political parties in the Western Balkans do not show substantial commitment to gender equality agendas beyond promises for the future and vague rhetorical commitment. This refers mainly to a thin conceptualization of gender issues that focuses more on advancing women's rights. As expected, government status matters (Hypothesis 2).

In contrast, thick gender-related issues, where public opinion and the EC are not aligned, are brought into the political debate by some centrist parties, which offer somewhat general support to gender identities, and, more forcefully, by GAL parties, which

make more concrete references to LGBTIQ+ issues (partial support for Hypothesis 3). These findings from the Western Balkans echo research on party positioning from within the EU that indicates that, in terms of the sociocultural divide, radical-right and radical-nationalist parties align with TAN positions whereas green and social-liberal parties, as well as new left parties, fall under the GAL category, as classified by Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al. 2022). While TAN parties value order, tradition, authority and the nation, GAL parties value the expansion of personal freedoms (divorce, abortion, same-sex marriage) and cherish cosmopolitanism and liberal policies.

To be sure, party programmes offer a snapshot of the party's political agenda and may be less telling of more elaborate positions across policy areas. These party documents may, for instance, only tell us very little about the values parties hold about women and LGBTIQ+ people and remain silent as to how parties respond to specific events (e.g. gay pride parades) or legislative proposals related to women's rights. Nonetheless, manifestos are useful for capturing which issues are prioritized in the parties' official electoral messages and how much space they devote to different issues across policy areas. Crucially, they are appropriate for comparative analyses as they are comparable across countries, parties and within countries over time. Given our expectation that gender issues will be further politicized in the course of accession processes, we hope that future research will revisit our findings with empirical analyses of different types of data (e.g. parliamentary debates, media discourses or parties' communication channels) and party responses related to specific events, legislative proposals or contentious issues, which relate to gender issues.

As countries progress in their accession process, they are expected to expand their references to gender equality, from women's issues (thin) towards thicker diversity agendas (embracing LGBTIQ+ rights). Our analysis shows that very few parties do so and bears implications for understanding the interplay between EU demands and domestic politics. Due to the polarizing potential of gender-related issues, especially in societies where patriarchal norms persist to some extent, our analysis of EC reports, public opinion and party programmes according to the thick and thin conceptualization implies that EC pressure for more progressive agendas may cause tensions between EU responsibility and responsiveness. The politicization of gender-related issues may, in turn, activate political competition along ideological lines on these issues, as well as along pro/anti-gender lines in the years to come. Certainly, political will to comply with the EU's recommendations in the area of gender equality differs significantly depending on how gender is understood. This has repercussions for the EC's assessment of these countries' future in the area of gender equality. With regard to this fundamental value of the EU, change in response to EU conditionality and the (slow) progress on the EU accession path is reflected neither in our findings nor generally in human rights trends that are negative in the region as a whole.

at the American University in Washington DC, as well as conference participants at AuPSA (2022), EUSA (2023) and IPSA (2023) for discussing the arguments and findings of this project.

Notes

1 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

2 For instance, even though all countries share a common communist past, Albania was not part of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia and differs in relation to the historical legacy of the Yugoslav socialist model.

3 For example, even though outside the scope of our analysis timeframe, Serbia's recent elections have been impacted by manipulations, such as changes to the 5% electoral threshold at the dawn of the campaign period. These factors suggest that democracy may not always be functioning in the same way across all six countries.

4 For instance, only Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo have reserved seats for minorities. Furthermore, the electoral thresholds for parties to gain parliamentary seats during our period of study vary between 3% in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia and 5% in Kosovo. In North Macedonia, the threshold was 5% until 2016 and 3% from 2017 onwards. Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by a distinct split between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, with a 3% threshold in the latter and either a 3% or 5% threshold in the cantons of the Federation of BiH.

5 See the EC website for each candidate country's progress (stage of accession, chapters negotiated/under negotiations, etc.): https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/eu-enlargement_en.

6 Table A2 in the Appendix in the Supplementary Material.

7 A few were retrieved through the Wayback Machine or obtained upon request.

8 Party programmes from Albania and Bosnia were analysed in their original language by the authors; the remaining programmes were translated into English by an automatic translation programme, with the translation accuracy checked by a team of native speakers.

9 For example, the 2016 report on Albania points out the lack of changes to the family code to recognize same-sex cohabitation. The 2019 report on Serbia highlights concerns about the lack of legal and social recognition for intersex individuals. The EC report on Montenegro discusses the increasing number of reported hate crimes and hate speech towards LGBTIQ+ individuals, with insufficient prosecution of these crimes. In the reports on North Macedonia, the EC expresses concerns about the discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals. The 2014 report emphasized the need to promote awareness and respect for diversity. Similarly, in Bosnia, a major issue affecting this community is physical violence, mistreatment, and intimidation. This issue has persisted across multiple country reports from 2009 to 2016.

10 Figures related to the analysis can be found in the Supplementary Material, Appendix (Figures A1 to A6).

11 We extended this focus outside of our period of study to see whether ideology may matter for other parties across the countries of the region, but we only found the Green Party of Serbia and Our Party in Bosnia focusing on this issue (Table A3 in the Appendix). The Green Party of Serbia is the only one that mentions inheritance rights for LGBTIQ+ community members.

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