

Serbia: Belated Democratisation

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Introduction

The fact that a citizen who was born within the borders of the current Serbian state in 1989 can declare that he or she has lived in four different countries¹ without leaving the borders points out the tremendous political changes concerning the state. This chapter endeavours to give an overview about the dynamics of the Serbian political system, outlining its history during the last nearly 30 years. Serbia serves as an example of belated political transition: the communist leadership was able to survive and preserve its power after the introduction of a multi-party system. Thus, after 1990, under the rule of Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian political system became increasingly authoritarian where one party – the Socialist Party of Serbia – was able to create a hegemony and marginalise the opposition parties (especially the anti-Milošević ones). This chapter intends to reveal the factors which facilitated the regime's survival from the communist times until October 2000: which tools were used by the political regime to prevent social unrest to become a real threat.

After the collapse of the Milošević regime, early elections and frequent government changes have remained constant. Despite these difficulties, the country launched the Europeanisation process, even if several problems, like corruption, weakness of the rule of law have hindered the reforms. The belated Serbian transition resulted in a fragmented party system resulting in multi-party governments and an apparent electoral volatility. Thus, this piece portrays the features of the party system and its main constituting cleavages as well.

The Long Road to Regime Change – Serbia in the 1990s

The case of Serbs in Yugoslavia was unique taking into consideration their number and their role in the formation of the country. Nevertheless, Josip Broz Tito hindered the Serbs' ability to dominate the country (compared to the interwar period) by creating a federation of six countries and two autonomous regions (Vojvodina and Kosovo). Even though Serbia was the biggest country and had a central position in many respects (e.g. they dominated the Yugoslav army), the basic principle of the state was to strengthen the smaller nations against the Serbians' attempts to restore their supremacy. However, after Tito's death, the

¹ Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1963–1992), Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992–2003), State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003–2006), Republic of Serbia (2006–).



new political leadership was too weak to resist the temptation of nationalism and failed to maintain the strong central authority that Tito had.²

The Antibureaucratic revolution (1987–1989) changed the internal balance of power in Serbia and had effects on the whole federation as well. Slobodan Milošević, the new leader of the League of Communists of Serbia (elected in 1986),³ initiated a series of actions with the objective of putting his loyal cadres in important positions in the state administration, weakening the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo, and establishing his political control over the country. The ‘revolution’ was executed in the forms of meetings, protests and (forced) resignations of political adversaries. His political trajectory met the growing reflections to nationalist sentiments, and especially the issues in Kosovo where Serbs were in minority (and their number was constantly decreasing). Milošević declared in his famous speech in Kosovo on 24 April 1984 that the Serbs in Kosovo should not abandon their lands despite the fact that the threat stemming from the Albanian majority. This political move paved the way for him to make an alliance with the nationalist parties, and later on, to seize power for the future.

Thus, during the last years of the 1980s, when other communist regimes started to fall in neighbouring states (in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania), the Serbian communist leadership managed to centralise and even stabilise its power, fuelled by the growing nationalism and Serbian–Albanian antagonism over Kosovo (Albanian deputies in the Parliament of the province declared the independence of Kosovo in mid-1990).⁴ Nevertheless, the transition to a multi-party system started in 1989–1990. In July 1990, a new party, the Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička Partija Srbije – SPS) was founded as a result of the merger of the Serbian League of Communists and the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Serbia. The SPS was closely linked to Milošević and established itself as a new political organisation.⁵ Other parties also appeared on the political landscape, such as Vuk Drašković’s Serbian Renewal Movement (Srpski Pokret Obnove – SPO) on the right, or more ‘liberal’ parties, such as the Demokratska Stranka (DS). Realising these developments, the Serbian Parliament allowed the legal formation of opposition parties in August 1990.

Nevertheless, SPS preserved its political and economic hegemony over the state (apparatus), thus the new opposition parties faced an uphill battle challenging it. The results of the first two-stage multi-party elections held on 2 and 23 December 1990 showed the domination of SPS in domestic politics. Due to the first-past-the-post system, SPS was able to acquire almost 80% of the seats despite its 46% share of the total votes. Relying on the comfortable majority in the Parliament, and being elected President (with 63.3% of the votes) at the presidential election on 23 December 1990, Milošević continued to cement his power in the multi-party system.

In 1991, the dissolution of Yugoslavia began. Both Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence on 25 June 1991. Slovenia managed to achieve its goal by a short conflict (the Ten-Day War), while Croatia entered a long-lasting war against the secessionist movements of Serbs in Krajina (who declared the independence of the Republic of Serbian

² JUHÁSZ 2010.

³ JUHÁSZ 1999, 172–173.

⁴ JUHÁSZ et al. 2003, 15.

⁵ JUHÁSZ 1999, 203.

Krajina in August 1990 and occupied rapidly some 15% of the territory of the country).⁶ After Bosnia and Herzegovina's declaration of independence, the existence of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia became futile, the leaders of Serbia and Montenegro decided to form a new entity called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), based on two member states and the autonomous regions of Serbia (Macedonia declared its independence on 25 September 1991).⁷

This 'rump Yugoslavia' had to face international sanctions when the UN imposed a trade embargo on the country on 30 May 1992. On the following day, 31 May, the federal elections were won by SPS and the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka – SRS)⁸ came second. At the federal level, Serbian–American businessman Milan Panić became the Prime Minister. Later on, Panić surprised Milošević by following a more liberal and conciliatory policy by recognising Croatia and BiH, leading to internal political struggle between him and Milošević. As a result, he had to resign in 1993.

Despite the growing nationalist sentiments in Serbia and the strong support for Milošević within the electorate, some opposition parties began to organise mass rallies against the government. On 23 May 1992, they founded the Anti-Milošević Democratic Movement of Serbia, called DEPOS, which was led by the Democratic Party and SPO. Nevertheless, they failed to unite and support Panić in challenging Milošević's power. Thus, he could not beat Milošević at the presidential election on 20 December 1992, as the incumbent President acquired more than 50% of the votes. The parliamentary elections held on the same day (boycotted by Albanians and Bosniaks) were also won by the SPS, which secured some 29% of the votes due to the manipulation of the electoral process. Nevertheless, Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party gained ground and got the second highest number of votes. The federal parliamentary elections roughly followed this pattern. The cooperation between SPS and SRS did not last long. In September, the SRS decided to propose a vote of no-confidence against the government. Mounting tensions between the two parties inclined Milošević to dissolve the Parliament and call for new elections.⁹

The new elections held on 26 December 1993 strengthened the position of the SPS while SRS received only some 14% of the votes. The DEPOS – which had been transformed since 1992 – came third. The economic crisis featured by hyperinflation, empty shelves in shops and a sharp decrease in wages in real terms imposed a deep economic hardship to the Serbian people. These difficulties were successfully tackled by the intervention of Dragoslav Avramović, the President of the Central Bank. His stabilisation programme reduced inflation, began to increase production and facilitated the increase of real wages. Various factors helped this economic miracle, such as the resilience of the Serbian agricultural output, or constant remittances from the Serbian Diaspora living in Western Europe and in the USA. Finally, Serbia managed to surmount the deep economic crisis.¹⁰

Simultaneously, the Serbian political elite had to face the consequences of losing the war in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The West's support for Croatia – which was

⁶ KARDOS–SIMÁNDI 2004, 844–855.

⁷ WOODWARD 1995, 173.

⁸ Founded in early 1990.

⁹ MILLER 1997.

¹⁰ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 252.

able to make the adequate reforms and create a strong army – and NATO involvement in BiH accompanied by a recovering, but still poor Serbia convinced Milošević to change its policy and leave his quest for a ‘Greater Serbia’ behind. The Croatian military success in 1995 (Operation Storm) destroyed the Republic of Serbian Krajina and created a huge wave of refugees of around 150–200,000 people. Serbs in Bosnia also had to face military collapse.¹¹

Facing the possibility of defeat, the Serbian Government started to support the peace talks, which resulted in the Dayton Agreement (21 November 1995) and the Erdut Agreement (12 November 1995).¹² After finishing the war, and intention to establish himself as a guarantor of peace in the Western Balkans, Slobodan Milošević started to make stronger efforts to control the economy and the opposition as well. The federal parliamentary elections on 3 November 1996 brought the victory of the SPS-led coalition (due to the boycott of Albanians, it was able to get the overwhelming majority of the seats from Kosovo).

Nevertheless, the local elections in November 1996 proved to be a challenge to the regime. Its efforts to deny the opposition parties’ victories and to restrict university autonomy nourished the popular discontent and led to demonstrations and protests against the government. As the opposition’s¹³ victories of Zajedno were annulled, some worker groups also joined the demonstrations and the international community condemned the developments as well. Even an OSCE delegation visited Belgrade.¹⁴ Finally, the authorities began to recognise the electoral success of the Zajedno. The ‘winter discontent’ did not result in the overthrow of Milošević. This was partly due to the internal division of the opposition (in mid-1997, the Zajedno alliance collapsed), and also due to the President’s power over the police, which was an effective tool to neutralise the protests and any threatening social discontent. While the authoritarian regimes mostly disappeared from the region by the mid-1990s, Milošević could strengthen its position and preserve his power regardless of the international community’s pressure and the domestic social and political tensions.

He managed to amend the Constitution and became President of the FRY in July 1997. Due to the manipulation of the elections, SPS and its coalition partners were able to gain 110 seats out of the 250, and they became the strongest group in the legislature. The presidential elections that year were also flawed; finally, in the fourth round, the pro-Milošević Milan Milutinović could win with the adequate turnout (more than 50%).

Although Milošević’s power was unquestionable, some groups, like the student movement called Otpor (Resistance), which was launched in October 1998, tried to challenge it. In spite of their efforts, the war in Kosovo had a major impact on the Milošević regime. The Kosovo Liberation Army’s (KLA) struggle in Kosovo after 1996 deteriorated the situation in the autonomous region, the self-proclaimed government of which missed the opportunity to join the international negotiations in 1995. Notwithstanding their efforts, Kosovo’s independence remained far to be achieved, which pushed some Albanian groups to launch an armed conflict. The news about the clashes with the Serbian authorities found their way to the international community that was worrying about the possibility of ethnic cleansing – the repetition of

¹¹ REMÉNYI 2014.

¹² JUHÁSZ 1999, 249–274.

¹³ Party coalition between several anti-Milošević parties, like the DS, the DSS (Demokratska Stranka Srbije – DSS) etc.

¹⁴ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 255.

scenes of the war in Bosnia. After failing to conclude an agreement between the Albanians and Serbs, NATO launched massive air strikes against Serbia, damaging its strategic facilities from March to June 1999.

Domestic violence against the adversaries of the regime continued. In May, demonstrations were started in several towns of the country by army reservists demanding the end of the war. Later on, thousands of them refused to return to Kosovo, aggravating the situation of the regime, against which the military operation of NATO was futile.

Finally, Milošević had to concede defeat in June 1999. The opposition parties started already to campaign for the resignation of Milošević in late June by establishing the 'Alliance for Change'. Later on, main opposition leaders, such as Vuk Drašković and Zoran Đinđić, agreed to hold a major rally on 19 August 1999. Anti-government demonstration continued in the spring without major consequences. The authorities made stronger efforts to restrict critical media.

Milošević managed to make constitutional changes passed by the federal Parliament to secure his power, for example allowing two four-year terms for the President instead of one. The amendments also decreased the weight of Montenegro in the federation.¹⁵

After reinforcing his chances to retain power, Milošević called for federal presidential, parliamentary and local elections for September 2000. Nevertheless, by then, he had lost some of his allies: SRS announced that it would not support him and nominated its own candidate, Tomislav Nikolić who criticised the government by pointing out high-level corruption and electoral fraud. As a more threatening move, eighteen opposition parties created the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (Demokratska opozicija Srbije – DOS) in early 2000. For the elections, the alliance decided to support Vojislav Koštunica, leader of the centre-right DSS, as its presidential candidate. The desperate actions of the regime to ban opposition rallies, limit the electoral campaign and attacks on the independent media proved to be fruitless. The government did not allow Western observers to monitor the elections, but invited teams from Russia, India and China.¹⁶

The presidential election was won by Koštunica with more than 50% of the votes; however, the Electoral Commission (the members of which were appointed by the SPS-dominated Parliament) announced that despite his victory, he fell short of reaching 50%, hence, a second round was necessary.

Milošević's reluctance to cede power to the democratic opposition paved the way towards mass rallies, strikes in mines and factories, and growing civil disobedience in October 2000. Under such circumstances, the so-called 'bulldozer revolution' toppling Milošević started on 5 October 2000. In the morning of that day, the Constitutional Court made a decision about annulling the results of the first round of the presidential election and announced the need for a new election. Around half a million protesters rushed to various state institutions, the Parliament, and the buildings of the state radio and television. Neither the police, nor the army did hinder the people. After the event, the Constitutional Court reconsidered its previous decision and announced that Vojislav Koštunica was the President of the country.

¹⁵ JUHÁSZ 2001, 103–120.

¹⁶ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 270.

Political Developments after the Regime Change

At the federal level, the Parliament voted for an interim government led by Zoran Zizić who was the deputy leader of Montenegro's (pro-Milošević) Socialist People's Party. After the revolutionary events, new elections were held on 17 December 2000 which was won by the DOS coalition composed of eighteen parties. After a short intermezzo (the elections had to be repeated at several polling stations) in January, the Parliament voted for the government led by DOS and Zoran Đinđić.

As of its first measures, the new government put Milošević under police surveillance and adopted a law to curtail the privileges of ex-presidents, thus allowing the judicial system to begin prosecuting him. Legislative reforms repealing the repressive media laws were also introduced and the government started to dismiss the people loyal to Milošević from the administration and the judiciary. At the very beginning of April, Milošević was taken to prison after an incident and was charged with abuse of power and corruption.¹⁷

Koštunica was able to win the next presidential election in Serbia in late 2002. The democratic turn in the country did not impede the dissolution of the federal state. Firstly, at the beginning of 2003, the respective legislatures of Montenegro and Serbia accepted to replace the FRY with the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, granting more powers to the member states. Three years later, after the successful 'Yes' campaign in the referendum about Montenegro leaving the confederative state, Podgorica declared its independence. The government in Belgrade accepted the decision, and Montenegro could split from the state without military conflict. Shortly after the dissolution of the unified state, Serbia accepted a new constitution.

Although anti-Milošević measures were taken by the government, several difficulties hindered this process. Some of his loyalists managed to keep their positions (mainly in the secret service and army), surviving at least the first attempts of lustration.¹⁸ SPS, which became isolated after 2000, had to create a 'more democratic' image to get legitimacy. During the 2004 parliamentary elections, they supported Kostunica, while in 2008, they managed to return to the government as an ally of the DS. Combating organised crime and mafia groups also emerged as a difficulty for the new government; these efforts led to the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić on 12 March 2003. After his death, DOS has collapsed.

After the elections of 2004 and 2007, Vojislav Kostunica managed to create a cabinet with the participation of other smaller parties, like G17+, SPO, and later on also DS. The negotiations between these political parties, including the almost three-month-long internal quarrel over government formation, harmed their reputation. In 2008, a DS-led government took power under the premiership of Mirko Cvetković with the participation of smaller parties, among others, SPS or G17+.

However, these elections demonstrated that the strongest party in the country was not DS, but first SRS, and then, from 2008, the Tomislav Nikolić-led Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS). The coalition of smaller centre-right or leftist parties was able to balance the strong parliamentary presence of SRS/SNS for a while; nevertheless, the elections in 2012 brought a major change. Boris Tadić's defeat at the presidential

¹⁷ The extradition of people accused by war crimes to the ICTY also began. After several weeks of political debates, the government also transferred Milošević to the international court on 28 June 2001 (later he died in The Hague in 2006).

¹⁸ BOCHSLER 2010, 101.

elections against Nikolić and the SPS's alliance with SNS to form a coalition government opened the way for SNS to seize power. All the same, this could only happen as a result of the coalition talks. Ivica Dačić (SPS) emerged as Prime Minister, early elections in 2014 strengthened the position of the SNS and allowed Alexander Vučić to be appointed Prime Minister. Ever since, SNS has been able to reinforce its position and preserve power after the parliamentary elections of 2016.¹⁹ In 2017, Vučić won the presidential elections, thus introducing a de facto semi-presidential system, cementing his power and raising critiques about authoritarian tendencies in the country.²⁰

Political Institutions

The Constitution

After Montenegro's secession and the dissolution of the confederation, Serbia's political elite rapidly accepted a new Constitution, which replaced Milošević's Constitution of 1990. The new one abolished the death penalty, introduced the office of ombudsman demonstrating the reformist features.²¹ According to the Constitution, the country adopted a parliamentary system based on the separation of powers between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary branches.

The new Constitution granted a rather symbolic role to the directly elected President. The law does not prohibit the President to hold party membership, consequently, it allowed charismatic governing party leaders, like Boris Tadić (2004–2012) and Aleksandar Vučić (after 2017–) to broaden the effective powers of the presidency, creating a de facto semi-presidential system.

Electoral system

The unicameral Parliament has had 250 MPs since 1990. The Parliament adopted a new electoral law in 1992. The law divided the country into nine electoral districts, and members of the Parliament were elected on a single party list in a proportional system with a 5% threshold, replacing the previous, majoritarian one. After the collapse of the Milošević regime, the Parliament amended the law (as of 2018, the elections are regulated primarily by the 2006 Constitution, the 2000 Law on Election of Representatives [LER], the 2009 Law on the Unified Voters' Register [LUVR], the 2009 Law on Political Parties [LPP] and the 2011 Law on Financing Political Activities [LFPA]).²² According to the legislation, there is a single nationwide constituency, in which eligible voters can cast their votes for closed-party lists in a proportional system (with the D'Hondt method). The threshold has remained 5%. Lists representing national minorities are exempted from this threshold requirement.²³

¹⁹ ÖRDÖGH 2016a, 9–24.

²⁰ EROR 2018.

²¹ BOCHSLER 2010, 100.

²² OSCE 2016.

²³ OSCE 2016, 5.

Due to the proportional electoral system, the party system has become fragmented, as several small parties have always been represented in the Parliament.

Government

The government's competence is regulated by the Law on Government, accepted in 2005. According to this legislation, the government is the executive power of the country, led by the Prime Minister. The government can be constituted of ministers with or without portfolios. Interestingly, there is no Government Spokesperson, but the Secretariat is responsible for handling relations with the media. Ministries have their own competences and relations with the press, which has sometimes led to controversial statements from various members of the Cabinet.

Due to the fragmented party system and the presence of minority parties in the Parliament, governments are usually formed as multi-party coalitions. From 1991 to 2018, there were 13 different governments in Serbia, which means that they managed to retain the power for an average of two years instead of the four permitted by the Constitution. Frequent government changes highlight the political instability the country went through. During the 1990s, governments came from SPS, which usually had the required majority in the legislature (when it did not, they could count on the support of the SRS). However, these governments were heavily controlled by Slobodan Milošević, who kept meaningful power to his authoritarian regime. Since 2000, a series of multi-party governments involving minor political parties can be observed, which sometimes had more than 20 cabinet members. During the last 18 years, political instability and frequent government changes have remained an integral part of the system: there was no government that could manage to survive the four-year-long period granted by the law.

Administrative divisions

The Constitution (Article 12) declares that “State power is restricted by the right of citizens to provincial autonomy and local self-government”.²⁴ It also declares (Article 182) that “there are the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija” which are granted special status protected by the Constitution. This is in line with the developments after 2000 when autonomy of Vojvodina, which was curtailed by Milosevic, had been reinstated.²⁵ After the defeat in 2000 and the establishment of international supervision in Kosovo, the status of the province has become disputed. The declaration of independence of Pristina in February 2008, followed by the *de jure* recognition of a *de facto* state by many countries showed a territorial loss, which Belgrade has never accepted. Nevertheless, negotiations were started between the two capitals, later brokered by the U.S. and the EU.

²⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia 2006.

²⁵ See more about the autonomy in Vojvodina in TÓTH 2018.

Party Politics

After seizing power in 1987, Slobodan Milošević was able to stay in power for thirteen years. This period can be divided into two periods: 1. a shorter one until 1990 under socialist institutions; and 2. a longer one, which can be characterised by a multi-party, nationalist-authoritarian system.²⁶ The introduction of a multi-party system in 1990²⁷ did not challenge Milošević's rule. This had several reasons. Firstly, a great number of parties appeared in the political field and they were too fragmented to become a real threat. Their occasional alliances – as it was already mentioned – were short-lived and collapsed regularly due to their internal struggles. Secondly, Milošević managed to strengthen his power by using nationalist rhetoric and radicalisation stemming from the ongoing wars in the first half of the 1990s. Establishing himself as a strong and charismatic leader helped him stand out from the party elite in the late 1980s, and later his charisma also helped him preserve the majority of his electorate. In addition to his personal skills, he also made the required modifications in the constitutional system in order to prevent any legal and political threats that could have led to his toppling. He was able to manage several crises (winter discontent, economic difficulties in 1993, defeats in wars). Moreover, nationalist rhetoric helped him to eventually make political alliances with the SRS which was helpful from time to time in his political career. This political co-optation was not restricted to SRS, but for instance, it also included SPO in 1999, when Vuk Drašković joined the coalition for several months. In short, the weakness of oppositional forces and the establishment of an authoritarian system granted a political hegemony to SPS.²⁸

The military defeat against NATO forces and the loss of Kosovo, coupled with economic difficulties leading to growing social tensions, posed a significant threat to the regime. The new coalition created by the alliance of 18 parties, led by DOS has become a more stable political initiative compared to previous attempts. DOS was able to defeat SPS at the September 2000 elections and the manipulations of the authorities backfired, worsening the position of the regime. The revolution on 5 October pushed the regime to establish an interim government and call for elections, which were won by the DOS.

Subsequent years were characterised by political instability and led to the decline of DOS. Vojislav Koštunica's DSS left DOS in August 2001, and remained at the centre-right. Later on, other moderate right-wing parties (e.g. SPO) joined this bloc. Following the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, DOS collapsed, and the next roughly ten years were characterised by the struggles between DSS and DS led by Boris Tadić. Under such circumstances, DS moved to the left, finding allies in the form of G17+ or the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) among others. In 2005, Čedomir Jovanović was expelled from the DS; however, he founded a social-liberal party, LDP.

Tomislav Nikolić by deserting SRS and establishing SNS paved the way to the emergence of a strong right-wing party after 2008. The 2012 elections brought the next change in the political dynamics. As Tadić (leader of the DS between 2004 and 2012) lost the presidential elections against Nikolić, and the moderate SNS (being the largest party in

²⁶ ANTONIĆ 2002.

²⁷ However, parties began to form in late 1989, like the DS has been founded by a group of intellectuals in late 1989.

²⁸ MILLER 1997.

the Parliament) managed to broker a coalition agreement with SPS, DS lost its governing position and went through an internal crisis. Since 2012, the SNS has managed to secure its position as the main party in the Serbian Parliament, while one can see a gradual fragmentation on the left.²⁹

The Serbian party system is shaped by three cleavages. The first one is based on ethnic division.³⁰ Without Kosovo, the majority of Serbia's population is Serbian (more than 80%), the second biggest group is the Hungarian minority (some 4%), while the remaining roughly 15% is constituted of more than 20 different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, ethnic tensions played a crucial role during the last years of Communism and during the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, making it an influential cleavage during the 1990s. Thus, a nationalist-civic cleavage can also be detected in the party system, where the civic group was made up by the DS, G17+, LDP (several participants of the DOS-led coalition) while DSS, SPO and NS were in the centre. On the nationalist side, SPS and SRS were the most important parties. Seemingly, the relevance of this cleavage has been declining since 2012 due to the collapse of the support of the SRS and SNS' move to the political centre after acquiring the power from the DS. Nevertheless, the cleavage still exists, as SRS managed to gain parliamentary seats in the 2016 elections, and DSS has been moving towards the right.

Ethnic parties are integral elements of the Serbian political landscape. As Hungarians constitute the most numerous ethnic group, their parties are the strongest and most organised in this category. The first Hungarian political organisation, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség – VMSZ/Savez vojvodanskih Mađara – SVM) was founded in 1994, in Senta (Zenta in Hungarian), a town inhabited mostly by Hungarians. A year later, it became a political party and ran in the parliamentary and local elections, winning several seats. During subsequent years, other Hungarian political parties appeared; however, they were not able to challenge the dominant position of VMSZ within the Hungarian electorate. Due to the geographical distribution of ethnic groups, these parties are well-embedded at the local-level politics. Thus, Hungarians are very active in shaping regional politics in Vojvodina, where their share of the population is nearly 20% (while it is around 4% at the state level).³¹

Bosniaks, concentrated in the Sandžak region near the Montenegrin border in south Serbia, also organised their political parties; nevertheless, the failure to establish one strong political formation reflects to the internal cleavages within the community.

The second cleavage is based on the individuals' relation to the past. Those who feel nostalgia about the Tito-era or the Milošević regime are more reluctant to vote for new, 'democratic parties', which carried out the painful economic and political reforms of the transition. These parties had to face the consequences of the global financial crisis, leading to the loss of support within the population. The above-mentioned rupture is interrelated with the third one, based on the attitudes towards EU membership. After the regime change, parties forming governments were rather West- and EU-oriented. The EU accession appeared several times as one of the major campaign topics (like in 2008 or

²⁹ ÖRDÖGH 2017, 34–48.

³⁰ ÖRDÖGH 2013, 204–229.

³¹ ÖRDÖGH 2016b.

2012), articulating public debate about the options of membership, isolation or increased cooperation with Russia.

Although these cleavages can be considered constant, their importance or relevance varies from time to time, while the positions of political parties have also changed during the last 18 years. Several parties, like SRS, have maintained their anti-Western and pro-Russia stances and also remained in the nationalist field. However, Tomislav Nikolić has changed his stance when he left the SRS and his newly founded began supporting EU accession, and at the same time managed to maintain good relations with Moscow. A similar pattern could be observed in the case of SPS. The party has become more pro-EU after 2008 in order to become suitable to join a government coalition with the DS.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed at offering a brief overview of the developments of the Serbian political system after 1990. The fact that Slobodan Milošević was able to preserve his power for a decade after the fall of other communist leaders in the region shows that the political trajectory of the country had different features compared to its neighbours. The Milošević regime was successful in channelling and transforming nationalistic sentiments growing in society due to ethnic tensions in the autonomous regions (especially in Kosovo) and at the federal level as well. By entering the war and maintaining a belligerent rhetoric, Milošević was able to boost his popularity and make the necessary measures to cement his power; these actions included curtailing the rights of the autonomous regions, restricting media freedom and manipulating elections. The hegemony of the SPS during the 1990s led to a lost decade, and the Serbian regime change could only start in 2000 after the victory of the 5 October revolution over the authoritarian system.

Strengthened by Western support (U.S. and EU financial assistance and the prospect of becoming member in the EU), the democratisation and Europeanisation were launched after the chute of Milošević; however, many challenges have persisted. The weaknesses in the rule of law, the inadequacy of fighting against corruption and the lack of a conclusion of the negotiations with Kosovo have made catching-up more difficult and slower.

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