

SERBIA



# Balancing on a pin: Serbian populists, the European Union and Russia

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## Abstract

This report investigates the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Serbian party system. The Serbian case has two unique characteristics. The first is the final status of Kosovo, which Serbia has traditionally relied on Russian support over (as a member of the UN Security Council). However, Ukraine has also respected the territorial integrity of Serbia and did not recognize Kosovo. The second characteristic is Serbia's ruling party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Unlike many other Eastern European populist parties, the SNS is formally pro-European Union. Since the beginning of the war, the ruling parties have been under international pressure to join sanctions against Russia; on the other side, the opposition splits between right-wing supporters of Russia and left-wing and liberal parties with weak support for international sanctions. This report aims to analyse the potential change in the ideological positions of Serbian parties — especially the populist ones — due to the significant changes in the international landscape occasioned by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

**Keywords:** *Serbia; populism; European Union; Russia; cleavages.*

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## Background

Serbian politics has revolved around identity issues since the beginning of party pluralism. Milošević's authoritarian rule (1991–2000) was based on leveraging nationalism and conflicts during the break-up of Yugoslavia. After his defeat in 2000, the new ruling coalition of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia split between modernist and traditionalist forces based on similar identity-based issues: war crimes prosecutions, foreign relations — especially Serbia's integration into the European Union (EU) — and finally, the status of Kosovo. Competition between these two sides was the critical process of Serbian politics during the first post-Milošević decade. In 2008, pro-EU forces led by the Democratic Party (DSS) made what seemed to be the decisive electoral victory that led to the establishment of a national consensus on European integration.

In this report, I will briefly describe the Serbian party system with particular emphasis on populist actors and populism-related issues. This part will be followed by a description of changes caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, focusing on the 2022 parliamentary elections in Serbia and a comparison with the period after the campaign. The final part will be dedicated to the “demand side” of politics – public opinion surveys and the electoral results of parties with specific positions on the war in Ukraine.

## The Serbian party system - an overview

Since 2012, the Serbian party system has been dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Narodna Stranka, SNS). The SNS was founded by the Far Right, nationalist, and populist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) after its electoral defeat in 2008. The new party declared itself a moderate centre-right and pro-European people's party (Stojić, 2018), increasing its coalition potential and enabling electoral victory in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. Since 2014, the party has consistently won almost 50% of the vote and ruled under the very popular president, Aleksandar Vučić, as a predominant party with several coalition partners, including the Socialist Party of Serbia or SPS (Milošević's former party) and minority Hungarian and Bosniak parties, among others.

Due to ideological baggage carried over from its radical period before 2008, the SNS initially moderated its political views to present itself as something completely new. The SNS tried to avoid most of the old identity issues and to promote issues

such as economic growth and combating corruption. Corruption proved critical during the 2012 and 2014 electoral campaigns as the SNS accused previous governments of being “thieves and tycoons” and responsible for the corrupted transition from communism. In a classic populist manner, SNS leaders contrasted the corrupt ruling elites with the “ordinary” people. The SNS claimed to represent ordinary Serbs who had been left behind socioeconomically by the transition to democracy and a market economy (Spasojević, 2019).

In contrast to many Eastern European populist parties, the SNS had to formally maintain pro-EU positions as Serbia is a candidate country. This meant that criticism against the EU had to be expressed in vague and general terms; simultaneously, the SNS conveyed significant respect for individual European leaders. For example, Vučić spoke very highly of Merkel and had many meetings with the German chancellor, even as a part of electoral campaigns. The SNS developed an extensive catch-all ideological profile, including the balance between the East and the West. The previous DSS government already defined a similar foreign policy posture emphasizing “the four pillars” (the EU, the United States, Russia, and China), and it was primarily related to the question of the final status of Kosovo. In other words, as most EU countries recognized Kosovo’s independence, Serbia relied on Russia and China (as permanent members of the UN Security Council) as counterweights to the EU and the United States” support for Kosovo’s independence.

As time progressed, the SNS felt more confident in power and increasingly foregrounded non-European actors in Serbia’s political landscape. Simultaneously, the EU integration process stalled, both because of enlargement fatigue on the EU side and a dearth of reforms on the Serbian side. During Donald Trump’s presidency, relations with the United States intensified as there was more understanding of an “alternative” solution to the Kosovo issue, partition between Serbs and Albanians. This solution was perceived as practical but “against the European values” (an ethnic division of territory) and as a potential trigger for other similar cases in the region. Conversely, Russia and China have been praised as reliable partners that recognize Serbian interests and do not put pressure on Serbia like Europe. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian government always emphasized medical support from China and Russia, in contrast, to aid from the EU.

However, this should not be understood as Serbia giving up on European integration – the process is still ongoing, and government officials often refer to EU values and cooperation with the EU institutions and EU representatives praising



Serbian progress. Also, the SNS limits its right-wing populist policies primarily to regional issues and for a domestic audience while adhering to a pro-EU approach internationally. For example, the Serbian government took a very cooperative stance during the 2015 “refugee crisis”, the Serbian prime minister is openly lesbian, and Belgrade hosted the 2022 EuroPride (after initially cancelling the event, the Serbian government recanted, but the parade failed to attract the typical attendance). EU legitimacy enables the Serbian regime to undermine the opposition and relativizes criticism of autocratic rule (Spasojević, 2022). Support and legitimacy of this kind has been termed “stabilitocracy” (Bieber, 2018).

The SNS is not the only populist party in Serbia. Parties like Dveri, Zavetnici, Dosta je Bilo (Enough is Enough), which has run in past elections under the banner of the Sovereignists, the SRS, and perhaps even the DSS are in many ways further to the right of the SNS. In total, these parties garner as much as 15% of the electorate, with each party winning 2–3% of votes. This group is heterogenous – the SRS and the DSS are the old parties from the 1990s, while the rest emerged during the last waves of populism. Most of these parties object to EU integration and demand strict anti-immigrant policies and the establishment of stronger ties with Russia. Some opposed COVID-19 measures and the government’s vaccination policies, and most accuse the current regime of being prepared to recognize Kosovo’s independence. At the same time, there are frequent accusations that they cooperate with the government and do not represent the “real” opposition. These claims are based on the fact that representatives of these parties have access to pro-government media, in contrast to the liberal and left-wing opposition parties.

Finally, since 2018 there have been examples of left-wing populism, such as the grassroots Ne davimo Beograd (“Do not let Belgrade d(r)own”) movement to participate in Belgrade elections. In 2022 they became a part of a parliamentary coalition with environmental groups and small regional parties, establishing a left-wing populist presence in the institutions.

## The supply side of right-wing populism and their political environment

The Russian invasion began almost simultaneously with the kick-off of the electoral campaign in Serbia. The elections were scheduled for April 3, which gave parties an opportunity to react and adapt to new circumstances. Having the most resources, the

ruling SNS immediately reacted and shifted the entire campaign from usual electoral promises of progress and rapid development toward stability – president Vučić argued that the world as we know it will collapse and that our goal should be to preserve ourselves. The main concerns the SNS and government officials raised were energy (as the Serbian energy sector is heavily dependent on Russian supplies) and food. As a result, the Serbian government was pressured to introduce sanctions on Russia. Still, it seems that they used the electoral campaign and technical mandate of the government as an excuse, at least initially. In later statements, the SNS representatives claimed that Serbia would not impose sanctions if it could resist pressure from the West. Finally, however, Serbia voted for the United Nations Assembly Resolution that demanded the end of the Russian offensive in Ukraine on 2 March.

Far Right populist parties saw the invasion as an opportunity and took a position that resonated with their constituency's established anti-West (and pro-Russian) values. In this sense, the war gave new impetus to old arguments, with the war cast as a classic proxy war of the West against Russia, that Ukraine was under the sway of the Western powers, and Serbia should not take sides and impose sanctions on Russia. The arguments of these parties varied from the moderate position of the DSS (Serbia should not pick sides and should retain principled positions respecting the international law and territorial integrity of Ukraine and, therefore, should not recognize the separatist Donbas and Luhansk republics) and anti-EU positions of Dveri, Dosta je Bilo and Zavetnici (the EU integration process has stalled and thus there is no incentive to harmonize foreign politics with Brussels and to jeopardize relations with Russia and Belarus), toward the more critical SRS, which demanded strong support for Russia. The right-wing parties were already in a good position because of a recent campaign against the constitutional changes supported by the EU in January 2022.

The ruling SNS expressed positions close to Far Right populists. The SNS is often classified as pro-Russian. The Socialists rejected the idea of joining the sanctions regime against Russia as it would go against Serbian national interests. They referred to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, asking why the international public was not interested in Serbian civilian victims. President of the Socialist Party, Ivica Dačić, argued that it would take another 25 years for Serbia to become an EU member and that Belgrade could thus happily shelve policy harmonization for the foreseeable future.

Other (non-populist) parties tried to avoid this issue during the campaign, hoping the war would end quickly. However, most non-populist parties believed the war would only provide incentives for nationalism and identity politics,



traditionally perceived as a vital element of the regime and right-wing parties. Therefore, in the first several weeks of the campaign, the Party of Freedom and Justice (SPP), Serbia's largest opposition party, argued against the sanctions on the ground they affect ordinary people and not the regime (often referring to the Serbian experience during the 1990s with claims that sanctions did not harm Milošević at all). Still, most non-populist parties demanded that Serbia condemn Russian aggression on Ukraine. However, as the war progressed toward the end of the campaign, several parties, including the DSS, the PSG (Movement of Free Citizens) and the left-wing party Moramo (We Must), spoke out strongly in favour of Ukraine and called for sanctions on Russia.

These voices were strengthened after the elections when the SSP supported the sanctions and even asked for a parliamentary session on this issue. It is unclear if these changes resulted from public opinion, war events (e.g., atrocities, destruction of civilian infrastructure), or international pressure on these parties. In the post-electoral period, pro-EU liberal and leftist parties started to demand sanctions against Russia daily and to warn that Serbia could be an isolated part of Europe once again if it did not change politics.

Radicalization after the elections also happened on the Right, where parties gathered in a coalition that aimed to prevent sanctions on Russia. These issues have been intertwined with developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro and presented as Western pressure on Serbian interests to disrupt relations between Serbia and Russia to facilitate Kosovo's independence. In contrast to other European parties, being pro-Russian in Serbia is not an obstacle, so these parties could freely express their views.

Finally, the SNS position after the election remained similar for months – although there was a clear majority in the parliament, the government was formed just before the legal deadline – this deflected international pressure for a long time and enabled the SNS to escape from initial pressure. Party position remained neutral, and Vučić insisted on the complexity of the Serbian position and the necessity to put Serbian interest first; this led to a number of warning signs from both Russia and the West, but so far, it seems like there still is some manoeuvre space for him.

## The demand side of right-wing populism

Since the beginning of the invasion, the war in Ukraine has become the most critical issue in Serbian media. Based on a recent report from the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA, 2022a), a Serbian human rights outfit, most of the media coverage is pro-Russian (although with some moderation compared to the initial phase of the war), with the most substantial imbalance observed in national TV stations (especially TV Pink and TV Happy) and tabloids (*Informer* and *Večernje novosti*). Biased reporting is moderate during the news sections and quite open during the morning talk shows (open pro-Russian propaganda by pro-government journalists and analysts). The CRTA report also shows that most fake news is pro-Russian and anti-NATO.

Considering this media landscape and established attitudes on foreign politics of the Serbian population, it is not surprising that a survey conducted in May 2022 (CRTA 2022b) showed that 66% of citizens claimed to be “closer to Russia” in the conflict, in contrast to only 12% who were pro-Ukraine; also, 72% agreed with the statement that Russia has been provoked by NATO expansion. These figures changed over time to some extent – a similar study conducted in September of 2022 showed a small decline in support for Russia and the number of citizens supporting the sanctions rising to 20% (Miletić, 2022). Other surveys show that Serbian citizens might change their position in the case of outside pressure, the threat of sanctions from the West or in the case of Russia recognizing Kosovo independence (on several occasions, Putin used the Kosovo argument to justify the independence of the Donbas and Luhansk republics) (Euronews Srbija, 2022).

Because the 2022 electoral campaign took place after the war started, many commentators argued that the invasion helped Far Right parties surpass the 3% threshold (in 2020, none of those parties had entered parliament). The same assessment was shared by President Vučić just after the elections when he accused the Far Right parties and the SPS of being opportunistic and irresponsible to Serbian interests because they allegedly used the pro-Russian sentiments of the voters to gain more support. However, if we observe mid-term trends (and compare results with the 2016 elections, as those were the last ones with the full participation of the opposition), it seems that there is a small growth of both the Far Right group and the SPS, probably on behalf of the SNS share. Although it could be argued that it is the consequence of the war, data already showed the gradual growth of the Far Right parties even before the war due to strong campaigns against COVID-19



measures and already mentioned constitutional changes in January 2022.

Table 1: Electoral results of populist and “pro-Russian” parties, 2016-2022

	2016		2020		2022	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
<b>SNS</b>	1,823,147	48.0	1,953,998	60.0	1,635,101	44.0
<b>DSS</b>	190,530	5.0	72,085	2.2	204,444	5.5
<b>Dveri</b>	27,690	0.7	Boycott		144,762	3.9
<b>Zavetnici</b>			45,950	1.4	141,227	3.8
<b>Sovereignists</b>	–	–	73,953	2.3	86,362	2.3
<b>SRS</b>	306,052	8.0	65,954	2.0	82,066	2.2
<b>Far Right populists (total)</b>	524,272*	13.7	257,942**	5.7	658,861	8.3
<b>SPS</b>	413,770	11.0	334,333	10.0	435,274	11.7

Source: Republic Electoral Commission

\* In 2016, the Sovereignists could not be classified as Far Right. Dveri and DSS ran as a coalition that year.

\*\* In the 2020 elections, some Far Right voters voted for the monarchist party POKS (85,888) and right-wing SPAS (123,374); in 2022, POKS split between DSS and Dveri, and SPAS joined the SNS.

## Concluding remarks

The issue of Russian aggression merged with already existing political cleavages and reinforced some of them. None of the relevant parties dramatically changed their position due to war and the change in the international landscape; however, parties with strong ideological positions gained more strength and new topics that reinforced divisions between them. At the same time, catch-all parties found themselves in problems as balanced politics became much more complicated.

In terms of populist parties, Far Right populists gained additional issues and incentives to preserve strong anti-EU positions and to oppose the introduction of sanctions on Russia as it would weaken the Serbian position on Kosovo. At the same time, they gained the opportunity to reinforce narratives on the hypocrisy of the West and politics of power instead of politics of principles (e.g., territorial integrity). On the other side, the SNS, as a moderate right-wing and populist party that balances between East and West, found itself in a delicate situation. Although the SNS mastered balancing between powers in the last ten years, the space for manoeuvres is shrinking. So far, Serbia’s government did vote “against” Russia in the UN General Assembly twice, but it also rejected demands to impose sanctions. Moreover, the recent conflict in Kosovo regarding licence plates led to the withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions, which intensified the situation and

raised concerns about the conflict to the highest levels since early 2000. On one side, this makes the situation for president Vučić and the SNS even more complicated, while on the other, it decreases the pressure regarding the sanctions.

In general terms, the war in Ukraine put the Serbian position in the spotlight and emphasized old divisions and issues. Most of them are identity-based and related to significant foreign policy issues, which remind us of previous periods of great divides – in the late 90-ties and before the decisive 2008 elections. However, the current party system does not reflect the divisions – the SNS has a stable government with coalition partners, and the bilateral opposition cannot agree on most of the issues. Also, there are many concerns about the quality of Serbian democracy and recent trends of autocratization. In other words, although there seems to be a challenge in foreign affairs for the Serbian government, there is significant stability in the internal political arena.



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