Riding the wave of distrust and alienation – new parties in Serbia after 2008

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Abstract: *Serbian party system is in the phase of reconfiguration which can be perceived as the outcome of domestic incentives (crisis of democratic transition and of democratic rule) and the international one (economic and migrant crisis). On one side, this reconfiguration includes emergence of predominant ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party, SNS) with strong leader and popular support; on the other side, the opposition camp has been atomized into number of smaller parties. Most of these parties are the new one (including the SNS) and founded after 2008 elections and creation of pro-EU consensus among relevant parties; post-2008 period has been characterized by the decline of almost all old parties, followed by emergence, partial success and fast decline of a large number of new actors. In this paper I am investigating if these new parties can be explained as the unexpected consequence of ideological and political stability after 2008 elections, tactical narrowing of the ideological space and cartelization of the party system. Analysis will focus at populist and anti-partisan ideas, their interplay and different ideological interpretation.*

Keywords: Serbian politics, new parties, populism, Serbian progressive party, democratic crisis.

This paper analyzes the recent wave of new political actors in Serbia. They are perceived as the outcome of simultaneous incentives, both from the outside – a contemporary crisis of democracy followed and strengthened by the economic (2008) and the migrant crises (2015), and from the inside – crisis of the democratic transition and Serbian party system. In these conflictual circumstances and in contrast to expectations after the 2008 elections in which democracy

and the party system in Serbia had reached its stable and institutionalized form, the party system entered an extremely volatile and turbulent stage. This stage is characterized by the crisis of the entire political system and the decline of almost all old parties, followed by the emergence, partial success and fast decline of a large number of new actors. However, some of those new actors had become important and stable parts of political life.

The goal of this paper is to investigate whether these new actors can be explained as the unexpected and unwilling consequence of ideological and political stability after the 2008 elections, the tactical narrowing of the ideological space and the cartelization of the party system. Analysis will focus on new ideas promoted by new parties, populist and anti-partisan standpoints, their interplay with the main issues of Serbian politics and different ideological interpretations and outcomes.

In the first part I will present a theoretical understanding of party system development, followed by insight into the main driving forces behind the changes and challenges to the established order. In the second part I will present the stages of the development of the Serbian party system. The third part will be dedicated to a description of the new actors, their ideological platforms, and the tactics and participation in the political process. Finally, in the fourth section my focus will be on the consequences of the emergence of these new parties for the party system and structure of social cleavages, as well as on potential for institutionalization of the analyzed new actors.

Theoretical framework – the stages of development of the party system

Eastern European democracies have provided political scientists with extraordinary opportunities to observe the development and potential institutionalization of party systems in vivo and to test hypotheses that were developed based on the old democracies. However, it was very soon observed that in most cases post-communist societies needed alternative and adapted approaches that would address the specific traits and uniqueness of these societies, as well as the significant differences between them.

The core issue of the debate between those new approaches was on the interpretation of the social structure of post-communist societies and whether it has the potential to provide political articulation of the socio-structural differences (as in the case of the original cleavage theory proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967)). Some scholars argue that these societies were 'flattened' by the communist rule and that they represent 'a tabula rasa' which allowed leaders to create political parties in a top-down manner and without constraints imposed by the social structure (Shabad – Slomczynski 1999). The other approaches hold that, although social differences are not articulated as in consolidated

liberal democracies, there are still important social differences (ethnicity, level of modernization, etc.) which will provide a foundation for party competition within the new pluralist environment (Evans – Whitefield 1993). For example, Kitschelt argues that occupational-based positions have the capacity to serve as a basis for cleavage formation, especially under the influence of 'marketisation' (Kitschelt 1992), while Deegan-Krause (2007) puts an emphasis on non-economic issues like the role of the church, abortion, minority issues and consumerism. However, regardless of the understanding of social structure, it was noted that it takes some time for the creation of links between parties and citizens and that we can observe different stages of this process (Agh 1994). Voters also needed some time and experience to understand their positions on the left-right scale, as well as parties to create and to develop their ideological profiles (Mateju – Rehakova – Evans 1999). Therefore, formation of the party system was initially understood as a process that might last some time. Olson argued that party systems are formed „through a sequence of elections and parliamentary terms" that allows participants (both politicians and voters) to learn and to adapt (Olson 1998: 432), which puts the emphasis on the change and instability, as well as on the institutional dimension of party politics (in contrast to focusing on the organizational aspect and linkages between parties and civil society) and on tactical choices made by political parties (Sitter 2002).

One example of adaptations of the old ideas to new post-communist circumstances is Bielasiak's concept of the five-stage development of the party system (Bielasiak 1997). In contrast to previous attempts, Bielasiak links the (substantive) cleavages approach to the process approach (which is oriented on electoral processes and the creation of governing coalitions) in order to combine the understanding that social cleavages, although not the sole foundation of CEE politics, structure politics throughout salient and fundamental issues and that the party system institutionalizes itself through the series of electoral cycles or processes. In this way we are „appreciating both the content of political cleavage and dynamic evolution of these divisions into more structured, competitive party system" (Bielasiak 1997: 26) and keeping the balance between stability (structure) and the role of politicians (actors). In other words, Bielasiak's approach enables us to understand the change and the evolution of the party system and at the same time perceive the elements of stability.

In more concrete words, he argues that most post-communist party systems have gone through the five-stage process of consolidation and institutionalization. The first stage is the hegemonic party system, which presumes the predominance of one ruling hegemonic communist party. This stage is followed by a polarized party system which depicts the division between the old regime and the emerging opposition, or between the old one and the transformative regime (Beyme 2002). This phase and the following phase can potentially have many variations, depending on the different sizes and strengths of the opposition to

the communist or successor regime. For example, in some Balkan countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, old communist elites transformed themselves partially and continued to govern for some additional time within the formal pluralist environment (Kasapović 1995; Sobolewska-Myślik – Kosowska-Gąstoł – Borowiec 2016). Also, as Kitschelt pointed out, there are many structural variations between countries and those differences provide obstacles and incentives for the future stages of party systems development. These variations can include, among other things, type of communist regime, politically mobilized social groups or the method of the regime change (Kitschelt et al 1999). Depending on these characteristics, the next stage of development can come sooner or later and be more or less chaotic.

In Bielasiak terminology, the next phase is the fragmented system, where the new ruling coalition falls apart without an arch-enemy and unifying goal. Differences between former opposition parties grow bigger and set the scene for the establishment of new cleavages. In the fourth stage (pluralization of the party system) fragmentation is reduced into fewer rooted parties that are expected to create links with civil society and to end the „isolation of parties from society" (Agh 1994). This stage is finally succeeded with the creation of a polyarchical party system which is expected to be the last stage of the development and represents „a stable, self-sustaining party environment along well-defined axes of competition" (Bielasiak 1997:30). The polyarchical model, therefore, presumes stability of party competition and establishment of links between parties and civil society. The polyarchical model resembles strongly institutionalized party systems defined by Mainwaring (2001) as systems with the stability of inter-party competition and a relative stability in parties' ideological positions.

As Bielasiak argues, those phases are analytical and they can vary from one case to another. This article aims to demonstrate how strongly the Serbian case fits to this theoretical framework, even though it was primarily designed for central-European countries. Analysing the Serbian case from Bielasiak's perspective is interesting because the party system entered a highly turbulent stage after the 2008 and 2012 elections and „creation of shallow and superficial pro-European consensus" (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2018) in contrast to expectations that the party system reached some form of stability and balance.

What are the reasons behind the turbulence and crises of the Serbian party system? Is it a country specific characteristic or can it be related to a wider Eastern European context? For example, in contrast to initial cleavage and/or party system stability, Croatian and Slovenian party systems are also showing signs of instability and volatility (Henjak – Zakošek – Čular 2013; Zajc 2013). Additionally, some countries (e.g. Hungary, Macedonia and Poland) are facing a crisis of democratic performances (Freedom House 2019). It seems that political crisis and (consequential) crisis of party systems is a common feature of many post-communist societies and that there could be a common ground

between the decline in the democratic performances in Hungary, Poland or Serbia, or between the lack of trust in the old parties and the increased space for new actors in Croatia, Slovenia or Serbia. For example, Agh argues that there is a triple crisis in the Hungarian case: the first one is related to the transformation of post-socialist societies, the second one is the post EU-accession crisis and the third caused by the global economic-fiscal crisis. In his opinion „democratic backslides" or „the golden age of populism" can be understood as some of their outcomes (Agh 2013: 5–6). In case of candidate states (i.e. Serbia or Macedonia), a post-accession crisis could be substituted with the crisis of a long-accession process and the enlargement fatigue that produces similar effects.

Therefore, the following parts present the stages of party system development in Serbia, while seeking the roots of democratic crisis, structural conditions for party system development and change (i.e. the structure of social cleavages), and the old and new parties' response to the mentioned crisis and trends. Focus will be placed on anti-partism and populism as the most visible ideological outputs. Populism, which is understood as an thin-centre ideology that divides society between true, „honest people" and a „corrupted elite" (Mudde 2004), can be related to distrust in politics and alienation from political parties, two trends that are very important incentives for the emergence of new parties in the Serbian case.

The presentation of development stages of the party system and newly emerged parties will be oriented towards electoral campaigns instead of party programs and documents. In the Serbian case, party programs are not that relevant for understanding party politics since party leaders have the strongest influence on the interpretation of ideological positions or policies (Orlović 2008); political parties also very rarely produce electoral manifestoes. Therefore, analysis of the content of electoral campaigns and secondary sources on campaigns are often the primary or the only source of relevant data on political parties (Stojiljković 2012). Focus on electoral processes is also very compatible with the Bielasiak theoretical framework.

Serbian party system – five stages of development

The Serbian party system represents the mixture of structural characteristics common for Eastern European transitional democracies with some very strong post-Yugoslav traits. Specifically, the Serbian party system is weakly institutionalized (Mainwaring 2001), with high volatility and a dominance of identity based divisions (Elster – Offe – Preuss 1998) related to the break-up of the former Yugoslavia – war crimes, separation of Montenegro and Kosovo, and a consequential lack of consensus on EU and NATO membership (Komšić – Pantić – Slavujević 2003; Mihailović 2008).

Regardless of its specific characteristics, the development of the party system followed Bielasiak's phases to a significant extent. The first phase of the

hegemonic party was during the communist Yugoslavia when the Communist Alliance held a monopoly over political life. In contrast to many ECE cases, Yugoslavian communists were more liberal and they provided elements of autonomy for certain areas of life (e.g. culture and education). However, the last stage of Yugoslav communism was driven by political pluralism that was allowed within the constituent parts – the Yugoslav Republic, but not on the national level (there were no Yugoslav elections). This circumstance propelled nationalism and conflicts between the nations as the key issues behind the breakup of the Yugoslav federation. The hegemonic stage was just an introduction for the first transitional period(s) – polarization. In the Serbian case, it lasted for almost ten years, until the opposition found a way to unite itself as the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS) and to defeat Slobodan Milošević in the 2000 presidential elections.).

As predicted by Bielasiak, the DOS coalition was not a governing coalition, but rather an electoral one. Soon after the democratic changes it was divided into several camps depending on their ideas on how fast and deep the transition should be and what the outcome of the process should be. „The lack of consensus was mostly visible regarding the European integration issue that divided the party system into three groups: euro-friendly (led by the Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka, DS)), centrist euro-skeptic (led by the Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska stranka Srbije, DSS), and anti-European parties (Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS)) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije, SPS))" (Spasojević-Stojiljković 2018:149). Since the foundation for this division was based on values, scholars define this cleavage as a cleavage between traditionalist and modernist (Mihailović 2008; Spasojević 2016) or as a „cleavage of world-views, authoritarian and traditionalist versus modernist and libertarian" (Todosijević 2013: 523)

Due to very intensive debate between the new ruling parties and the lack of national consensus on EU membership, old regime parties were much stronger and less reformed, compared to the other ECE countries. The strongest one – SRS, however, did not have any coalition potential which kept the radicals outside of power sharing mechanisms on almost all levels of administration. The peak of polarization of the party system in the post-Milošević period was between 2007 and 2008, when the pro-EU block won two important consecutive elections – presidential and parliamentary, and set the course for Serbian transition in an EU direction. Victory of pro-EU parties „caused a decline of euro-skeptic parties: the DSS never recovered after this failure, the SPS initiated partial ideological reconfiguration towards a pro-EU social democratic party, and the SRS split. The SRS continued to exist, but their leadership and a majority of members founded the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) in 2008, defining it as a popular center-right and pro-European party" (Spasojević – Stojiljković 2018: 149). At that time, the split of the old

Serbian Radical Party was perceived as „the final step in consolidation of the electoral democracy" in Serbia (Spasojević 2011) and as a point of no-return in terms of the creation of basic social consensus and EU integrations. It seems that both of these claims are being challenged with the recent events in Serbia (as I will discuss in detail in the concluding parts).

After the breaking point, between 2008 and 2012, we witnessed an example of moderate pluralism with two large catch-all parties and with several smaller ones (Orlović 2011). The level of consensus, at least formally, was so high that the SNS and the DS even discussed the possibility of a „grand coalition" and it seemed that the party system had successfully gone through the stage of pluralization and initiated the formation of a 'polyarchic' model. This model would include the creation of a stable party system with stronger and long-lasting ties between the parties and civil society, interest groups and other interest-based actors.

So, in terms of Bielasiak's theoretical framework, it seemed that the party system in Serbia had solid foundations and was quite stable between 2008 and 2012. Main cleavage lines depending on identity issues (e.g. EU and Kosovo) were pushed lower on the political agenda, and for the first time it looked like the economy or „the politics of interest" would become the driving force behind party competition. So, what happened and what prevented the formation of a polyarchic model?

There were two main developments. As a reaction to the 2008 economic crisis, the Serbian government increased spending, but that also included clientelistic networks and a significant level of corruption (Jovanović 2013; Dolenec 2013; Radeljić 2014). On the other side, in terms of EU integration as the key electoral promise from the 2008 elections, the DS failed to deliver a satisfactory level of progress due to slow and complicated negotiations with Kosovo and a lack of political determination from the state and DS president Boris Tadić. For example, the DS government tried to keep balance in foreign affairs (between pro-EU and pro-Russian positions), which resulted in a number of mixed messages and indecisive proposals. Since Serbian citizens had very high (and probably unrealistic) expectations from democratic changes and a lack of better results ten years after 2000 created difficult circumstances for the ruling politicians. Disaffections and distrust rates were high as the most trusted institutions were the Orthodox Church and the army, whereas political institutions (government, parliament), parties and even civil society and trade unions remained at the bottom of the scale with less that 30% of support (Stojiljković 2016). In these circumstances, formation of the new party (SNS) created a viable option for many disappointed voters, especially because it was clear that the SNS had coalition potential and a real chance to win the elections. In other words, during 2012 elections post-DOS parties were, for the first time, faced with party that could actually win the elections and form a government.

In terms of political processes, besides the foundation of the SNS, one additional challenge came from the liberal end of the political spectrum as the „Blank ballot campaign", which was organized as a protest against the political elite and their lack of responsibility (Spasojević 2012). The blank ballot campaign argued that „politicians are all the same" and that citizens should annul the vote (or vote blank) in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections because it is „irrelevant who governs". Interestingly, this campaign was driven by individuals with strong political and/or civil experience, and with a strong academic background. In other words, it was an elite revolt against the political elite.

Since most visible proponents of the blank ballot campaign were from the liberal and pro-EU end of the political spectrum, this campaign created more political damage to parties from that end – i.e. the DS and the Liberal Democratic Party (Liberalno-demokratska partiija, LDP) (Kovačević 2013). Some understood this campaign as an additional criticism because of too-pragmatic and too-centrist politics of the DS and president Tadić, as well as criticism against the „creation of Tadić cult" and dominance of PR and media-oriented politics over the substantive one (Slavujević 2017). In this perspective, the blank ballot campaign had an additional twist – some proponents (e.g. Vesna Pešić, former leader of Civil Alliance of Serbia) called for voting for the opposition candidate in the second round of presidential elections in 2012, not because they favored Tomislav Nikolić (candidate of SNS), but for tactical reasons in order to end the Tadić rule (Trivić 2012). Since Nikolić won with a very small margin (70 000 of votes), we can argue that blank ballots did cause significant damage to Tadić as a candidate, but also that they expressed growing dissatisfaction among the DS and Tadić constituency.

The defeat of Boris Tadić in the presidential elections in 2012 formally initiated the new developments of the party system. Foundation of the new government by the SNS, Socialist and the smaller regional party the United Regions of Serbia (Ujedinjeni regioni Srbije, URS) also meant formal resurrection of the *ancient regime* parties and their governing within the new democratic setting. The SNS/SPS government tried to prove that they have been reformed and acted with caution in the first mandate period, especially concerning sensitive issues that could be related to ancient regime policies like EU integration, relation to civil society and media or negotiation with Kosovo (in 2013 the government confirmed the Brussels agreement with Kosovo). However, in regard to the position of the DS there were fewer considerations and the SNS launched a strong campaign using the state resources (prosecution, public media, etc) framing the DS as the main source of corruption and crime. This campaign affected the DS's capacity and started internal debates and processes which led to a series of splits within the party. The most notable taking place just before the 2014 elections when Tadić decided to split the DS and found the New Democratic Party, later renamed the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (Socijaldemokratska

stranka, SDS) just weeks before the elections (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2016). In a wider perspective, splits between democrats decreased their electoral power, but also created more opportunities for the new actors in the ideological space that was once dominated by the DS (pro-EU, modernist and liberal parts of political space). The split of the DS also restarted the competition for the leading oppositional party among several smaller parties. The new actors that can be related to this ideological space were Enough is enough! (Dosta je bilo, DJB) and the former ombudsperson Saša Janković who ran against Aleksandar Vučić in the 2017 presidential elections and who later founded The movement of free citizens (Pokret slobodnih građana, PSG).

Catch-all politics created a space on the far-right end as well, as the SNS tried to go as far as possible towards the political center. Also, the SRS (that has been occupying the far-right end since the beginning of party pluralism) has been perceived as an old and conservative party without the ability to adapt to new circumstances and with special ties to the SNS. This relationship was similar to the one they had with the SPS during Milošević's rule when they acted as „fake opposition", that is, opposition that works in collusion with the governing parties (Spoerri 2015). The available political space on the right and traditional end of the political spectrum has been taken up by Dveri[1], a new right-wing populist and socially conservative/religious party.

Finally, some new actors have tried to offer political options that were not previously available or that cannot be compared to the old parties. Do not drown Belgrade (Ne davimo Beograd, NDVBGD) occupied the left populist position and Ljubiša Preletačević Beli (candidate for president in 2017) offered– a satiric and imaginary character running for the presidency. The following parts of this paper present and analyse new actors and their main ideas.

New actors – description and analysis of tactical issues

The previous section has highlighted the new parties and actors examined in this study. Namely, SNS, Dveri, DJB and NDVBGD, and two individuals who have run for president of Serbia, Janković and Beli. A formal criterion for selection was that the parties were founded and registered after the 2008 elections and that they have participated in at least one election since. Also, the two candidates that were added to the sample appeared for the first time in the 2017 presidential elections and had no previous political experience. However, most of selected parties/actors would fulfill stricter criteria of „newness", as well. Their party labels and ideological standpoints were new; they managed to attract new voters and new activists; their candidates and policies were also

1 In literal translation Dveri is the archaic word for doors; it can also refer to the doors of iconostasis (a wall of icons and religious drawings that's separates the space in a church)

new (Barnea and Rahat 2010:306). Furthermore, most of the parties included in the sample have clear ideological profiles (especially when compared to the old, established parties), refer to new issues and try to occupy new ideological niches. In this regard they would be classified as prophets (leaders or parties that are developing new ideologies around new issues). Partial exceptions to this would be the SNS and Saša Janković, who would be closer to the role of purifiers (those who claim to purify 'the original' ideology from its current interpretation), according to Lucardie's concepts (Lucardie 2000).

The only border-line case could be the status of the SNS, as they became a new party by the split of the former SRS. They are the largest new party and the ruling party. However, it is not clear if they are a new party or not? From one perspective, the SNS initially inherited the majority of the SRS leadership, most of its infrastructure, a group of former SRS MPs in the national parliament (without participating in elections) and significant political experience and skills. Without any doubt, the SNS can and should be perceived as one of the successors of the SRS, although the SRS continued to exist as well. From the other perspective, and the one applied in this article, (), the SNS represents a new party because they introduced a new label and their policies are significantly different from those of the old party because the SNS has tempered its nationalist rhetoric, declared itself open to the prospects of European integration, and emphasized economic issues" (Todosijević, 2013:535). Moreover, a vast majority of their candidates and officials are different from the Serbian radical party (Barnea and Rahat 2010). Finally, as their leadership constantly argued during the first years of this party, insisting on newness was a significant part of their project and success (Sikk 2011).

Being perceived as something new was one of the party's main goals after the foundation. The SNS leadership tried to detach itself from the radical legacy while not breaking all ties with former constituencies. Political circumstances were in favor of this transition „and the SNS benefited from shifting away from issues like EU [sic] and Kosovo toward the economy-oriented issues" (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2018: 115). During the electoral campaign in 2012, the SNS presented themselves as „the movement of the discontented people" (Jovanović 1013: 12) and promised a „radical fight against corruption and organized crime" (Stojiljković 2012: 18). In a nutshell, the SNS tried to ride the wave of disaffection with a transitional outcome and blame the DS and other governing parties for the poor results. As most of their voters were transitional losers (Orlović 2011; Vuković 2014), this was an excellent and logical choice; the SNS emphasized their positions by using a populist framework and claiming that the DS represented a unified block together with tycoons, international organizations and foreign investors who were getting all benefits and state subsidies. Also, „the SNS was in a better position to reach medium voters based on an anti-corruption agenda compared to the incumbent Democratic Party (DS) idea

of anti-corruption, as the core campaign issue better suited conservative voters who always demand more 'law and order' policies" (Spasojević 2019: 131). This ideological position also provided the party with continuity in relation to the old SRS positions, but within the usual populist twist that they were defending the people and the democracy against the usurpers that took power after the democratic changes in 2000 (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2018). Also, promoting democracy as a value, instead of authoritarian alternatives, was something new that the SNS added in comparison to the Radical period.

In terms of other parts of the ideological portfolio, the SNS was quite careful not to include too much nationalism, although their ideological baggage was full of potential „others". This issue is another example of the tactical balance between new and old – the two main enemies or „the others" were still the international community and other Yugoslav nations, but new confrontation is much softer. For example, the SNS was accusing Brussels of rigid and anti-Serbian attitudes, but they continued with EU integrations and praised individual European states (e.g. Germany or Austria); in regional relations, the key messages were peace and cooperation, and then followed by harsh evaluations of the position of the Serbian minority in Croatia or Montenegro (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2018: 117). This complexity and these contradictions of ideas will remain part of the SNS ideological portfolio and they would go on to further intensify it later by creating ideologically heterogeneous coalitions and by assigning roles of „good cop and bad cop" to different party officials. This would also include an increase in radical and nationalistic positions, especially after the 2016 and 2017 elections (Stojiljković 2017; Spasojević 2019). However, the party still keeps its formal EU position and distances itself from its radical past and the SRS. It is very important to note that this kind of ideological profile is only possible in situations when the government is in significant control of the media system and in societies without a free and independent media and public sphere that would question these issues and contradictions (Freedom House 2019).

In contrast to most Serbian right wing and nationalistic parties that are rooted in issues that can be related to the post-Yugoslav conflict, Dveri are the most salient in relation to their social and conservative agenda (Vukov 2013). The party is driven by social conservatism that can be traced to the teachings of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Family issues and family values are the cornerstones of Dveri's ideological portfolio. This does not mean that Dveri do not share strong standpoints on Kosovo or war crimes, but they identify more with social values and issues. In this regard, Dveri are the first and a unique post-Milošević right wing party that came out of right-wing civil society that started to emerge in the early 2000s. When members of the social movement decided to transform into a political party, it created a division between founding members because some of them perceived party politics as immoral (Vukov

2013); the division was extended when the party changed its statute in 2015 in order to strengthen the position of the party president and to become more efficient. Regardless of these divisions, it still holds strong ties to right-wing civil society groups and uses them as a legitimacy tool and a tactical advantage.

Dveri are quite similar to many new right-wing populist parties across Europe. They perceive Brussels as an alienated center that imposes „European values" that are in conflict with local and traditional values. Dveri participates in the anti-immigrant movement, even though Serbia is a society with almost no immigrants. In 2011 and 2014 Dveri organized protests against camps for immigrants and refugees that existed in Serbia (Rudić 2014). In economic terms, Dveri are arguing for economic protectionism and economic patriotism (Stojanović 2017), which should serve as a shelter from international corporations and a globalized economy. Dveri are against the influence of the EU and IMM on domestic economy and, generally, against the neo-liberal model (Pavlović – Stanojević 2016; Vukov 2013). Initially, Dveri criticized all of the other parties, but later found a way to cooperate with most opposition parties. In the 2016 parliamentary elections they entered parliament in a coalition with the DSS and in 2017 they ran in the Belgrade elections in a coalition with Dosta je bilo. In the 2019 protest waves, Dveri were active as a part of a wider coalition called the Alliance for Serbia (Savez za Srbiju, SZS), together with almost all of the other opposition parties. This coalition activity is important because it shows that Dveri (although still perceived as a far-right party) are changing their positions in regard to other parties and are that some are even open to coalition agreements.

Dosta je bilo (DJB) was initiated by a group of experts who believed that transparency and a reduction in public spending were the key to solving the main problem in Serbia, which is worsening corruption and partocracy (Stojiljković 2017). This approach was the driving force behind the initial success of DJB and the most notable representative of this belief was Saša Radulović, a former bankruptcy trustee and prominent blogger (well known for his criticism of uncontrolled public spending and corruption), who accepted the position of Ministry of Economy in the SNS/SPS government However, very soon he encountered conflicts with Vučić because of proposed austerity measures and a lack of transparency and he left the government just before the elections in 2014 (Avakumović 2017). Radulović founded DJB together with several prominent public figures that had not been active in political parties. This gave the DJB campaign a head start because they were at least recognizable to one part of the public; however, they failed to win the necessary 5% threshold in 2014.

DJB used anti-party positions to criticize both the SNS/SPS and former ruling parties like the DS. Between 2014 and 2016 Radulović became very popular because of his effective and simplified criticism that demanded change of the

entire system, not only government parties. DJB used the space and ideas laid by the „blank votes" campaign and a general discontent among the voters. However, we cannot classify DJB as a populist party because they neither anti-elitist nor anti-pluralist. In contrast, as they belonged to some sort of elite, DJB promoted a technocratic image and ideas among the voters (Avakumović 2017).

DJB's ideological portfolio affected their organizational style, in a word non-conventional or completely different from the other parties. The party used an open process to write the manifestoes, had an open call for MP candidates and even used computer software to decide the order of candidates for MPs on the party list (Avakumović 2017). However, behind this smoke screen, there were many oligarchic and centralizing forces in place as Radulović made all of the important decisions and eventually alienated most members of the party leadership (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2016).

In 2014, DJB failed to win the 5% threshold, but in 2016 they entered parliament as the strongest opposition party with 6% votes and 16 MPs. Their 2016 success was more impressive because DJB relied solely on social media for its campaign (Klačar – Živković 2018). Their campaign was without a single TV clip. Also, since they generated loyal and passionate voters, the SNS perceived them as a threat and actively attacked them during the campaign. Undergoing attacks from the regime and being positioned as critical against all other parties created a complicated situation for DJB. The party tried to create a balance between conflict and cooperation with opposition parties, but it was not that successful, in part because of a lack of political experience and skill on behalf of DJB. They even proposed that there should be a new opposition made of parties without negative background and political baggage (Radulović 2016).

Lack of cooperation became most visible during the presidential elections in 2017 when Radulović simultaneously ran for president and supported the candidacy of fictional candidate Ljubiša Preletačević Beli. At the same time, the opposition supported ombudsperson Janković, who was perceived as the „new face" in politics and as someone the DJB could genuinely support. In 2018 the DJB ran in the Belgrade elections together with Dveri under the slogan „the current politicians should leave power, but the old ones should not return" (N1 2018). However, this coalition failed to win the local elections threshold and Radulović won only 1.5% in the presidential elections. This signaled a changing trend, and soon after the presidential elections several prominent members left the party, a trend which continued in the following months., Eventually, out of 16 MPs that got mandated as part of the DJB lists in 2016, only three remained members of the party.

The presidential elections in 2017 had two unexpected candidates that reflected two opposing trends. On one side, as a result for the demand for new politicians without „baggage" there was the candidacy of Saša Janković, who was serving as ombudsperson and who had become a harsh critic of the SNS

government (especially in regards to the Savamala controversy[2]). On the other side, as a continuum of the blank ballots campaign and the „they are all the same" approach, there was the candidacy of Ljubiša Preletačević Beli, a fictional character performed by Luka Maksimović.

During local elections in 2016 a small group of activists in Mladenovac (urban area of Belgrade) ran using a satirical political party platform and a mock leader called Ljubiša Preletačević Beli[3] and won almost 20% of the votes. Their campaign was a satirical expression of disaffection with local politics that is perceived as corrupt, clientelistic and too-dependent on the national parties (Hopkins 2017). In many towns is Serbia it was quite usual for one politician to serve as mayor under one party in one mandate and under a different party in another mandate. In order to confront such a trend, the SPN used humor and a satirical campaign of fake promises, the most notable probably being the promise to open a euthanasia department for retired people in order to reduce the cost of living for them and their families (Sekulović 2016).

Following local success, Beli decided to run in the presidential elections in 2017. Initial expectations were quite humble, but after going viral and becoming extremely popular (Čančarević 2017), Beli had become politically relevant. He followed a path similar to the blank ballots campaign, arguing that it is completely irrelevant who rules the country; one part of his supporters were very political and disaffected by the existing political offer, but he also attracted voters that were not interested in politics and who simply found him funny and amusing (Estatie 2017). During his campaign Beli acted as saviour of the nation (dressed in white, with a „royal" scepter and often riding a white horse), he promised many unrealistic things, claiming that there were no real differences between him and the other politicians (Čančarević 2017). After receiving higher scores in public opinion polls, Beli was faced with constrained and moderate criticism from the other opposition candidates with arguments that his mockery benefited the Vučić regime because it did not contribute to the change of government. However, due to his enormous popularity and the expectations that his voters might vote for the opposition in the second round of elections, no one actually engaged in serious criticism. Some parties like DJB even worked hard to support his candidacy. Beli won 9% of the votes and defeated some long-standing and well-known politicians in the first round.

2 The Savamala controversy refers to the demolition of several houses and restaurants in the Savamala district in downtown Belgrade during the night after the parliamentary elections in 2016. This action was conducted by masked individuals who were not stopped by police. Most probably this demolition was related to construction deadlines for the Belgrade Waterfront project (a government backed project with significant political importance).

3 Beli means White, whereas Preletačević is a fake family name suggesting someone flipped/defected party membership; *Preleteti* literally means to fly from one place to another.

How is it possible to have every 10th vote go to a fictional character? It is evidence of how voters were disaffected with the political offer (Klačar 2018; Elez 2017), although we should not minimize the influence of those who voted for Beli just for fun and without serious political intentions. After the presidential elections, Beli tried to continue with his role of politician, but some members of his team left and he came under the scrutiny of the public. He managed to gather signatures for candidacy in the Belgrade local elections, but it seemed that his 15 minutes of fame were over and he failed to generate similar support. During the local campaign he was openly criticized and accused of being a Trojan horse of the government and it seemed that he was not able to answer those accusations in an appropriate manner, although he remained quite popular among non-political citizens.

As stated above, the presidential elections created an opportunity for another new actor – Saša Janković, who was serving as the first Serbian ombudsperson since 2007. In recent years the ombudsperson position had been personalized and indentified by Janković, because his work became more visible during the SNS rule due to an increased number of human rights violations and especially after the Sava Mala incident (although he did engage in legal battles against the DS government as well). As his second mandate was coming to an end, there were growing rumors that he would start a political career. Indeed, he ran for Serbian president in 2017 as a representative of modernist, liberal and pro-European Serbia (Čančarević 2017). Basically, Janković used an empty space left after the crisis of the DS. His campaign was supported by the DS but with his legal background and culture (former DSS constituency) he also managed to create a wider front that included a significant portion of civil society (Čolović 2018) and some centrist voters. Janković managed to raise significant expectations and hopes among the opposition block, to gather many non-political individuals behind him as part of the „Appeal of 100" (Čančarević 2017) and to some extent to decrease the negative perception of politicians. At the same time, the DS was quite hidden during his campaign, although their organizational support was enormous (Stojiljković – Spasojević 2018: 119).

Janković was the only new actor that did not flirt with populism and anti-party sentiments. By focusing on issues related to political systems, democracy and human right (Elez 2017) he tried to articulate widespread discontent and to frame it as a consequence of the usurpation of politics and the state by the current regime. At the same, he tried to keep balance between the old opposition parties and new actors that ran for the presidency as well. As he was the strongest candidate from the opposition (tallying 16% of votes in the first round), he was under a severe campaign of the SNS friendly tabloids (Čolović 2018).

In the post-election period, Janković tried to transform the electoral support into everyday politics. However, his relations with the DS became too complicated, and at one point there were rumors that he was considering a run for the

DS presidency. This conflict in the post-electoral period was based on a dilemma of how much of the 16% of votes could be contributed to the candidate and how much to the supporting parties. Because of this situation, Janković decided to make a new party and name it the Movement of Free Citizens (Pokret slobodnih građana, PSG).

In 2018, PSG ran in the Belgrade local elections together with other opposition parties in the coalition led by Dragan Đilas (former DS president and former Belgrade mayor), but they failed to establish a long-term cooperation. PSG insisted on a pro-European identity as the cornerstone of this coalition, whereas Đilas (as the most prominent leader) opted for a wider coalition that might include euro-skeptic parties like Dveri. After remaining outside of this coalition and without an agreement with the DS, PSG was left alone on the political scene and many problems surfaced. Similar to the case of the DJB, the party failed to establish itself and to become relevant. Janković was accused of centralization and a lack of understanding for different opinions. Most founding members left the party and finally Janković decided to politically retire in January 2019, just two years after challenging Vučić in the presidential election. He was substituted with Sergej Trifunović, a prominent actor without any experience in politics; following Trifunović's election many members of the presidency announced their resignations. Regardless of PSG's future, there is still an empty space on the pro-European pole of political spectrum in Serbia.

Finally, the last Belgrade elections added another actor – Initiative Do not Drown Belgrade (Ne davimo Beograd, NDVBGD) as a leftist, citizens list. NDVBGD has become recognizable to the wider public after a series of demonstrations against the Belgrade Waterfront project (Greenberg – Spasić 2017). This project is transforming and gentrifying a large space on the right bank of the Sava river in the centre of Belgrade, from a railway station and old industrial area to more residential and business usage. The project is very important politically because it was an electoral promise of President Vučić and something that was very high on the political agenda. NDVBGD protested from the beginning of the project arguing that it was against public interest, against the legal framework and that it would decrease the quality of life in downtown Belgrade by serving only the interests of large capital (Greenberg – Spasić 2017). However, only after the Sava Mala incident) has this issue become very important and visible (Kmezić 2017). NDVBGD organized a series of large protests, but they had no formal effect except that President Vučić acknowledged that the highest officials of Belgrade were responsible for the demolition (Blic 2016).

This issue was enough to make a head start for the NDVBGD initiative and they positioned themselves as the civic, grassroots and leftist option. Members of the initiative had been active for a longer period in different areas that could serve as the programmatic base for the initiative, including housing and property issues (house evictions), usage of public and free spaces, envi-

ronmental issues, etc. The initiative was faced with dilemmas similar to those of the previously analyzed actors. As they perceived themselves as the local initiative, they ran in local elections outside of coalitions and won only 3% of votes, but NDVBGD supported Janković during the presidential campaign. However, members of the Initiative shared a distrust of politics and politicians, and some of them publicly supported Beli as a candidate. I could argue that there were elements of populism (similar to the leftist populism of Spanish Podemos), although they were not as visible as in the case of Dveri. NDVBGD kept distance between themselves and other established politicians. However, the initiative worked closely with other oppositional parties as part of the 2019 protest on the improvement of democratic conditions in Serbia. At the same time, the initiative was preparing to launch a new national left party that would gather several similar initiatives across Serbia (Danas 2019). Although there is a political space for this initiative (far left and liberal left), it is hard to predict whether they will manage to fulfill it and to earn the necessary 5% threshold for the national elections. Because of this, parts of the initiative were still very active as civil society organizations in order to increase capacity to influence the decision-making process.

The structure, the tactics and the change

In the previous part I have presented the most relevant and interesting new actors in the post-2008 period. The list of new actors is not limited to the ones mentioned, as other newly-registered parties have so far failed to fulfill the criteria of relevance, newness or were founded outside of proposed time-frame. For example, former DS official Vuk Jeremić established a new party called the Peoples' Party (Narodna partija, NP), former DS president Dragan Đilas established the Party of justice and freedom (Stranka slobode i pravde, SSP) and a number of factions from Dosta je bilo and PSG are in the process of forming new parties.

The presented cases have proved that applying Bielasiak's theoretical framework to the Serbian case can be fruitful, but somewhat challenging. Namely, after the 2008 elections and creation of the consensus on the issue of EU membership, the cleavage structure in Serbia significantly changed. Identity-based issues were in decline, because the main conflict between EU- and Kosovo centered politics was, at least temporarily, resolved in favor of pro-EU parties and also because of tactical interest of the main actors (the SNS leadership wanted to avoid issues that were salient during their period in the SRS). However, a lack of alternative cleavage line that would take the highest position and impose a new main line of competition (e.g. economic cleavage between free market and distributive economy), provided political actors with more freedom to search for new ideas and to propose new issues.

From an ideological standpoint, this lack of constraints and incentives (usually provided by social cleavages) prevented the party system to develop into a polyarchic phase. However, the instability and change did not make equal influence on both sides of the political spectrum. The conservative and traditional pole has been solidified by the foundation and enormous success of the SNS (which took on the role of the predominant party), and consolidation of the SRS and proliferation of Dveri. On the other side, the modernist and liberal block has been atomized in the last ten years. Splits of the DS, caused by internal debate and external pressure by the SNS, led to the foundation of a number of parties that can be linked to this pole. In Bielasiak's terms, I could argue that the modernist pole of the Serbian party system has been restored to a „fragmented" phase; interestingly, his argument is that fragmentation occurs in situations without an „arch-enemy and unifying goals" which could be used for this situation as well. Transformation of the SRS into the SNS (and the previous 'modernization' of the SPS) left the DS without archrival(s) and the general pro-EU consensus among most Serbian parties left the DS without a goal that would be party-specific. In these circumstances on the modernistic pole of the party system, it is not surprising that new parties are mushrooming and that the old parties are having trouble finding viable ideological standpoints.

This process of changing cleavage structure and party system configuration coincided with multiple crises. The first was economic (the global economic crisis), followed by a crisis of democracy and political representation in Serbia caused by authoritarian tendencies gradually introduced by Vučić and the SNS government. The level of democratic erosion has increased since the 2014 elections leading to Serbia's classification as a „partly-free" country in 2018 (Freedom house 2019). The mentioned crises all had a considerable impact and reinforced each other. In Serbian context, this means that the economic crisis hit society with very low trust rates in political institutions and with a high level of discontent with the results of the first transitional decade. Even without the global wave of populism and the narrative about the crisis of democracy, this would create circumstances that would promote anti-partism, anti-politics standpoints and anti-elitism, and most of the new actors responded to this call.

However, they did not use the opportunity in the same way and they applied different tactics. Right wing parties combined populism with different elements – the SNS decided to join the pro-EU camp and to carefully avoid confrontations in order to not jeopardize coalition and ruling potential. Dveri, on the other side, chose to remain anti-EU and to imitate most European anti-immigrant right wing parties with a local twist emphasizing social, religious and family values. Liberal and modernist parties like DJB also could not resist this opportunity, but they framed the argument in terms of anti-partism without anti-elitism and even combined it with technocratic concepts. Saša Janković was even softer in this perspective, and his response to public discontent was

mostly tactical and observable through the absence of parties in his campaign. Finally, NDVBGD offered leftist populism, grassroots participation and civic engagement as a response to the crisis of democracy.

Interestingly, all of the new parties had a dilemma on cooperation and conflict with the old parties with the exception of the SNS, which was founded in order to increase coalition potential. Cooperation with the old parties would mean the difference between the new and old ones was not that important; at the same time, that difference was one of the most important incentives for the voters of the DJB and Dveri and the driving force behind their success. On the other side, a lack of cooperation and an ability to make coalitions with similar parties was often punished by the voters and members. It seems that rapid formation of the parties on the wave of distrust and alienation was not enough to create sustainable and institutionalized parties and that other ideological elements have to be added as well. Also, support and enthusiasm around new parties has to be carefully developed and articulated because voters have less understanding for oligarchic tendencies in the case of new leaders/parties and expect higher democratic performances in internal party relations.

Conclusions

In contrast to Bielasiak's theoretical and empirical expectations that a polyarchic phase would come after the pluralist phase, especially after the formation of basic consensus on the main issue since the defeat of Milošević's regieme (i.e. EU integration process), the Serbian party system still does not belong to the group of stable and institutionalized ones. Even more, it seems that the modernist pole of the party system has been reversed into the stage of fragmentation and atomization, creating the asymmetry of the party scene.

There are many reasons behind the current crisis of the party system and some of them can be common for other eastern European countries as well. Our initial argument is that stability and centripetal competition after the decisive 2008 elections created conditions for moderate pluralism. However, political actors overemphasized established consensus on EU accession and narrowed the political space to an extreme level. This, in return, provided more space at the ends of the political spectrum and encouraged radical and centrifugal options.

These circumstances did not automatically produce a crisis of the party system. However, when the effects of Agh's triple crisis started to show, politicians got the incentive to change their behavior and to pay more attention to growing discontent among citizens and growing alienation between them and politics. In most cases, parties adopted some form of populism and anti-partism in order to respond to the newly emerging political market. The Serbian case is interesting because there are many variations – from left (NDVBGD) to right

wing populism (Dveri), anti-partism without anti-pluralism and anti-elitism (Dosta je bilo) and, finally, even examples of pro-European populism (SNS).

Most of these new parties so far failed to establish viable organizations and recognizable ideological profiles. Two main exemptions are Dveri and the SNS. Dveri used the current *zeitgeist* to seize the opportunity, but they combined it with an already existing ideological profile and civil society behind those values. The SNS did something similar by using the populist wave to strengthen their centre-right and peoples' party profile and to promote issues (e.g. corruption) that could bring more benefits to them in comparison to their opponents. Once in power, the SNS used weak democratic institutions to re-shape the entire political system in their favor and, by doing so, challenged the democratic character of Serbian society. Ironically, their success was enabled because of criticism against the previous government and the SNS continued with the anti--democratic practices which had caused distrust and alienation in the first place. However, different constituencies allow different styles of rule and it seems that the SNS will not face something similar to the blank ballots campaign.

Once again, it seems that searching for solutions outside of the usual pluralist and multi-party democracy is unlikely to generate stability and democratic standards. In terms of Bielasiak's frameworks, the Serbian party system is still far from the polyarchic and stable formation and it seems that populism and anti-partism cannot serve as a solid and long-lasting foundation, unless they are attached to the existing cleavage structures and old and recognizable issues and narratives

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