Chapter 10: Populism as a Technique of Power in Serbia

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1. Introduction

This chapter contains an analysis of the main political actors in Serbia through the lens of populism. It examines the causes for the rise of populism in Serbia, where the main populist actors are parties and their leaders. The main theoretical argument of this chapter is that changes in the party system have led to a rise in populist tendencies among political parties, who have acted as key actors in sustaining the rise of populism in Serbia. The primary subjects of this chapter are the political parties which have demonstrated the highest level of populism. These political parties are not only the main actors in Serbian political processes, but also the creators of populist narratives.

The changes in Serbia's party system after 2000 are reflected in the shift from polarized to moderate pluralism. One direct consequences of the rise of populist tendencies in Serbia can be observed in the decline of democratic values, jeopardized media freedoms, and a parliamentary crisis. The evident crisis of certain parties has led to the emergence of new movements and the creation of new parties. Initially, these new movements were successful in acquiring support, but they lost this support in the subsequent election cycle. This chapter focuses on the 'mainstream' political parties, i.e., the actors who have taken part in Serbian political processes for an extended period of time: the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS).

The first section of our analysis explores the characteristics of the historical and political context of Serbia, starting from the fall of communism to the present-day. Serbia has undergone several phases of changes which have contributed to a context that favors populist tendencies. Our research and argumentation are based on the widely accepted theoretical framework found in contemporary analyses of populism (Mudde 2004, Stanley 2008, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, Miler 2017, etc.,).

This chapter focuses on the key factors which have influenced the rise of populism in Serbian politics, placing emphasis on the most important el-

ements that are in causal relation with the populism of parties, movements, and leaders in Serbia. The first level of analysis is related to the party system and factors which have influenced its creation, i.e., "the institutional and social-structural characteristics" of the party system (Orlović 2015a: 117). Among these characteristics, one can find many elements which favor the development of populist politics.

The second section of this chapter deals with the actors themselves, i.e., the parties and their leaders. Here, our research is based primarily on content analysis of parties' programs (manifestos) and an analysis of political topics which were publicly raised by their leaders. In this way, the paper builds on the existing research and relevant analyses of populism in Serbia, while quantitative measures are used for the purpose of confirmation of the thesis. Our analysis will be grounded in the proposed theoretical framework, and any conclusions and their implications will therefore be based on existing research. These findings will perhaps lead to the possibility for solid predictions of future developments and draw some avenues for further research in the domain of populism in Serbia.

2. Historical and political context

In this chapter, we analyze Serbia's historical context, since it has directly influenced the current rise of populism. Serbia has undergone a series of transformations which were almost always followed by conflicts, crises, and a desire for strong leaders. The country's recent post-communist history has witnessed clear democratization attempts and strong resistance. However, this process has been upended by the economic crisis and the rise of populism. The last decade of the 20th Century in Serbia was marked by the dominance and populist rule of the SPS. Subsequent democratic changes reduced the power of populism to a significant extent. However, 2012 signaled a new wave of populism marked by the dominance of one party, the SNS. These events have resulted in the current political context of Serbia, which favors populist tendencies.

In modern history, Serbia has experienced many different forms of government; from a monarchy to a republic, from a federal unit to a state union and, finally to an independent parliamentary republic. According to the country's constitution, which was adopted in 2006, Serbia is a parliamentary republic with a semi-presidential system. After the World War II and the establishment of the communist regime in Yugoslavia, Serbia

was one of the key federal states. During Tito's regime, Yugoslavia changed constitutional elements, such as in 1974, when two autonomous provinces were established within Serbia, both of which were provided with the same rights of participation as the federal units. The communist regime managed the ethnic problems and conflicts, but the republic's stability was embedded in Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. After Tito's death and the weakening of communist ideology, under the pressure of external influence, Yugoslavia entered a crisis, and the possibility of dissolution of the state emerged.

The requirements for transitioning from a monopoly of communists, i.e., a single-party system, into one which is multipartisan, as well as from a command economy into a market economy, expanded very quickly. The collapse of communist states in Eastern Europe and changes in the Soviet Union greatly impacted Yugoslavia. One of the indicators that suggested the impending dissolution of Yugoslavia was the decision to hold the first multiparty elections in 1990. Yugoslavia did not have general elections, only the republics and their representatives in the federal institutions held elections. The nationalists won all the elections in each republic. In Serbia, the nationalists were represented by the successors of the communists, i.e., the SPS, led by Slobodan Milošević, who became the new Serbian national leader. Only Serbia and Montenegro remained part of Yugoslavia until 2006, while all the other republics became independent (in war or in peace) towards the beginning of the 1990s. What distinguishes Serbia as a case study is that its multiparty system was established in a special context, one which was characterized by "the UN sanctions introduced upon Serbia during the 1990s, the NATO bombing campaign, (…) and then the separation of Montenegro through the referendum and the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo and Metohija" (Orlović 2015b: 12).

Serbia experienced a slow transition under the leadership of the former regime of the SPS and the opposition, which split into two blocks. The nationalist bloc was represented by the SRS and the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), while the second bloc was represented by the Democratic Party (DS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), and many other smaller parties. The key political issues in 1990s were the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and ethnic problems in Kosovo and Metohija, which Milošević's regime used as an integrative factor of the nation and to make himself the one and only factor of stability. Economic instability, nationalist rhetoric, wars, and crime marked the context in which the institutions in Serbia were being established.

Since 1990, the electoral and party systems have been changed several times. Some changes were due to external influence, some were made to meet the demands of the opposition, but most of them were politically engineered by the regime itself. Pluralism in Serbia has had two periods, from 1990 to the fall of Milošević's regime in 2000, and after the democratic changes of 2000. Serbia's democratic transition was delayed, because it was dominated by one party (the SPS) throughout the 1990s. The democratic changes in 2000 were led by the united opposition of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). The new democratic government upheld European integration as the most important political goal. Despite this, Serbia has had a permanent problem of Kosovo and Metohija, whose unresolved status produced many other problems in the area of EU integration.

In practice, the electoral system has undergone several phases of change. The first ten years were "characterized by party disputes about the electoral system and frequent changes of the electoral law" (Jovanović 2015: 29). During this period, Serbia had the majority two-round system with 250 MPs (1990) and the proportional system with nine constituencies (1992, 1993) and later with 29 constituencies (1997) (Jovanović 2015: 38). After the political changes of 2000, Serbia established a proportional electoral system with a single constituency. In the years after 2000, the only reforms carried out concerned the representation of national minorities and women, the allocation of mandates, and the electoral threshold (from 5% to 3%).

During the 2000s, after a period characterized by dominance of the SPS, the party system in Serbia moved between moderate and polarized pluralism. The first years of the post-Milošević era witnessed "the breakup of the umbrella organization DOS due to the leaders' vanity and the parties' programmatic differences, the fragmentation of the party system increased" (Orlović 2008: 207). The most pro-European relevant parties in the first years were the DS, led by Zoran Đinđić, and the DSS, led by Vojislav Koštunica, and many others smaller parties. On the other side of the coin, the former regime was represented by the SPS without Milošević and the SRS, which acted as the most radical and Eurosceptic party and had the greatest support of voters. Intraparty relations of the SRS and the departure of part of its leadership ultimately led to significant changes in political life in Serbia. The establishment of the SNS, led by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, and their victory in the 2012 elections resulted in the defeat of the DS, the DSS, and other small parties, with the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić becoming highly popular. This chapter provides an analysis of the

political life in Serbia after 2012, a period which is characterized by the rise of populism.

3. Theory and argument

Populism is not a new concept, but it has experienced a great expansion in the 21st Century. The concept of populism does not have a universal definition. There are many different interpretations of populism, and it is often related to the crisis of democracy. The last decade of world politics has been characterized by the rise of populist parties, movements, and leaders. This trend has affected stable Western democracies, as well as new democracies which were created after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, including Serbia. Following the electoral success of populist parties is the usage of populist mechanisms to remain in power. Populism has become a characteristic of many left-wing and right-wing movements and parties. A number of economic, social, and political factors are directly correlated to the rise of populism. The conditions which generally facilitate the success of populism are a polarized society, the existence of a strong political leader and party, and a state of permanent crisis. The basic argument which we underline is that the character of the party system significantly influences populist tendencies. Party systems with a dominant party emphasize the power of one party and leader. This indicates that the tempo and political processes are dictated by the strongest actor, although there are other present political actors with less or little power. In order to maintain their dominance and power, the ruling party must constantly produce new threats to the regime, thereby fostering the state of permanent crisis. The legacy of communism and titoism, followed by a state of confrontation and opposition to Western democracies led by Milošević, has had a large influence on the current rise of populism in Serbia.

There are many questions concerning populism as a concept that must be addressed before we dive into the case of Serbia. While "it is easier to show who is a populists than to explain what populism [is]" (Orlović 2017a: 46), we can define some basic tenants of populism. First, we need to underline the differences between populism in stable democracies and populism in new democracies. Second, we need to theoretically define populism. Is populism a type of ideology, political strategy or political mechanism, a style of political public speech and communication with voters or all of that?

All around the world "populism is an extremely heterogeneous political phenomenon—individual populist actors can be left or right, conservative or progressive, religious or secular" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 9). Many stable Western democracies are challenged by populist parties and movements, but stable democratic institutions constrain populist political practices. This kind of stability is reflected in a situation "where populist parties cannot form a government as the primary actors (and still in many cases are not acceptable as part of the ruling coalition)" (Spasojević 2018: 2).

In Eastern Europe, the emergence of populism occurred in Russia, through a populist movement called *narodnichestvo*, a name which directly translates to 'populism' in English (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 32). After the October Revolution, communism gave rise to populism in many social segments. All countries within the Eastern Bloc had a social context which was favorable to populism. The Yugoslavian brand of soft communism, a specific form with its own concept of self-governance, provided a special context for the case of Serbia. We should also emphasize the process of the transition to democracy as a determinant of populism in Eastern Europe. The transition took the form of rapid democratization and Europeanization processes in the post-communist countries associated with the EU.

Other developments have also contributed to the rise of populism in Serbia. Over the last decade, "the wave of populism [emerged] in parallel with the wave of the global economic crisis (...) since 2008 there was an increase in social inequality, waves of terrorist attacks in Europe and fear from terrorism, the immigrant crisis and the crisis in the Eurozone" (Orlović 2017a: 47). All of this has contributed to the rise of populism in many stable, but also in new and unconsolidated democracies.

How does one define populism? Populism should be understood as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 9), one which is based on three core concepts: the people, the elites, and the general will. It should be added to this assumption that as a "thin ideology, as Stanley points out, populism "is diffuse in its lack of a programmatic center of gravity, and it is open in its ability to cohabit with other more comprehensive, ideologies" (Stanley 2008: 99-100). Some authors emphasize populism as an ideology based upon "hostility" (based on De Raadt et al. 2004; Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 97 , 2004) to representative democracy. The antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites' is the basic level at which the populists conduct their politics. On the basis of this relation and other characteristics, populism requires a framework to analyze specific

case studies. If we want to show that populism is an ideology of certain political actors in Serbia, then we need to study their political programs and formal party documents in order to understand how these political parties, movements, or leaders frame their rhetoric.

The classical theory of social cleavages cannot explain the new social tendencies marked by the rise of populism. This is why a new social cleavage that demarcates 'the establishment vs. anti-establishment' should be considered in this analysis. On the one hand, "political institutions are unable to articulate the interests and demands of citizens and deliver the expected results. They are exhausted and flogged by stagnant political elites that are absorbed by the system and blocked the flow of fresh ideas, frames and fresh air" (Orlović 2017a: 50). On the other hand, "as a reaction and response to such a state, the anti-establishment candidates, leaders and parties appear. Populism is a synonym to 'opponents of the establishment' who, although without clear and crystallized political ideas, mobilize voters on emotions against the elite, channeling disappointment and inciting distrust in those in power" (Orlović 2017a: 50).

Populist rhetoric entails a list of characteristics and elements in order to qualify as populist. As Krastev says, "the magic formula of the populists' success is dependent on ten elements: authentic anger, unrestrained hatred of the elites, policy vagueness, economic egalitarianism, cultural conservatism, compassionate radicalism, measured euroscepticism and anti-capitalism, declared nationalism, undeclared xenophobia, anti-corruption rhetoric" (Krastev 2006). Depending on the political context and current needs, populists tend to incorporate these elements into their rhetoric. Populist parties and politicians tend to integrate populist rhetoric into political programs, and especially in their electoral campaigns, slogans, and speeches. It is this perspective on populism which will guide our analysis on populist leaders and parties in Serbia.

In this article, we rely on Paul Taggart's model of populism to analyze populist actors in Serbia. Taggart's model offers a catch-all view of populists' features. This theoretical frame is useful for analyzing any political party, movement, or leader with populist tendencies. According to this framework, populism has five characteristic features: hostility towards representative politics, 'the heartland' and 'the people,' a lack of core values and chameleonic nature, and a sense of extreme crisis and a charismatic leader (Taggart 2006: 273-275). The first feature, i.e., hostility towards representative politics, refers to the way in which populists target institutions of representative politics. Because representative politics is based on the

relationship between the masses and their representatives in institutions, or 'the elites,' populists tend to rely on procedures of direct democracy to accomplish their goals.

The concept of the heartland is another core element of populism, according to Taggart. Populists frequently exploit the desire for an ideal world and country and make it the ultimate goal of their political program. As Taggart says, "populists construct 'the people' as the object of their politics" (Taggart 2006: 274). Other ideologies also have their own "ideal world" based on their vision of the future, but the populist view is based on a nostalgia for the past.

The lack of core values is a characteristic of populism. This is partially due to the different conceptualizations of 'the heartland,' which require different ideological positions among populists. The 'chameleonic' nature of populism does not allow for a consistent relationship to similar issues; thus, we cannot define core values of populism. Populists do not possess a shared identity with other populists in different contexts. The fluid nature of populism makes for a broad ideological range of parties and leaders that can be considered populist.

As the fourth feature of populism, Taggart (2006) points out a contextual reason for the rise of populism. The general consensus is that populism is essentially a reaction to an extreme crisis and an unstable society. During times of big changes—or during an economic or a political crisis—the division between the elites and masses is frequently exasperated, which populists then exploit to acquire electoral support. The world economic crisis of 2008 created a space for populism to emerge in many countries. In economic crises, many citizens lose confidence in their political and state institutions, and democratic processes must play defensive role to ameliorate such situations.

During times of crisis, programmatic politics may become more personalized. When this happens, charismatic leaders become even more important. Due to their lack of traditional and institutional legitimacy, populist actors frequently rely on charisma as a source of political legitimacy (Veber 2006). Political speeches which deflect political responsibility from the speaker and depict complex political issues as easily solvable are a means for charismatic leaders to come to power in a short period of time. Because of this, they do not need core values, stable institutions, and a consistent ideology.

4. Case description

The Serbian parliamentary elections of 2012 witnessed the rise of one dominant party and resulted in a crisis of other relevant parties. This led to changes in the party system and the appearance of new populist tendencies. In our analysis, we will focus on three political parties and their leaders: the center-right SNS, the left-wing SPS and the far-right SRS. When it comes to other political parties, especially the new ones, such as the Serbian Movement Dveri and Enough is Enough (DJB) we have also observed some populist elements, but the SNS, the SPS, and the SRS are the best cases to show the nature of populism in the Serbian party system. These three parties were also the parties of the old regime, the one which preceded the county's transition to democracy. In today's Serbia, they represent new policies and occupy new roles. The elections of 2012 marked a turning point which established "a coalition of two types of populism—quasi-left and quasi-right" (Lutovac and Marković 2017: 91). Rather than claim that these parties are populist, our approach is to analyze the populist elements in their programs and actions.

The former right-wing politicians who departed from the SRS and formed the SNS, a centrist and catch-all party, have utilized all available resources to remain in power. Since the elections of 2012, the opposition parties have been in a state of permanent crisis and lacked the possibility to produce new politics. As the new ruling party with Aleksandar Vučić as its leader, the SNS developed a new pro-EU policy. With this as its political platform, the SNS has been able to establish its catch-all character. In the first years of their parliamentary rule, the SNS and Vučić have managed to establish a new pro-European, anti-corruption, progressive image.

The SRS has so far managed to survive the departure of some of its leadership and the split in the party. Its new leader, Vojislav Šešelj, returned to the Serbian parliament upon his release from the Hague tribunal. As a right-wing party, the SRS is known for its extreme politics and populist promises. Due to its conflicts with the democratic parties in the party system, the SRS has continued to be the most extreme party in Serbia.

The SPS, the party which dominated politics throughout the 1990s, has formed a part of all government coalitions since 2008. This has created an image of the party as the ideal coalition partner for parties belonging to both sides of the political spectrum. As a left-wing party, the SPS has typically occupied governmental positions in areas related to social policy. SPS politicians have also occupied other positions of power, i.e., prime

minister, minister of defense, as well as positions in the police force and in foreign affairs. However, the distribution of ministries depends on the strength of the parties within the coalition, which was especially evident after the 2020 elections. In this context, these three parties represent the basis for analyzing populist politics in Serbia.

5. Analysis

After democratic changes were adopted in Serbia, political parties exploited the division between those who were in favor of the 'DOS regime' and those who were against it. This ultimately resulted in hostility towards representative politics and the established democratic structures. The parties in power, the SNS and the SPS, accused the former ruling parties (the DS, the DSS, etc.) of being responsible for Serbia's problems, particularly its economic problems. The 'former yellow regime' is the most frequently used phrase in public speeches about the ruling parties.

The first chapter of the 'White book,' the SNS political program on reforms, explains all economic problems through the criticism of the previous government of Serbia (2008-2012). In the chapter on the economic policies of the democratic government, they use adjectives such as "catastrophic," "dramatic," and "unscrupulous" (Serbian Progressive Party 2011: 4-5). This political program remained in place even after the SNS had won the elections, as they did not offer a new program. After coming to power, the SNS continued labeling specific domestic or international structures as enemies who is ready to use 'all mechanisms against the Serbian government.' Another significant event was Aleksandar Vučić's presidential campaign in 2017, when he ran as a candidate of the SNS. During the campaign, Vučić made the most public appearances of all candidates, with 82.1% of his rhetoric being characterized as populist (Bešić 2017: 168), of which half (49.1%) was criticism of his opponents (Bešić 2017: 170).

Although the leadership of the SNS presented itself as being pro-European and in partnership with the EU and international community, they depicted the opposition as 'foreign mercenaries' when speaking in the public and with the pro-government media. They also directed this kind of criticism towards independent and regulatory institutions that had criticized the government and other public institutions. As the leading political party in the government and the dominant party in the system, they engaged in

a hostile campaign against the former establishment, which they blamed for the country's poor economic situation.

The second most powerful party in the government, the SPS, has also expressed hostility towards established structures. In the history of multipartism in Serbia, the SPS has taken part in most government coalitions, although they were hostile to the international community during their early years of coming to power (Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 99). After 2008, they made some soft pro-EU changes. In internal political relations, they justified the regime from the 1990s and tried to transfer all the responsibility to the DOS parties. Ivica Dačić, a leader of the SPS once said that "the 5th of October was a betrayal carried out and prepared and financed from abroad" (Tanjug 2017), thus challenging the legality and legitimacy of the democratic changes that had taken place. In the political program of the SPS, there are some populist elements that relate to how they view politics. In a chapter about the current state of the world, the SPS criticized liberal democracies, arguing "that order brought addiction instead of freedom, exploitation instead of equality, class division instead of class fraternity" (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010: 5). As a socialist party, they have conducted themselves similarly to other leftist parties that likewise exhibit populist elements and engage in criticizing representative democracy.

The right-wing SRS, which has been part of the opposition since October 5th, but also before that, has remained hostile to representative politics in many ways. The SRS is the most popular Eurosceptic and anti-EU party in Serbia. They do not want to make any space for dialogue with the EU. They perceive the established politics advocating for Serbia's integration into the EU as unacceptable and anti-state. Even though the public speeches of the SRS leader, Vojislav Šešelj, and other party members are full of criticism of the EU, the political program of the SRS does not mention the EU or the European integration of Serbia.

For the SRS and Šešelj, a common political practice is the disqualification of political competitors. They frequently characterize all opposing attitudes as 'being under foreign influence,' condemning the actors as 'domestic traitors.' In his presidential campaign, Šešelj reserved 52.4% of his rhetoric to criticize his opponents (Bešić 2017: 170). Generally, the SRS tends to denounce their established opponents with undemocratic rhetoric by disregarding their democratic legitimacy.

The 'heartland' and 'the people' are descriptors frequently used by many of the political parties in Serbia. Regardless of their ideology, parties have used the notion of 'the heartland' to motivate conservative voters. The

parties have aimed to represent themselves as bottom-up parties, generated from the masses. The confrontation between 'the elites' and 'the people' forms the basis of these parties' political rhetoric. The rise of populism in Serbia is mostly sustained on the topics of the Serbian lands, especially Kosovo and Metohija, which are perceived as forming 'the heartland' of the Serbian state. Kosovo and Metohija are very important in every election and have represented the biggest challenge for every government that has come to power. Caring about 'the people' is one of the most useful determinants of a party's popularity. In Serbia, 75.2% of the population believes that most politicians do not care about the people, and half of population thinks that the people need to make political decisions (Lutovac 2017: 17).

Calling upon the will of the people is a frequent tactic of the SNS. 'The people' and 'the heartland' are leitmotifs of many chapters of the SNS's political program. In that regard, 'Kosovo and Metohija – part of Serbia' and 'Fatherland and Diaspora – inseparable whole' are meant to communicate that the party cares about 'the heartland' and 'the people' (Serbian Progressive Party 2011). The program's commitment is that the SNS "cannot and will not recognize the independence of Kosovo" (Serbian Progressive Party 2011: 37), which has been highlighted several times in public by the party's leadership. In some other provisions, the SNS has indicated an imbalance between program and practice. This is especially evident in a paragraph stating that "the abolition of Serbian institutions in the north of Kosovo and Metohija is unacceptable, because they represent the only guarantee of the survival and protection of the Serbian population from discrimination" (Serbian Progressive Party 2011: 38), while the Brussels Agreement of 2013 abolished these institutions. The SNS also 'believes in our people' and, as a catch-all party, aspires to have all social groups as voters. In the first elections, the SNS presented itself as a party of 'the ordinary people' and spoke against 'the alienated elite' (the DS), and after that, they presented themselves as the defenders of democratic government against the usurpers who had deceived the people (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 115). The leader of the SNS, Aleksandar Vučić, in his presidential campaign of 2017 relied heavily on patriotic and nationalist narratives[1] (74.8%, 22.6%) (Bešić 2017: 170).

1 Patriotic narratives attachment to Serbia as a homeland, a heartland, independent of nationalist discourse. Nationalist narratives attachment to identification with the nation and insisting on the national virtues and national identity (See Bešić 2017: 165).

The clearest indication of populist positioning can be observed in rhetoric concerning the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. In the program of the SPS, there are many uncompromising attitudes about the supposed heartland of Kosovo and Metohija. The problem of Kosovo and Metohija is "the most important state, national, historical, moral and spiritual question of the Serbian people" (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010: 21). Having been in power during the war in Kosovo and Metohija in 1999 and before that, the SPS seeks to deny all responsibility for the war. Also, in the political practice, the leader of the SPS and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2016 to 2020, Ivica Dačić, made Kosovo and Metohija the first priority of foreign politics and exempted the withdrawal of the recognition of the state of Kosovo into a number of countries.[2] Additionally, the SPS uses 'the people' as a core value of its politics. The SPS "is a party of a democratic left that has a lasting base in the people" (Socialist party of Serbia 2010: 11) and "it is an obligation of everyone to act on behalf of the people and work for its good" (Socialist Party of Serbia 2010: 13).

The political reorientation of the SPS started with a political program which was adopted in 2010 and some radical changes about socialist ideology (Slavujević and Atlagić 2015: 127). In the elections of 2012, as a ruling party, the SPS ran a critical campaign against other government parties and also against opposition parties. In doing so, the SPS and its leader, Dačić, used highly demagogic rhetoric when describing the need for "a peaceful revolution that will bring workers and poor people into power" (Slavujević and Atlagić 2015: 128). After the elections of 2012, the SPS formed part of every government coalition, as it possessed the image of a party whose presence was necessary for the stability of the government. In the modern multiparty history of Serbia, the SPS had candidates in every election except in the presidential elections in 2017 because of the deal the party had forged with the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić.

The SRS, as the most radical party when it concerns the heartland, has also clearly demonstrated populist characteristics. The party has differed from other parties in relation to the heartland attitudes. The idea of the 'Great Serbia' has been a political goal of the SRS since the party was established. The concept of a 'Great Serbia' incorporates all Serbian

2 To 7.12.2018, recognition was withdrawn by 12 states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). After this, there were some more withdrawals of recognition, but the Washington agreement in September 2020 stopped the process for a year, but there is still the potential to continue.

countries and territories, including Kosovo and Metohija, the Republic of Srpska, the Republic of Srpska Krajina, Montenegro, and parts of Macedonia (Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 101). This idea, while impossible to actually implement, has been introduced in all political campaigns and has contributed to the SRS's image. The leader of the SRS, Vojislav Šešelj, is notable for his extreme discourse on nationalist and territorial aspirations, which he justifies on the basis of the 'historical right' of Serbs.

The lack of core values is a result of the inconsistent ideology of these parties. This chameleonic nature is one of the most apparent populist features of these parties. The SNS, the SPS, and the SRS each have different ideologies; they are positioned as center-right (SNS), left-wing (SPS), far-right (SRS). However, in practice, we can find many examples of their ideological inconsistencies.

As the dominant party in Serbia's party system, the SNS has transformed its ideology in many ways. After its electoral victory in 2012, the party became a catch-all party, as it advocated for interests of various social groups and coalitions (pre and post-election), each of whom upheld different priorities and ideologies. Introducing policy reforms to reduce the salaries and pensions of government representatives went against the ideology of the SNS, but these reforms aligned with the ideology of the SPS. In ideological terms, the SNS has heterogeneity which is possible and necessary because of its catch-all strategy. We can't clearly define the ideology of the SNS, but this is the case with most political parties in Serbia. In their political communications, the SNS predominantly uses double tactics—the first with its leader, Vučić, and his "tranquil tones and calming passion," and the second with his close associates who have "the role of initiator of verbal conflict" (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 116). The party's chameleonic nature is evident in light of these double communication tactics and its catch-all approach, both of which are useful when the party has voters from different social groups. However, this tactic does not allow for the party to have clearly defined core values.

On the other hand, the SPS shifted from being socialist to center-left. This is especially evident considering the new political program the party adopted in 2010. As we have already mentioned, government coalitions which formed after 2012 engaged in reforms that did not correspond to the SPS' ideology. Some politicians from the party's leadership perceive 'socialist ideology' as unusable in modern politics (see Slavujević and Atlagić 2015: 127). The SPS altered its approach after 2008 with the Declaration on the Reconciliation between the DS and the SPS, which was created with

an aim of minimizing the cleavage between 'the old' and 'the new regime.' However, after they formed the coalition with the SNS in 2012, the SPS once again started exploiting this cleavage in their political communication.

One of the key problems of the SRS is the party's lack of core values in its economic program. This party has maintained a consistent position when it comes to the majority of important political issues, especially issues concerning national interests, Euroscepticism, and anti-NATO attitude. However, in their program and in their public discourse on the economy, the SRS has shown the populist chameleonic nature. In the economic program of the SRS, the starting point for the development of society is the concept of a liberal market economy (Serbian Radical Party: 31), but this party disseminated economic policy proposals in their political communications and electoral campaigns which contradict the notion of a market economy. The SRS made election promises such as "bread for three dinars" and communicated with workers and poor people, because the core structure of its voters belongs to these social groups (Goati 2013: 81). Contradictions between the formal economic program and the structure of the SRS voters opens up space for populist communications and its chameleonic character.

The global economic crisis of 2008 negatively impacted the already struggling economy of Serbia and produced conditions which favored the rise of populism. All parties referred to the crisis in their political communication, either to justify their criticism or their excuses, depending on the role they occupied. The open issue of the status of Kosovo and Metohija and its unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 produced permanent problems and a sense of crisis in Serbian politics. Parties in power have used public space to share ideas about permanent crises and the possibilities of engaging in war or a coup. This general sense of crisis dominated the parties' electoral programs of 2012, as parties sought to offer solutions to fix the economic, financial, social, and political crisis (Atlagić 2012: 65).

The atmosphere of fear concerning the stability of the state produced the system of stabilitocracy. "Governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law" (Bieber, 2018). The leading actor in this process was the SNS.

International reports evaluating the freedom of press around the world have indicated a perpetual decline of press freedoms in Serbia and point to the big impact which the ruling party has had on the media. The SNS and

pro-SNS media has used public appearances to emphasize the permanent vulnerability of the state because of 'foreign factors', and some opposition parties and their respective leaders. For example, "only in 2018, 'Informer' and the 'Serbian Telegraph'[3] announced wars and conflicts on the front pages 265 times" (Živanović 2018). Also, the SNS has used the media to delegitimize the political opposition as "corrupt elites from the previous regime and tycoons who robbed the people and the state" (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 119). The SNS continues to successfully scapegoat the previous government for the lack of its own political success, even though they have been in power for almost ten years.

During the 1990s, the SPS frequently turned to crisis rhetoric, but they reduced this type of communication in recent years. Thanks to its collaboration with both sides of the political spectrum (DS-SNS), the SPS aims to represent itself as a relevant participant in the political processes. The party has engaged in a mixture of peaceful communication and occasional criticism in the context of 'everyday possible war.' The leader of the SPS, Dačić, as Minister from 2016 to 2020, used the political crisis of Kosovo and Metohija to win victories in diplomacy. The party tried to cover up economic problems with promises of improving the position of workers and pensioners in the future, all without offering any tangible solutions. After the elections of 2020, which were boycotted by a large number of opposition parties due to poor election conditions, Dačić entered a new role as President of Parliament, leading an internal dialogue between political parties about problems concerning free and fair elections. In observing the strategy of SPS, the need to approach ordinary people with informal language, but without anti-elitist attitudes, is evident (Mikucka-Wojtowcz 2017: 113). The SPS has shifted from behaving like a populist party to one that exhibits some elements of populism.

Although the SRS formed the opposition for the greater part of the last three decades, the party has played some role in the governmental politics as well. During the 1990s, they operated as the "favorite oppositions," behaving as the ideal type of populist party (Mudde 2000; Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018: 122). Occupying the position as the strongest Eurosceptic party, the SRS has exulted over every crisis of the EU and criticized the European integration of Serbia with the prognosis of the disintegration of the EU. In the new context of the SNS-led government, they also acted like an opposition party close to the government. As opponents of the

3 Pro-SNS tabloids with the largest circulation among the print media.

ICTY, NATO and the EU, the SRS has used every moment to dispute their relations with Serbia, especially in relation to the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. In terms of popularity, the SRS has benefited from crisis situations in every election, but after the party split, the SNS took over a big part of its 'extreme voters.' In its political communication, the SRS has sought to produce a sense of crisis or contribute to the existing one with its extreme and intolerant speech.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis has been integral to the populist tendencies of parties. The pandemic has shown the true face of populism in Serbia, and the ruling parties, i.e., the SNS and the SPS, have stood out in particular. This showed all the characteristics of populism. The SNS and SPS' tendency to abuse a crisis situation and their chameleonic character were especially obvious. Wining the 2020 election, which was conducted during the pandemic, the ruling parties also celebrated their victory over COVID-19. After the end of the election process, which coincided with an increase in deaths and infections, new culprits were sought. During the pandemic, the ruling parties accused the opposition parties of rejoicing at the bad state of the virus and using it for political purposes. Although there are many examples of populism, it is especially impressive that President Vučić addressed the public through the media and tabloids with the message that there will not be enough cemeteries to bury everybody. He did this just three months before the elections (Alo 2020).

The fifth feature of populism, the charismatic leader, is present in Serbian politics through the presidentialization of parties. This process is closely related to the non-programmatic policies of the parties and efforts to construct an image of the leader (Orlović 2017b: 23). Parties in Serbia are predisposed to create charismatic leaders, who occupy an essential role in a populist party. Candidate lists in most of the local and parliamentary elections contain a party leader's name. The image of the leader is often the central issue for the reputation of the party. In the hunt for voters, the leader is a symbol, the message, and the program (Orlović 2007: 36). In the world of non-programmatic politics and the personalization of politics, not all politicians are equally popular. In Serbia, the popularity of a party and its leader have a very similar result. For example, Aleksandar Vučić appears to be the most popular politician with a mean of 4.81, as opposed to Dačić (4.10) and Šešelj (2.73). All opposition leaders received negative evaluations (Todosijević 2017: 112-113).

As the leader of the SNS, Aleksandar Vučić represents a comparative advantage for the party. His image is based on "his own sacrifice because of the strenuous work for citizens" (Mikucka-Wojtowcz 2017: 113), and he has successfully conveyed the message that he is irreplaceable and omnipresent in all situations, especially in crises. As the Deputy, Prime Minister, the Prime Minister, and finally, the President of Serbia, the popularity of Aleksandar Vučić has continued to grow. The approach of the SNS and the government is to focus on Vučić, as all the ministers and party members use every moment to confirm the importance of his role in all processes. For some, Vučić personifies everything that populism is. This is due to his demagogic rhetoric, the cult surrounding his personality, and his tendency to oppose the discourse of the 'corrupt elite' (Lutovac and Marković 2017: 91). However, a study of his style of communications in the presidential campaign has shown that analytical style prevails (88.7%) over pathetic (67.2%) and promises (61.8%) (Bešić 2017: 170). Obviously, Vučić is the most useful advantage of SNS coalition, and his image-building efforts have been the most important mechanism in maintaining in power.

Across the aisle, the leader of the SPS, Ivica Dačić, has shown a significantly different style of political communication and image building. His frequent use of "*Bre*," a colloquial, everyday expression (Slavujević 2017: 188) has been carried out with the aim of producing an image of an ordinary man and reducing his distance to the voters. He has used the same style in the communication with foreign officials. This was the case when he sang in Brussels, when he sang for Erdogan, and when he engaged in an informal conversation with Zaharova. He has also used every opportunity to send the message to potential voters that the SPS has enough power to make big decisions. After Milosevic's departure from the presidency and after difficult times for the SPS, Dačić emerged as the winner in many of the conflicts, gaining the reputation of being a leader willing to make deals.

Vojislav Šešelj has led the SRS since the party was founded, and he has never been replaced. During the process in front of the Hague tribunal, Tomislav Nikolić was the leader of the party, but only in his capacity as the party's vice-president. Šešelj based his image on his years of being in disdain of the communist regime and a lawyer with a large number of publications. His views on history and politics have had a great impact on his voters. All party members and leadership "keep collecting and publishing everything he says in public in his name" (Stojarová and Vykoupilová 2007: 106). It should be emphasized that he was expected to take on an even more important role after his return from the Hague, due to his criticism of the

authorities. However, his criticism of rival parties and the opposition has grown stronger. He did not change his rhetoric, but he began to use new media channels (tabloids, realty shows, etc.) to target more extreme voters.

6. Conclusion

Political parties in Serbia and their leaders have shown themselves to have populist tendencies. By relying on Paul Taggart's theory of the five features of populism, we analyzed a representative sample of three political parties. After the 1990s and the end of Slobodan Milošević's populist rule, there were many challenges in creating substantive political change in Serbia and carrying out the democratization process, including the assassination of former Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, a unilateral proclamation of the independence of Kosovo, the economic crisis of 2008, the splitting of the strongest opposition party, the SRS, and the establishment of the SNS. In this context, the 2012 electoral victory of the SNS represented a new chapter in the party system. The rise in the popularity of the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić resulted in populist tendencies in all aspects of political life.

The SNS, the SPS, and the SRS have each engaged with different elements of populism. The SNS-SPS coalition government implemented many unpopular reforms with austerity measures. This provided space for populism to thrive. The majority of political parties in Serbia are characterized by non-programmatic and personalized politics. Concerning their hostility towards representative politics, the SNS and the SPS have reduced their capacities, but they still often refer to their 'unnamed foreign enemies' in practice. The SRS has continued to blame the EU and 'the West' for domestic problems in Serbia.

Perhaps the clearest populist indicator of these three parties is their alleged sacrifice for 'the people,' who are victimized by 'the elite.' The ruling party, the SNS, has targeted enemies of 'the people,' who are members the former regime and opposition politicians. Their coalition partner, the SPS, has used this strategy to relinquish all responsibility. The SRS has continued to play the role of the favorite opposition, much like it did in the 1990s.

The issue of Kosovo and Metohija is important for defining populism in Serbia. The need to find a solution and to respect the obligations upheld in the agreements are unpopular, and the government has continued to blame the former regime for its failures and problems. It has sustained a crisis that

has enabled them to present themselves as 'the saviors' of the state and its people. Stability is the primary goal of the ruling party, even if stability is achieved at the expense of democratic institutions. The rise of populism in Serbia has influenced the media and freedom of press within the country, and it has negatively impacted democracy.

While the rise of populism in Serbia is evident, the political leaders and parties in power have indicated that they possess only some populist tendencies. Therefore, while the SRS is close to fitting the profile of a pure populist party, we cannot make the same conclusion about the rest of the parties which we examined. However, we can conclude that the ruling parties are indeed contributing to the further rise of populism in the future.

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