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Europeanization of Serbian party system – accountability to Brussels or to people^{1 2}

(DRAFT)

Eastern European candidate states usually begin their EU accession process with high level of EU enthusiasm but ends up with significant euro skepticism. Serbian case is different due to strong preexisting social and political divisions regarding EU integration process already during the initial phase of transition – even before negotiations for Stabilization and Association Agreement (2005) have begun. However, in the last 10 years euro skepticism has been gradually pushed away from the mainstream arena of Serbian politics, reaching the point that the anti EU parties have not even been represented in the parliament during one of the previous mandates (2012-2014).

In this paper we are analyzing the process of Europeanization of the Serbian party system as the consequence of EU integration process.

Initially, we are focusing on the ideological shift from anti-EU toward pro-EU positions of two *old regime* parties - Milosevic's Socialist party and nationalistic Serbian Radical party. Being an anti-EU party during the first years after the democratic change in Serbia had become an obstacle for old regime parties and significantly decreased their coalition potential and access to power. Therefore, party leaderships initiated gradual ideological shift. This process was possible since Serbian parties are extremely leader-oriented and not institutionalized on programmatic grounds. Electoral manifestoes and platforms for 2008, 2012 and 2014 Serbian parliamentary elections are examined in this paper as the most salient elements of this ideological shift.

Furthermore, we are investigating Serbian pro-EU parties and their ideological development during the same period. Since those were ruling parties, it is important to notice how they use success in the EU integrations as the validation of their governance and democratic character (in opposition to *old regime* parties). Therefore, we can argue that EU-friendly positions had become the core ideological standpoint of modernistic and liberal political forces in Serbia.

Two additional questions can be raised regarding the outcome and the consequences of the Europeanization of Serbian party system. The first one is about the significance of ideological change from anti-EU to pro-EU positions – was this change just superficial and on symbolical level? We are using Voter survey and Comparative Candidate Survey conducted after the last elections to evaluate ideological change among political elites and voters. The second question deals with accountability – if the change was driven by the outside (EU) pressure and approved by candidate state status for Serbia, are new Serbian euro-friendly leaders responsible to Brussels or to Serbian citizens?

¹ Draft paper, do not cite without authors permission.

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Theoretical framework – Europeanization meets cleavages

Europeanization of political parties or of party systems is complex and multilevel process with still uncertain effect and outcome. Some scholars like Peter Mair argue that Europeanization did not cause any substantial changes regarding format (number of relevant parties), mechanics, dynamic or competition of party system (Mair, 2000:29-30). But Meir's work is focused at institutionalized party systems and on the systemic approach itself, which put some limits regarding changes and potential to change.

Bartolini (2005:402-405) finds four different scenarios that depict possible impact of Europeanization on national party systems: 1. Transformation of national lines of division on EU level, 2. European and national level are independent in a way that EU level divisions do not affect on internal cleavages; 3. Transformation of EU issues into national party system which can lead to partition of parties (e.g. in right wing blocks) and 4. Externalization – formation of completely new European cleavage that is independent from previously existing divisions.

Additional level of analysis is introduced by Marks and Wilson (2000) hypothesis that parties act differently before and after EU membership status of their country. For example, social democratic parties are opposing to EU because of single markets demands before membership status, but support further deepening of EU integration and internal redistribution after respective country becomes EU member state.

Finally, another important point comes from specific post-communist perspective and is based on Slovakia experience. In opposition to other countries that become EU member states in the same eastern wave of enlargement, Slovakia was the only one where EU directly interfere with domestic issues and supported one side (pro-EU) of political spectrum – therefore, the impact of Europeanization on party system can be stronger in the case on candidate states compared to previous cases of members states or successful transitions (Fink Hafner 2007). Following this logic "Europeanization is primarily understand in terms of European pressure (setting preconditions and conditions for integration with the EU, political pressures on potential candidate states to fulfill the EU's expectations" (Fink Hafner 2007:5). As Orlovic (2007:125) concludes Europeanization can be observed on 4 levels: on the level of political system, party system, individual party level and regarding internal party relations".

In this paper, I use political cleavage theory to demonstrate how Serbian political parties have perceived and discussed the European issue and how their position has actually changed over time as the result of Europeanization process. In addition, and in order to supplement the overall analysis, theories on party systems,¹ gradual development of post-communist party systems,² and different modes of party competition and their choice between vote and office-seeking strategies,³ are also considered.

The theory of social cleavages represents the main paradigm within the socio-structural approach in political sociology, aiming primarily to explain the link between social structure and party system. Social cleavages are usually described as stable, long lasting and deep social divisions. In their work, Bartolini and Mair narrowed the analytical focus of cleavage theory to divisions which included an empirically verifiable relatively self-conscious socio-demographic group with specific values and interests that are being articulated by identifiable political organization.⁴ However, contemporary cleavage approach does not presume automatic translation of social divisions into political parties, but also includes capacities of institutional design and, especially, the possibility of political actors and elites to shape and represent

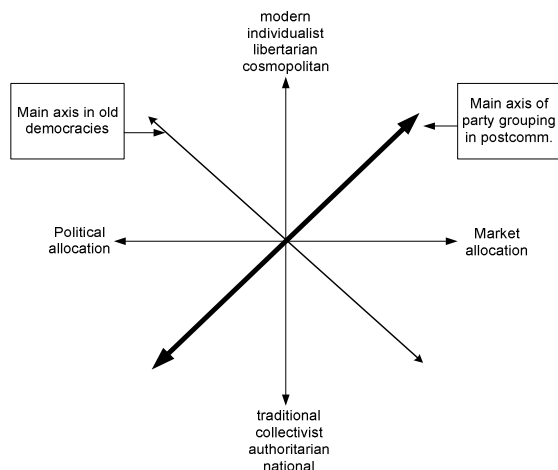
divisions⁵ – an aspect that is of great importance because of the unique social structure of post-communist societies.

In the communist societies socio-economic differences within mass population were never too visible, or at least they were not clearly articulated and thus they could not serve as the dominant line of societal division in the first transitional years. Therefore, “social conflicts that typically occur within post-communist societies are of nature other than class conflicts,”⁶ but formed around identity-based issues, primarily following the ethnic lines in large federations and its constituencies (such as in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia). Predominance of identity-based conflicts limited consensus making potential and generally promoted zero-sum competition between political parties, which postponed consolidation of electoral democracy until the articulation of interest based conflicts (usually economic cleavage).⁷

Following the initial stages in post-communist transition and after the democratic “honey moon,” other identity-based lines of political division started to (re)appear. The divisions found by Beyme to be typical for post-communist societies are the ones that follow the binary code: Old regime / Proto-transformational regime (according to Kasapović, in old east-European countries this was the most important division “that determined not only the first but also the second and the third elections”),⁸ Centralization / Decentralization, and Occidentalism / Nationalism.⁹ The third pair is the most important one and, as Attila Agh has argued, it represents “the great value war”¹⁰ in the first period of transition, because it reflects society’s dilemma about mechanisms of changes, methods and policies to be used and pace of introducing changes. This cleavage also reflects the question of identity and belonging, or as it is usually framed, it is a dilemma whether a society should go “back to Europe” or “back to itself” and therefore we could say it divides society to modernist and traditionalist side.

Although economy has not been as important as in old democracies, there are some divisions that start to appear based on growing socio-economic differences (pro-market vs. pro-state redistribution), but with certain post-communist specific characteristics. Mateju, Rehakova and Evans framed this division as the distinction between transitional losers and winners which could be *subjective* if it based on self-perception on social position and mobility within new-emerged market economy or *objective* if it is based on the objective evaluation of class based position.¹¹ Together with modernist vs. traditionalist dimension, the economic cleavage gives birth to unexpected line of party grouping, opposite to the ones in developed democracies. According to Kitschelt, post-communist societies are marked by pro-market and cosmopolitan forces on one side, and state regulated market particularists on the other, consequentially reversing the main axis of political grouping when compared to the old democracies (as presented in Figure 1).¹²

Figure 1: Basic lines of party groupings in post-communist societies (adapted from Kitschelt 1994, pp. 30–31).



However, this is just a starting position and it usually changes during the first transitional decade. The pace and the depth of the change depend on many factors. Bielasiak developed a four-stage model of party system development in the transitional societies presuming that initial large coalition made for electoral victory over old regime is ideologically heterogeneous and therefore not appropriate for ruling.¹³ Therefore we could expect fast and substantial divisions and polarization within block of reformist parties and these divisions usually follow the lines described by von Beyme (although each nation has its unique combination of cleavages). These rapid and fundamental changes are possible because parties and party systems are not yet stable and institutionalized.¹⁴ Gradual changes are visible in the case of Serbian parties, especially when analyzing attitudes regarding European union and Kosovo. Also, we will show that these changes could be perceived through several phases determined by the change of tactics of local elites. Two ideal-typical models of electoral behavior that we will use as explanatory tools are vote-seeking and office seeking strategy¹⁵. The first presumes that parties are acting in order to attract as much votes as possible without considering the ability to fulfill given promises or their coalition potential. The second strategy is based on idea to maximize control over political office and to improve coalition potential.

Since party system in Serbia is not institutionalized and therefore party programs are still underdeveloped (or in other words - less obligatory for party elites and of little importance to voters), this paper will focus on the electoral campaigns and electoral messages because they represent valid source of information on party ideology and politics (such as the Manifesto project). This standpoint is also chosen because of possibility to link changes in party positions on European Union to certain electoral periods and to use elections as trigger events for these programmatic maneuvers. Accordingly, I will argue that the EU integration issue should be understood as a symbol and amplifier of division between modernist and traditionalist forces. This division reflects the usual post-communist cleavage, but in the Serbian case, it has additionally been reinforced by other dominant lines of cleavages, due to the deeply divided society between the EU-centered and Kosovo-centered party blocks. By using cleavage theory, it is also possible to show that the parties have employed different tactics since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, moving between identity-based and interest-based conflicts and between vote-seeking and office-seeking tactics. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the gradual rise of the importance of Kosovo issue in the period 2000–2008 and then its decline. This decline led to

gradual marginalization of Kosovo-centered euro-skeptic parties, providing space for the creation of consensus on Serbia's EU membership amongst the dominant parties, under the "both Europe and Kosovo" paradigm.

EU in the campaigns during the early transition in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia³

Following the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, Serbian opposition was faced with a significant problem. Although Milošević declared victory in the war against NATO, it was more or less clear that Serbia lost control over the province of Kosovo. The ability of opposition to continue relying on Western assistance (as in the case of the winter 1996/97 protests initiated after the fraudulent local elections) was damaged because of popular disaffection with NATO decision to intervene militarily in Serbia. Even within the circles that had supported some form of intervention serious doubts were raised with regard to the use of military means in order to prevent human rights violations that had previously taken place in Kosovo.

Despite all, opposition strategy remained the same as before, mostly because of the lack of viable alternatives. However, the use of NATO and the EU as the synonyms of democratization started to decrease and more patriotic elements were in place (one of the slogan at that time was "Resistance – because I love Serbia"). Also, the opposition chose moderate nationalist Vojislav Koštunica as the direct opponent to Milošević with an aim of attracting moderate voters and minimizing any possibility of attacks on the grounds of lack of patriotism. The Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) also welcomed heterogeneous actors to the coalition, including anti-communist nationalists as well as civic and liberal representatives.

On the other hand, Milošević used NATO intervention as a proof that Serbian opposition served "foreign interests / fifth column" and that its representatives betrayed Serbia. In attempt to use warfare atmosphere and mobilization of nationalistic voters after the intervention, Milošević called for early elections for president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and federal parliament, to be held on 24 September 2000. Milošević expected the voters to award him because of his resistance to NATO.

The Democratic Opposition of Serbia managed to overcome an aggressive negative campaign launched by the regime because of intensive support it had received from the civil society¹⁶. Otpor movement and other initiatives, such as independent trade union Nezavisnost (Independence) and election monitoring organization CeSID provided legitimacy and tools for the opposition to successfully challenge the incumbent and to confirm electoral victory on the streets of Belgrade on 5 October 2000. This model of citizens' defense of electoral victory would become the model for the so-called "colored revolutions."¹⁷

It is important to stress that the DOS coalition was primarily formed for the aforementioned elections, not for governing, and this was obvious immediately after the inauguration of the Zoran Djindjić government (as the first government after the fall of Milošević) in the parliament in early 2001. It is possible to argue that there were two main disagreements between the DOS parties, one regarding the final goal of the country's transition and the other one regarding the depth and pace of reforms. This was not an unusual practice

³ Although the republics of Serbia and Montenegro formed the Federal Republic Yugoslavia until 2006, I will focus only on the Serbian case with reflection to the federal level, when necessary.

across Eastern Europe in the first transitional years and the same differences, for example, could be noted between Adam Michnik and Lech Walesa in Poland.¹⁸ In the wider framework, this debate could be interpreted as Agh's "great value war" which has characterized Central European transitions and divided the newly established government between modernist and reformist arguments ("return to Europe") and traditional and conservative demands ("return to ourselves"). The notion of "European" path was institutionalized through the EU integration process (and other international organization such as OSCE, Council of Europe and, in the most cases, NATO), while traditionalist path was vaguer, including political spectrum from moderate centrist euro-skepticism and social conservatism to radical right pro-Russian attitudes, in the Serbian case.

However, because of NATO intervention legacies, EU could not be easily used as the symbol for identification based on values, so Serbian reformist from the first government chose to frame EU as community of wealthy and organized societies – in other words, economy was framed as the main outcome of EU integrations or Europeanization, while democratization was left aside.

Therefore, Serbian transition has had several unique characteristics that shaped and amplified the initial modernist vs. traditionalist cleavage. All of these characteristics are legacies and products of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The "stateness problem"¹⁹ was dominated by the questions as to whether Serbia should continue to be in federal agreement with Montenegro (as it was decided in the early stage of the process) and what the final/future status of Kosovo will be. Surprisingly, these two questions were less influential during the first government (2001–2004), when compared to the cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, which was the focal point of Serbian politics in the early transitional years – a request largely imposed by the international community (the cooperation included extradition of accused individuals and access to secret military and police documents). Regardless of their hierarchy in the Serbian political agenda, these three issues formed coherent cleavage between modernist and traditionalist, and, together with the division between transitional winners and losers, divided voters and political parties into three groups – reformist, moderate reformist and anti-reform parties, aligned from top right to lower left corner on Kitschelt's inverted axis of party grouping (Figure 1). Since both cleavage lines divided voters in the similar groups, we could argue that they were in reinforcing constellation (divided society model) and therefore limiting possibility for coalitions across cleavages.

The leader in the reformist group was the Democratic Party (DS), but some smaller parties (such as Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS) and Social Democratic Union (SDU)) were also very visible and influential, especially when it comes to issues related to human rights and regional cooperation (all of which belong to upper end on the vertical scale in Figure 1 – liberal and cosmopolite politics).

The moderate section of the DOS coalition was led by the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). It increased its popularity in the first years of transition mostly because of its conservative position with regard to the cooperation with ICTY and generally centrist position on all other issues (such as economic reforms). The party's leadership managed to attach the blame for transitional economic problems and disaffection of transitional losers to the rest of DOS (primarily DS and G17). Moreover, it gradually started to attract more nationalistic voters (most of whom were former SPS voters) and to act similarly to old regime parties.²⁰

Finally, the third block was made of the old regime parties – SPS and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). After 2000 these two parties switched their power and thus position (the former was stronger and more important actor during the Milošević period). This party block and its political strength is one of the unique characteristics of Serbian transition deriving from the Yugoslav breakup, because the *ancient regime* parties in other post-communist transitions went through reform process before making their come back to the political scene. However, the strength of traditionalist block did not derive only from identity issues, but also from the representation of transitional losers and victims of the initial wave of privatization.²¹

Koštunica's first government: Gradual polarization

After the assassination of Prime Minister Djindjić, parliamentary elections were held in December 2003 and DSS, which had become the strongest former DOS party, formed a new government with G17 (predominantly in charge for the economy-related issues) and SPS, leaving DS outside of the power-sharing arrangement. Koštunica's governing period started with a strong anti-ICTY position, still keeping pro-EU stance but somewhat moderate in terms of the Kosovo question.

In Serbia, after the adoption of the new constitution, a new round of parliamentary elections took place in 2007, but the outcome was just another postponement of the crisis and further polarization. The Democratic Party of Serbia won solid number of votes and again it had the possibility to choose whether to make coalition with DS (having become the strongest former DOS party) or with SRS. After significant pressures coming from the international community and the Serbian public,²² DSS chose to form the second Koštunica's government, together with DS and G17, leaving SRS shorthanded, even though it had won almost 30 percent of the votes²³. The 2007 elections were important also because the LDP-led coalition became a parliamentary party after winning 6 percent of votes enabling the most reform-oriented and modernist parts of society to be heard in the parliament.

The 2007 parliamentary elections showed that DSS had decided to put more emphasis on identity issues, mostly on the ones related to the cooperation with ICTY and Kosovo, in general, and that these would be at the core of their political domain in the coming years. By connecting these issues to the EU accession process, DSS gained ownership over the euro-skeptic position. As Mihailović put it, "political class had interrupted the trend of accepting the loss of Kosovo on one side, and started to develop strong trend of euro-skepticism on the other."²⁴ DSS euro-skepticism resulted in increased pressure from the United States (already from 2005 on, because of insufficient cooperation with ICTY) and the European Union, resulting in the postponing of accession talks with Serbia until fulfillment of ICTY-related demands.²⁵ It is very important to notice that in this phase the Kosovo and EU membership talks were formally approached as two separate processes, which allowed the reformist strand of the opposition (DS and LDP) to direct its criticism towards the lack of results in the EU accession-related talks, while continuing to participate in and weakly support government's Kosovo policy.

Polarization and the decisive elections: Europe or Kosovo?

Several factors led to the crisis and polarization. Although it looked as the first Koštunica's government had found a satisfactory model of cooperation with ICTY – voluntary extradition followed by financial aid to the accused and their families, it failed with regard to the two most wanted war crimes suspects: Radovan Karadžić (president of Republika Srpska during the war in Bosnia) and Ratko Mladić (Bosnian Serb military leader). Also, faced with the inability to deliver substantial reforms without solving the final status of Kosovo and pressured by the vast majority of Kosovo citizens supporting independence, the international community gave up on the “standards before status” approach and gradually supported the announced Kosovo declaration of independence. Support for Kosovo independence by majority of EU member states made Koštunica conclude that EU integration process and Kosovo negotiations are not separate processes anymore and that Serbia would eventually be asked to recognize Kosovo in order to become a full EU member. The EU's response was that Serbia would not be asked to recognize Kosovo independence, but to solve practical issues in the good neighbor faith. Interpretation of this position was the core issue of the 2007 and 2008 electoral periods in Serbia.

Koštunica's second government proved incapable of creating common foreign and domestic policy, and coalition with DS did nothing but to accentuate differences between the two parties. At the same time, nationalistic SRS continued to grow and became even stronger opponent than before. The breakup of the EU accession talks, Kosovo declaration of independence and obvious problems within the DSS-DS coalition created emotionally charged and conflicting atmosphere before the 2007 and 2008 elections. This period could be evaluated as the highest level of polarization after 2000. Looking back, between 2003 and 2007, DSS managed to position itself as the median actor and to be perceived as moderate and bridging element between two “radical” parties, DS and SRS. In this period Serbian party system had almost all characteristics of Sartori's polarized pluralism party system model²⁶ – government in the centre, two strong and ideologically distanced poles made of opposition parties and centrifugal political competition. This type of party system can be stable only if the centre manages to balance between poles, but it is more often unstable because of continuous efforts of bipolar oppositions to force government in the middle (and their voters) to choose one of the two sides. In the Serbian case, DS and SRS succeeded in this attempt by increasing the importance of dilemma between Kosovo-centric vs. EU-centric politics which was facilitated by previous DSS decision to play on identity card and to increase the importance of value-based cleavage at the expense of socio-economic divisions.

It should be noted that Kosovo and Europe were used as symbols and amplifiers of the already existing divisions between modernist and traditionalists. Actually, the existence of such a concrete and fundamental question made Serbia rather unique case amongst post-communist countries because most of them had basic consensus on EU and NATO membership. In other countries, “value war” was mostly politically articulated in connection to social values, education or the Church-related issues, while in the Serbian case, it was connected to the more fundamental questions. Additional mechanism of polarization was based on the institutional design – in December 2007 and January 2008 Serbia had regular presidential elections. According to the 2006 constitution, the position of the President is not that important. However, because of direct elections and high level of legitimacy presidential elections were the first direct important political battle between DS and SRS after the adoption of the new constitution. Presidential elections were organized through a two-round system, and since government did not have successful candidate, SRS candidate Tomislav Nikolić and DS candidate Boris Tadić went to the second round. This situation forced other parties in the government (and in the centre of the

political spectrum) to choose sides between the two opposition poles. For example, G17 supported Tadić, while DSS tried to remain neutral. SPS supported Nikolić, but without putting too much effort in the campaign. Nikolić and Tadić were on the opposing sides in almost all policy areas, but question of EU membership was the most important issue. Tadić framed fast EU integration as the precondition for a successful defense of Kosovo as part of Serbia, while Nikolić argued that Serbia should act diplomatically against all states which had decided to recognize Kosovo and condition EU membership with the recognition of Serbian territorial integrity.²⁷ Electoral result proved high level of importance (turnout rate was 63 percent) and division in the population because Tadić won with just 100,000 votes more²⁸.

The outcome of the presidential elections had significant impact on the Serbian politics and shaped the atmosphere surrounding the forthcoming parliamentary elections. If one could argue that presidential elections were somewhat blurred regarding the main issue, in the case of the parliamentary elections, it was clearly a debate on how to respond to worldwide recognitions of Kosovo's independence, with the focus on relations with the EU in respect to association talks. As rightly observed by Mihailović, these elections reflected the peak of Kosovo-related divisions and traditionalist-modernist cleavage and, as clearly suggested by the public opinion surveys, Serbia was split into two almost equal halves.²⁹

Table 1: Standpoints on EU and electoral orientation in Serbia in 2008 (%)

	Predominantly anti-EU	Mixed answers	Predominantly pro-EU	total
LDP	1	3	96	100
DS coalition	6	13	81	100
DSS coalition	30	40	30	100
SPS coalition	60	16	24	100
SRS	59	30	11	100

Source: Mihailović (2008, p. 13)

During the 2008 electoral campaign DSS argued that Serbia should reject the EU mission in Kosovo, insist in the confirmation of territorial integrity as the part of Stabilization and Association process, and that Serbia should declare itself a militarily neutral state.³⁰ DSS lead coalition again tried to be an in-between one, but this time such an approach did not work, mostly because of the EU's position, expecting very concrete answers to regarding Kosovo independence. Also, as it could be seen from Table 1, at least one third of their voters were not willing to start diplomatic confrontation with the EU because of the Kosovo question.

On the other hand, DS continued with messages developed during Tadić's presidential campaign and used him as a representative figure in order to attract voters. The party's coalition with G17 and other smaller parties was named "For a European Serbia," clearly outlining their main goal. DS standpoint was that Kosovo negotiations and EU association process are two separate issues and that the EU as such did not actually recognize Kosovo, but a number of its member states. This standpoint was also based on the notion that Serbia should not jeopardize its EU-related process by confronting the most influential EU states. In this argument, the coalition "For a European Serbia" strongly relied on Yugoslavia's break-up experience, while arguing that Serbia should not isolate itself from the rest of the world and, in fact, accused DSS and especially SRS for trying to "take Serbia back to the nineties."³¹

However, we should not narrow down the electoral debate only to the Kosovo question. The success of the DS coalition can be attributed to the fact that it was able to connect Euro-centric politics with other issues such as stability and economic progress, and therefore to motivate transitional winners to vote for them. In other words, the coalition managed to link Kosovo-centric politics with isolation, conflict and uncertainty – all aspects very much associated with the Milošević regime.

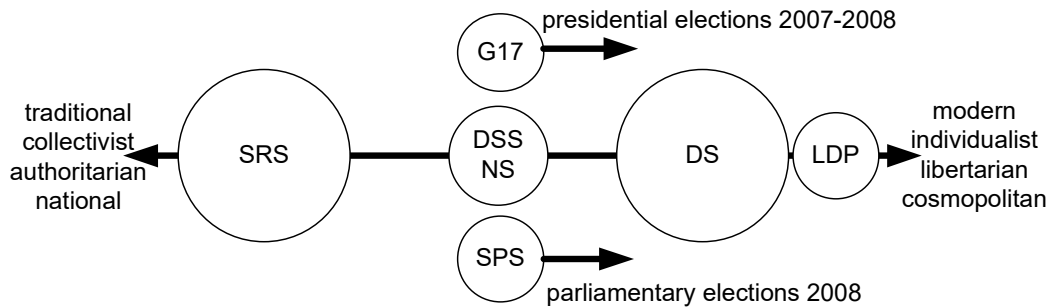


Figure 2: Centrifugal forces and polarization of Serbian party system, 2007–2008 (adapted from Spasojević, 2011, p.114).

This framing of Kosovo-centric policy as a continuum of the Milošević time was also possible because of rather traditionalistic and nationalistic positions of SRS. Namely, SRS did not try to detach itself from policies characterizing the Milošević regime. In fact, while SPS tried to reform itself to a certain level, SRS was eager to take the lead and to be perceived as the successor of Milošević’s politics. This is why SRS was still unacceptable as a coalition partner for significant portion of DSS voters, and especially for the international community that was not looking forward to having DSS and SRS together in the government. Put together, this all meant that EU and US support was strongly pointed towards the DS-led coalition and Serbian president Tadić.

The electoral outcome was slightly different from the presidential elections in January 2008 and the DS coalition increased its victory for up to 350,000 votes, comparing to only 100,000 during the previous presidential race³². This increase showed the trend of voters’ spill-over from the middle block to the modernist one and general victory of euro-centric politics. However, the final step in the pro-EU block victory came after the SPS’s decision to form government with DS, and not with the party’s ideological and historical partners SRS and with the 2004–2007 partner DSS.

Such a decision was thoroughly debated in the Serbian public, and usual explanations were based on strong influence of the international community and their pressure on SPS leader Ivica Dačić.³³ Bearing in mind the theoretical framework used for this chapter, it is also likely that Dačić anticipated the future development of the political scene in Serbia, meaning a gradual decline of traditionalist-modernist cleavage at the expense of economy-centered divisions. In addition, Dačić himself observed that Kosovo-centered politics had lost its popular support and that he should switch sides, as soon as possible. In other words, after two very emotionally charged electoral campaigns, Dačić realized that Serbian citizens were ready to gradually move on and start dealing with economic issues, instead of the identity one, or, at least, that Serbian citizens were not willing to risk economic progress or stability for the sake of uncertainty and long-lasting conflict over Kosovo. Of course, one should not rely too much on this kind of

argumentation, as there were many obstacles down the road, most of which showed up during the later government mandate.

Democrats in the office and their flirting with nationalism

Following two electoral cycles and double victory of pro-EU parties, DS, G17 and SPS formed government with Mirko Cvetković from DS as the prime minister. Tadić was earlier elected as the president of Serbia, so DS had the largest portion of political power. However, SPS and G17 took significant share of power, as they were in a better bargaining position, which meant that DS had to accept almost all of their requests.

Although the electoral outcomes directed the government toward the European path, both DS and SPS argued during the campaign that they would protect constitution and continue fighting for territorial integrity or, as it was coined at the time, for “both Europe and Kosovo” politics. This is why Serbia’s foreign policy in this mandate was built around two goals – EU membership and Kosovo as part of Serbia, but with clear advantage of the first one whenever these goals were conflicting. Such an approach allowed government parties to continue with moderate nationalistic discourse for domestic purposes and with cooperative standpoints offered to the international community signaling substantial shift in politics. This shift could be perceived through three major policy changes: Serbian government gave up on sanctioning those who participate in Kosovo institutions, decreased funds dedicated to Kosovo (social assistance and double salaries) and accepted direct negotiations with Kosovo representatives³⁴.

The Cvetković government restarted talks with the EU and participated in EU-led negotiation process together with Kosovo representatives. Although the government claimed that these processes were independent of each other, they obviously became intertwined and the EU used the membership candidate status as a carrot in order to motivate Serbia to cooperate regarding some of the EU’s demands vis-à-vis the position of Kosovo.

The Serbian government faced additional problems when implementing the Brussels agreements. Namely, Serbs in the north of Kosovo mostly supported the opposition parties (DSS, SRS and later the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)) and therefore were not willing to accept Serbian government negotiation team as legitimate representatives; they were reluctant to accept most of agreed mechanisms, including the introduction of border crossing in the north (although two similar crossings had already been established in the eastern border of Kosovo). This opposition resulted in conflicts between the Kosovo Serbs and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) delaying the implementation of agreements further. Of course, Serbian opposition used these events as an opportunity to criticize Serbian government representatives accusing them of being traitors of Serbian national interests and, in fact, servants of the EU.

However, this criticism was somewhat different from the one in the previous years, primarily because of the major shift within the opposition block. After another electoral defeat, a part of the SRS leadership decided that it was the right time to redefine political standpoints. Šešelj’s authoritarian leadership prevented the party from growing and changing in the similar manner as the Socialists did, although Tomislav Nikolić (acting president) did earn some level of autonomy and showed some signs of moderation. Realizing that it would not be possible to become acceptable for other parties and especially for the international community while in SRS, Nikolić decided to found a new party – the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), together with SRS secretary-general Aleksandar Vučić. The division between radicals was greeted and unofficially

supported by government parties, which also helped SNS to make first political steps. Those steps were aimed at proving the new nature and new political rhetoric; SNS declared itself as “a right wing pro-European party,”³⁵ ready to move away from the old SRS far-right positions. It was obvious that SNS decided to shift from vote-seeking strategy to office-seeking strategy in attempt to increase coalition potential or, as Jovanović has put it, “Nikolić tried to create a radical party that could win the elections.”³⁶ Voters greeted this shift and SNS rapidly grew to be one of the strongest parties already in 2010 after participated in several local elections³⁷.

On the other hand, in opposition to SNS moderation, DSS gradually shifted its position toward a more conservative end of political spectrum and focused mostly on Kosovo-related issues. It also promoted a more balanced foreign policy and advocated for strengthening ties with the Russian federation, mostly in the field of economy and energy.

In opposition to polarization in 2008, later period was marked by two largest parties adopting catch-all strategies and smaller parties (LDP, SRS and DSS) taking over the debate on Kosovo and Europe to the back-alleys of the political scene. In the absence of strong anti-system party and with centripetal party competition, Serbian party system showed most characteristics of Sartori’s model of moderate pluralism.³⁸ This means that ideological distance between strongest parties was significantly reduced and that main parties achieved consensus on the basic issues.

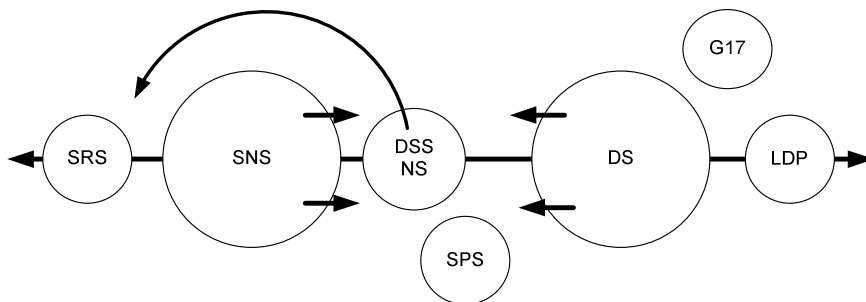


Figure 3: Moderate pluralism and catch-all strategies after 2008 parliamentary elections (adapted from Spasojević, 2011, p.115).

Furthermore, the mandate of the Cvetković government was largely dominated by economic issues and EU integration process, with occasional EU vs. Kosovo reminders. External reasons for this could be found in the global economic crisis which led to a decrease of direct foreign investments and lack of international companies’ interest in privatization of state owned companies, resulting in further erosion of local economic problems. On the domestic side, government parties preferred transition from identity-based to economy-based issues (believing that they would benefit from this because opposition was strongly rooted in nationalistic identity issues) while oppositional SNS supported this transition because it allowed them to make distance from the old SRS approach and to minimize the negative legacy. Understandably, DSS and SRS tried to keep Kosovo high on the agenda, but Koštunica’s party was rather weak and SRS was dealing with internal problems, after the party’s division. In the absence of strong opposition, government managed to complete a full 4-year mandate.

The beginning of the end: The shift of power and the Brussels agreement

The 2012 parliamentary elections were organized in the context of economic crisis, which is not surprising because unemployment rate increased from 14 percent to 24 percent, public debt was almost doubled from 8.8 to 14.4 billion euro, and average salary decreased from 409 to 333 euro.³⁹ An additional (and eventually decisive) element in these elections was the decision of the Serbian president Tadić “to shorten his mandate” (as it was coined by his PR team, instead of saying that he simply resigned), in order to improve the DS chances on parliamentary elections because his personal ratings were higher than the party’s. Indeed, the general electoral campaigns (presidential, parliamentary and local) managed to blur program-based messages, shifting focus to personalities of current and potential leaders,⁴⁰ preventing party programmatic diversification from happening.⁴¹

Democrats started campaigning from the incumbent position arguing that continuity in the office would provide stability and progress, both in the international arena (EU candidacy and the protection of Kosovo) and in the field of economic reforms. However, after receiving the first public opinion surveys that were pessimistic, DS decided to launch negative campaign against the opposition based on claims that once in power SNS would act like “the old radicals.”⁴² However, the election results proved that the DS initiative was not effective and that citizens started to perceive SNS differently than SRS, or at least that the SNS representatives managed to convince voters that they can change.

The SNS campaign was oriented toward economic issues and ruthless fight against corruption.⁴³ This was an expected, efficient and well chosen extension of standpoints that SNS leadership promoted while being in SRS, which allowed it to make through this transition without a real need to change every aspect of its politics and therefore look more credible. Using corruption as the core campaign issue was excellent choice because it reflected transitional losers’ standpoints that government corruption is the reason for poor economic situation. This standpoint gained more legitimacy after EU Commission demanded additional investigation on 24 privatization cases following the Anti-corruption Council report⁴⁴.

During 2012 electoral campaign SNS supported EU membership and offered rather vague statements about the Kosovo question, calling for “an agreement of all parties on the national interest, without really proposing the actual solution.”⁴⁵ What SNS basically did was to replicate the DS approach from 2008 by high-jacking DS issues and adding them to their agenda (and therefore minimizing weak spots in the identity politics) and moving as far as possible to the centre of the political space. This catch-all strategy was even more successful because of weak competition on the conservative end in comparison to strong criticism coming from LDP and “white vote campaign” on the DS (modernist) side of the political scene.

SPS was the most program-oriented party; it combined socialists’ economic standpoints with authoritarian and conservative social values that included frequent mentioning of Kosovo. SPS was also different when compared to other parties because of Dačić who attempted to include more pragmatic views on Kosovo, often proposing partition and exchange of territories between the Serbs and Albanians. Still, the most Kosovo-oriented party in the 2012 campaign was DSS. It argued that the Brussels talks were not in accordance with Serbian constitution. DSS attached other policy areas to Kosovo policy and demanded more Russian influence in Serbian economy (as in the case of Serbian oil industry that was privatized by Russian Gazprom during the Koštunica government) and foreign policy.⁴⁶ The DSS position was now closer to SRS and some extreme right-wing parties such as Dveri (a new far-right party), and we could argue that DSS and SNS switched their ideological positions between two elections.⁴⁷ The radical position

did not bring many votes and DSS barely fulfilled threshold, while SRS and Dveri got 4 percent each and did not secure place in the parliament, at all. These results emphasized the 2008 victory of pro-EU forces even more, but also led to the lack of representation of almost 10 percent of right-wing voters in the parliament.

However, as in the case of 2008 elections, the real outcome of parliamentary elections was decided by the presidential race and the choice of medium actor (SPS) with whom to form the new government. Surprisingly, after the defeat in the first round, Tomislav Nikolić managed to secure an extremely narrow victory (71,000 votes) against Boris Tadić in the second round, and to move SNS to pole position for the government negotiations⁴⁸. Again, Dačić predicted the coming developments and decided to end a four-year cooperation with DS and to join SNS winning camp. Within the new setting, he became prime minister in the government with majority of SNS ministries. The United Regions of Serbia (URS, ex G17) was added to the parliamentary majority in order to avoid “*the ancient regime*” image of the government.

Indeed, SNS won the 2012 elections by imposing a new hierarchy of cleavages and by decreasing the influence of Kosovo / EU dilemma. However, it was still rather difficult to say what the party’s policies, especially regarding Kosovo and the EU, could look like. A detailed analysis of the SNS campaign shows that it played on both cards – EU and Kosovo, allowing population to freely interpret their electoral promises. Once in the office, it became clear that SNS was willing to continue the DS path in negotiations with Kosovo in order to keep Serbia on EU integration path. President Nikolić explained these steps by arguing that Serbia is a serious state, ready to respect obligations taken by the previous government, which represented the original signal of the SNS’s pro-EU orientation.

The new government also managed to convince the Serbs in northern Kosovo to accept the Brussels agreement, by using different strategies.

On the other hand, the government’s anti-corruption policy and arrests of several tycoons became the prime time issue leading to further marginalization of other issues and enormous popularity of SNS and, more precisely, Aleksandar Vučić (elected as new SNS president after Nikolić took the position of the president of Serbia). His personal popularity put a lot of pressure on the established majority and after only one year in the office, the Dačić government went under the reconstruction and URS was detached from the majority. At the time, SNS and SPS proved that they do not represent risk for the regional stability since they had already secured trust from both regional and international actors. SNS leader Vučić used the given set of circumstances to maximize voters support, becoming even more popular than prime minister Dačić, all of which resulting in new (extraordinary) elections in 2014. The campaign proved irreversible trends regarding identity issues and domination of socio-economic cleavages. EU consensus was again confirmed and Kosovo-centered parties, such as DSS, SRS and Dveri, stayed below the electoral threshold and out of the parliament. The same happened with LDP on the other side of political scene, although ideological reasons are not the only ones. The SNS-led coalition won 48 percent of votes and could form a single-coalition government, but anyhow it decided to include SPS in the new government arrangement. DS split into two halves after the party’s assembly had elected a new president Dragan Djilas (former president Tadić left and founded the New Democratic Party (NDS)) and both parties won 6 percent each. This electoral earthquake clearly demonstrated that the Serbian party system is still far from being consolidated, but with clear predominance of pro-EU parties.

Concluding remarks

This chapter examined the standpoints of relevant Serbian political parties about the Kosovo question. As pointed out, the Kosovo future status has represented one of the most salient issues in transitional Serbia, especially after being intertwined with European accession process. By using social cleavage approach, I demonstrated that the Kosovo issue has been approached by Serbian parties through the already existing structure of political divisions and that it has been moved to the top of political agenda because of vote-seeking tactic of moderate reformist and traditionalist political actors. However, once this tactics started to put limits to the government ability to provide expected pace in the EU integration process, political parties started to move toward office-seeking logic – an approach leading to the decrease of importance of the Kosovo issue. Of course, political actors just followed electoral will expressed through long, but crucial electoral period that took place in the first half of 2008 and the incentives expressed by the international community.

On the general level, electoral victory of modernist DS in 2008 led to basic national consensus on EU integration and to consolidation of electoral democracy. These elections made fundamental impact and caused substantial change on the party scene and the outcome of these changes it still not clearly comprehensible. The most striking fact was the breakup of the largest opposition party (SRS) and the establishment of moderate nationalist pro-EU party (SNS) that initiated changes in the Serbian party system resulting in predominance of centripetal competition and catch-all party strategies. Furthermore, this redefinition of the conservative part of political spectrum and change of main political issues launched series of changes that included total marginalization of right wing parties and their voters and divisions and atomization among reformist block of parties.

With regard to the Kosovo question, the minimization of identity elements has enabled the political elite to become actively engaged in negotiations with the Kosovo representatives. The talks put in place led to signing of the 2013 Brussels agreement, providing the platform for future relations between Serbia and Kosovo. However, it is possible to claim that this platform will not provide success on its own, thus without a strong pressure from the international community; it would be presumptions to state that the predominant attitudes of Serbian population regarding the position of Kosovo have dramatically changed because of the changes characterizing the party system. On the other hand, developments since 2008 have showed that Serbia has moved on and it would be unlikely to recreate a divided society atmosphere from 2007 and 2008, even if the political actors would not mind doing so, because of tactical or ideological reasons.

In-depth or superficial change?

If this ideological change occurred within several years, it is reasonable to pose the question on possibility of reversed process? In other words, if political elite was able to move toward EU-friendly positions once, can they move back toward nationalistic and EU-skeptic positions?

In current years, it has become very difficult to make any predictions regarding European politics, but in this case we should (following our social cleavage approach) investigate the basic value based dimension. Regardless if we focus at elite or citizens, public opinion surveys shows the decline of the main root of euro- skepticism in Serbia – Kosovo issue.

Results from CCS and Voter Study [here](#)

However, this does not mean that EU skeptic position can not be based on other issues, more similar to e.g. Hungarian or Czech case. One example of this is electoral platform of new right populist party Dveri (in parliament since 2016 extraordinary elections, in coalition with DSS) which is more based on social conservatism (pro-life issues, family and church friendly standpoints), populism (including anti-immigrant issues) and economic protectionism, with Kosovo issue being in the background (ref. Spasojević 2016)

Accountability?

Finally, described ideological change raises the question of accountability? If this change has been driven more by the outside pressure (EU integration) than by voters' demands it is possible to ask if SNS leaders are more responsive and responsible to Brussels than to Serbian citizens.

In order to answer this question, we can go back to the initial stages of transition – as stated, political cleavages formation was more top-down process (hence the political instead of usual social cleavage) and we could argue that SRS and SPS put more emphasis on identity issues than their electorate supported. Election results (and public opinion surveys) from early 2000 showed that the opposition gained more support when they had more economic based manifestoes; also, enormous success of SNS after 2012 showed that their voter supported shift from euro skeptic to more realistic euro-friendly (or euro-realistic) positions and emphasis on corruption and economy. Therefore, we can conclude that ideological shift was supported by international actors (and launched by the change of tactics of SNS party leadership aimed at the increase of coalition potential), but enabled and facilitated by the electorate.

On the other side, there is still a questionable transformation of SNS leadership – are they *honestly* pro-European now? Although it would be almost impossible to detect actual/honest opinions, for us is more important to establish if political modus operandi of SNS has been changed or not? From the perspective of minimal democracy, it is obvious that SNS leadership has accepted democracy as the only game in town. However, regarding the decline of fragile democratic institutions in recent years, we could argue that their ideological shift is limited, especially regarding basic understanding of democracy (checks and balances, or Kitschelt cleavage between authoritarian and liberal),

In this case support that EU institutions give to SNS government becomes more important as provider of outside legitimacy, especially in the case of the old regime parties that were unacceptable for international community just a decade ago. There are many concerned voices from Serbian civil society and opposition that are claiming that EU trades its support in exchange for SNS cooperation regarding Kosovo issue.

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