

Hawk in Dove's Clothing: Political Trajectories of Political Parties in Serbia, 2003–2008

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Abstract: During the period of party system stabilisation after 2003, Serbia experienced two major party trajectories, the repositioning of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), and the emergence of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This article explains both of these moves as strategic choices by the party leaders: the SPS attempts to abandon its difficult electoral position as part of the nationalist bloc, and to reach new voters as a modern economic left-wing party, while the new reformist LDP profited from the natural move of its main competitor, the Democratic Party, toward the political mainstream, and forced it to come back to its ideological roots.

Keywords: Communist successor parties, New parties, Party system change, Serbia, Spatial models

Why party shifts can draw a new picture of post-communist party systems²

With a few exceptions, a close look at the literature on post-communist party systems makes us dizzy and disoriented. Parties in post-communist countries appear as inept actors, their moves hard to predict, and party development seems to thrive more on personal quarrels than any rational behaviour that would be possible to analyze using models that rely on rationality and strategic orientation. Work on the strategic positioning of political parties and choice of ideology has mainly contributed to the image of parties making populist appeals with no coherent program. In established democracies, it appears that parties are competing along social cleavages and with programmatic and ideological differences (1967) as well as the successful new parties instead serve new political niches, with voters who were not addressed by previously existing parties (Meguid 2005). In contrast, it is symptomatic of the seeming chaos and disorientation that appears in the literature on post-communist party systems that the new and highly successful political parties in post-communist democracies in Europe have adopted catch-all strategies with less distinctive programs (Innes 2002). Either they position themselves at the very centre of the political spectrum where many other parties already compete (Sikk 2006), or they use nationalist

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issues and populist appeals (Mudde 2005). Serbia seems to go along in the same way as other countries of the region (Vykoupilová, Stojarová 2007).

A first look at the coalition formation after the 2008 Serbian elections might reinforce this image of disoriented parties. The elections were called after the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS) broke from its previous coalition with the pro-European parties because it no longer supported the government's EU integration policy. After new elections in May 2008, the formation of a politically quite natural coalition of three (so far) EU-sceptic parties would have been possible, since these parties held an absolute majority of seats in parliament: the DSS jointly with the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) and the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS). In the election campaign all three parties had stressed their affinity with one another, and their programs share many similarities. Nevertheless, negotiations resulted in a coalition of pro-European and anti-nationalist reform parties along with the communist successor party SPS, which is still linked to the heritage of the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s, and was once the main enemy of the pro-Europeans after 1990.

Such party shifts are quickly interpreted as part of the madness of post-communist party systems, or as a consequence of personally motivated affinity or hostility. This article argues that this is not so. Through the example of two recent party trajectories in Serbian politics, I show that there is more rationality in post-communist party systems than is commonly assumed, and that the re-positioning of Serbian parties on the issue was the result of very thoroughly considered strategies. Instead of portraying the fuzziness, I offer rationalist explanations for the parties' re-positioning in the issue space. The theoretical explanation that I employ relies on the Downsian and Neo-Downsian approach, based on political positions in a space which is defined by the most salient political divisions and issues.³ Political parties and voters in the Downsian space of political positions and preferences are considered rational actors, and they attempt to maximise their political outcome.

In the development of party systems in post-communist democracies in Europe, two phases can be distinguished. The period from the first to the second elections was often characterized by a complete change of the character of party competition (Bielasiak 1997: 33; Olson 1998; Bochler 2007). In the first multiparty elections in post-communist countries, very heterogeneous umbrella coalitions uniting a broad alliance of reform-oriented parties usually won a landslide victory against the old regime party. The most relevant question in such elections was

³ See Downs (1957), McGann (2002), and many others.

usually regime change, occasionally related to issues of the country's borders. In the Serbian case, a broad alliance of reform parties (Democratic Opposition Serbia, *Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS) won a landslide victory over the old regime parties in the first reasonably free parliamentary elections on 23 December 2000, following the *bulldozer revolution* earlier the same year. Not only in Serbia, but in all countries of the region, the umbrella movements soon broke up, leading to a party dispersion process with numerous new parties that competed independently, occupying each their specific location in the political space. This opens a second phase, the shakedown period, where the number of parties diminishes. Parties that did not find an electorate were abandoned by voters and politicians, or forced to merge with other parties.⁴

The literature on party positioning in the political spaces has accurately explained why parties take certain positions, and how this is related to their electoral success. As a consequence, it is easy to show how certain parties were unsuccessful in their attempts to find a place in the new electoral market. However, the post-communist countries offer a unique opportunity to study the emergence of successful new parties, and the re-positioning of old parties in an already partly-established party space. Due to the relevance for comparative literature of these changes in party competition and the re-positioning of political parties, this article focuses on the period after the initial configuration of the Serbian party system, starting with 2003. It investigates the two major trajectories in the Serbian party system which occurred after 2003, up to the fourth elections in 2008. The focus on this period has the advantage that it leaves out the turbulent times of the break-up of the umbrella movement. I limit the investigation to party trajectories where either a relevant party changed their position in the party space in a major way, or where new parties emerged on the electoral market. These trajectories are seen as successful if these parties managed by themselves, or as the leading party in an electoral coalition, to pass the 5% threshold in any national parliamentary election after 2003.⁵ The criteria are fulfilled by the

⁴ For the shakedown hypothesis, see O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 58), Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 147) and Cox (1997). Dawisha and Deets (2006) and Bochsler (2007) investigated the hypothesis for countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁵ The case selection of this study assumes an electoral threshold of 5 % which limits the study on those parties which have passed the institutional barriers, so that political institutions do not have any filter effect on the parties under study, and need not be considered for this investigation. For the Serbian case, changes in the electoral rules are particularly interesting to explain the emergence of ethnic minority parties. In 2007, for the first time ethnic minority parties were exempted from the threshold. They are not considered however in this study, because none of them got even close to 5 % of the vote, which is used here as well as arbitrary threshold of relevance, and because there are no major known changes in the positions of minority parties in this period, and only two previously non-existent small

Liberal-Democratic Party (*Liberalno demokratska partija*, LDP), which emerged as a radical pro-European party in the 2007 elections, and the SPS, which was continuously present.

The study of the two most relevant party trajectories illustrates how party actors take into account the electoral potential in the political space in their strategic decisions. It gives suggestive rather than definitive conclusions, considering the limited scope, with a focus on successful cases of party transformation, without looking at parties that have not changed their position, that have not even emerged prominently, or that never won enough votes to become relevant players in the party system.

The first section of this article offers a short summary of the theory of political issue spaces and spatial positioning of political parties, on which the further analyses will be based. This is followed by a description of the political space in Serbia, and of the trajectories of the LDP and the SPS, and a tentative conclusion.

Rational explanations for parties changing their position

Spatial models of party competition

According to spatial models of party competition, voters are mainly “motivated by the policies that the competing parties [...] present in their current campaign” (Adams, Merrill, Grofman 2005: 15). Being rational, voters prefer parties which are close to their own positions. These policies can be modelled as a one- or multi-dimensional political space, relying on one or several factors that contain positions on policy issues. If there is only one major political issue or if opinions on all major political issues strongly correlate, then there will be only one political dimension that is relevant for political parties and their voters. Otherwise, there might be several important dimensions in the policy space, depending on the number of non-related factors which contain similar policy issues. While voters are attempting to choose the party which is closest to their most important political preferences, rational parties are trying to attract a maximal number

Roma parties emerged with one seat each in the parliament elected in 2007 as new competitors, but lost their seats again one year later.

We need to be aware that institutional power can be used in other forms too, for instance using state institutions in order to prevent a new competitor from emerging in the political system. This might be an important reason why the Serbian oligarch and media tycoon Bogoljub Karić failed to establish his Movement of Serbian Force (*Pokret Snaga Srbije*, PSS) as a new party in Serbia (cf. Bochsler 2008a).

of voters, and accordingly seek out a position in the political space that helps them to reach the largest potential of voters possible (McGann 2002).

Commonly, the study of political spaces and party systems investigates relatively stable party systems, where every party has found its own place. This is why models of party politics that rely explicitly or implicitly are much more developed for situations of stability than for situations of change.

However, the idea of stability explicitly relies on changes which previously occurred, or strategic political positioning. Only after a situation of movement might one expect the party system to find its own balance. It is little wonder that in countries that only recently abandoned communist authoritarianism and started a process of democratic consolidation, the party system might be more fluid and open to adaptation than in the Western democracies, where political parties have been generally frozen along the cleavages that emerged historically, after new groups of voters obtained their voting rights (Lipset, Rokkan 1967). Thus we may find much stronger evidence for strategic behaviour in the East, according to the prediction of spatial models, than we would find in many countries in the West.

Spatial models rely on three main components. First, the *structure of the political space*, which is defined through the most important axes of political orientation and the distribution of voter preferences along these axes. Second, the models rely on the *institutional–organizational framework and capacities*. Political institutions, such as party financing laws, electoral thresholds, decentralisation, regime type, or the financial capacities of political parties all have an impact on the formation of the party system. They can facilitate the creation of new political parties, or much more often make the entry of new parties difficult. Third, party leaders and politicians behave as strategic actors, and taking into account the structure of political space and the institutional–organisational framework, decide upon the position of their parties. The parties of a party system, however, are interconnected in their strategic decisions: the positioning of one party can affect the strategy chosen by other parties who are competing for the same voters (cf. Meguid 2005). Drawing on these determinants of party competition, we expect that changes in the party system can be explained through institutional change, changes of voter's positions, or when parties attempt to find a new position in the political space, in order to increase the number of their potential voters.

In this paper, I will focus on the latter aspect, and show how party trajectories in Serbia can be seen as an attempt to adjust the party supply to the voters' demands.

On the other hand, there are other competing explanations which might apply for the parties under study, and should be carefully discussed.

Historical legacies, personal impacts, and political Darwinism

While spatial models of politics rely on the idea that parties choose rationally the best position in the political space to maximise their voters, it is not the only possible answer to the puzzle of why parties choose a certain program, why they change their policies, or why they join a cabinet or do not. Often, explanations based on the historical legacies, specific policy preferences or personal interests of the party membership and of party leaders, or on personal quarrels can be plausible, too. I argue that such history- and personnel-related explanations are often closely linked to strategic decisions. There are plenty of legacy-based influences on a party's positioning, and as much politicians might try to influence its program, there are often several personal and historical factors at play within the same political party; any of which if dominant might lead to a different result. Both the organisational characteristics of political parties and the dependence of parties on electoral success restrict them to the strategically most appropriate path. If a party assembly does not choose a good party leader or it opts for a badly conceived political strategy, the party will either fail in elections, drop out of the electoral market, or as a reaction to bad results it will later need to correct its political program.

There, *Anthony Downs*, the father of rational choice models in political science, and *Charles Darwin*, the father of evolutionary choice in biology, go hand in hand. Parties can either choose the right direction to develop, or alternatively they risk disappearing. However, while biological species develop over long time-periods through random mutations, political parties are more intelligent organisms. On the one hand, they are lead by strategically-thinking actors, which often if not always steer them in a strategically desirable direction. On the other hand, if a path is less than promising strategically, defeats in opinion polls or electoral defeats often do have immediate effects on the party leadership, changing the internal distribution of power, and putting more strategically-thinking politicians in the driver's seat, so that parties can find the strategically right path. While this argument might be tested in a different place for accuracy, it explains why the focus on strategic spatial models does not necessarily neglect alternative legacy- or personality-based explanations, but complements them, and different approaches might explain the same outcomes independent of each other.

How party systems change

While the previous literature on party systems has mostly focused on stable situations, a few studies have investigated aspects of party system change. Two important investigations (Hug 2001; Meguid 2005) present models of new parties' entry and the old parties' reaction to it. Meguid (2005) shows how mainstream parties are forced to react to the appearance of new parties, because the new parties are approaching their previous voters. On one hand, they can move towards the newly entering parties, trying to prevent voters from switching to the new parties. On the other hand, they can also try to alter the political salience of the issue area in which the new parties try to find their voters.

For post-communist democracies in Europe, previous research has shown how institutional measures, particularly regarding party financing, can be built up in order to make the entry of new parties more difficult. Surprisingly, a study on new parties in the Baltic states has shown that the most successful new competitors did not aim for electoral niches, and thus did not take a pronounced position on a specific issue, but instead targeted the centrist voters (Sikk 2006).

The political space in Serbia

To discuss the positioning of political parties in Serbia, we need first to introduce the main dimensions of political orientation in post-2000 Serbian politics. Mainly, there are four political conflicts which are addressed by political parties and which seem relevant to voters in elections for the party choice. The four issue dimensions have been highly correlated in the party system. I discuss the four dimensions before the change occurred that will be discussed later; i.e. before the trajectory of the SPS, and without considering the position of the new LDP.⁶

The *regime conflict* refers to the conflict between politicians close to the authoritarian Milošević regime versus the democratically-oriented reform parties. More precisely, the SPS and repeatedly the SRS were the main pillars of the Milošević regime, while the pro-European reform parties (DS and Serbian Renewal Movement/*Srpski pokret obnove*, SPO), the nationalist-conservative parties (DSS and New Serbia/*Nova Srbija*, NS), and the parties of the ethnic minorities belonged to the Democratic Opposition Movement, and jointly defeated the Milošević regime in public protests and in elections in 2000. Later-emerging parties of the pro-European

⁶ See Pantić (2006), Slavujević (2006), Mihailović (2006b), Goati (2004) for more information on party positioning.

bloc, G17+ and LDP,⁷ have taken clear stands on the side of the reformers. As in most other post-communist countries, regime conflict has remained present in Serbian politics, leading to quarrels over the heritage of Milošević, and over the eligibility of members of the old regime to high state positions. The division is regularly found on the agenda when the reform parties commemorate important events in the public resistance against the regime, or by the few court cases regarding political violence committed during the authoritarian period.

Nationalist–authoritarian values are a second important dimension of Serbian politics. Namely, the attempts to create a Greater Serbia, the promotion of the Serbs as the dominant ethnic group, and authoritarian rejection of civic liberalism have been positions which were highly salient on the Serbian political agenda in the 1990s, and a priority both of the regime parties SPS and SRS, and likewise the parties of the democratic reformers, namely the SPO, while the DSS “oscillated between the nationalist and democratic opposition”, and the DS adopted a nationalist agenda in 1994–1995 (Bieber 2003: 75). The opposite view of Serbia as a non-nationalist civic–liberal state has been supported in most periods by the DS, but only the Civic Alliance of Serbia (*Građanski Savez Srbije*, GSS) consistently defended this view throughout the 1990s.

In the post-Milošević period, the building of a Greater Serbia has been replaced on the everyday political agenda by other related issues, such as the willingness to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), by the question how to deal with the past, relations with neighbouring states, human and minority rights, non-discrimination policies, and the approval of a democratic system. Most parties belonging to the DOS movement take rather civic–liberal stands, with the exception of DSS and the small NS, both of which share rather nationalist positions, promote strong ties between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church, and can be characterised as nationalist–conservative (Đurković 2007; Komšić 2003: 48). The Serbian Radical Party is clearly located at the ultra-nationalist end of this dimension. The Socialist Party has inherited a nationalist legacy from the wars that Serbia fought under the political leadership of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s, and even if it does not loudly advocate a Greater Serbia, it often stands close to the SRS on questions with an authoritarian connotation, and has been a fierce opponent of the ICTY.

The nationalist–authoritarian issues are closely related to Serbian foreign policy: in the first place, full cooperation with the ICTY, and the strengthening of civic rights and tolerance,

⁷ G17+ emerged from an NGO with mostly economic experts. Its first party leader, Miroslav Labus, was previously a DS member.

are pre-condition for the integration process into EU (and some of them for NATO as well). The most pronounced pro-European parties are the civic-liberal ones around the DS, along with the newly emerged G17+ party and the SPO. Likewise, the DSS and NS were for a long time mainly positive towards European integration, but in 2007 the DSS joined a cooperation agreement with United Russia, the Russian party of power, and explicitly rejected of NATO membership. In 2008, both DSS and NS rejected the possibility of EU integration after a majority of the EU member states recognised Kosovo, and the EU was expected to take over the UN mandate in Kosovo. And even if the ultra-nationalist parties in a few occasions have approved Serbia's EU integration, in most instances they remain rather negative (see Komšić 2007), a position which the Socialists did not change until their 2003 party congress (see below).

Finally, their positioning on the economic cleavage has been rather fuzzy. A clear protagonist of a strong role for the state in the economy is the SPS, along with a few minor parties that declare themselves social democrats, whereas G17+ favours radical liberal economic reforms. Other parties have less clear-cut positions: SRS declares itself to be right-wing, but has increasingly campaigned for the losers of the economic transition, promising price controls and an increase in the welfare state – positions that are usually connected to the economic left. Similarly, DSS has a tradition as a right-wing party representing the interests of an economic elite, but after the party acquired a very heterogeneous electorate after 2000, it changed its economic direction (Goati 2004: 208-209). DS favours liberal economic reforms, while promising socially egalitarian policies (Stojiljković 2007a: 144-145).

In sum, the positioning of the parties on the four dimensions has been to a high extent correlated in the period after 2000. While the most reformist parties have (mainly) shared anti-nationalistic values, been united in their opposition against the old regime, and favoured EU integration and liberal economic reforms, the old regime parties took the opposite stands.

In the following section, I will show how the most recent Socialist move might change this pattern, inverting the established dimensions of orientation in Serbian politics.

A new pro-European pole in Serbia's party space

Getting the reform euphoria back into the political system

With the Liberal-Democratic party, a new pro-reform player has emerged, five years after the start of Serbia's transition. The creation and positioning of the party can only be understood by looking at the large pro-reform party, the DS. The DS membership was always profoundly

pro-European and pro-reform, but as one of the largest parties, after 2000 it found itself during different periods in several different roles of governmental responsibility, and was behaving to some extent pragmatically. After the March 2003 murder of Zoran Đinđić, the first reform prime minister, who belonged to the DS, the circle of persons around Đinđić was replaced by different party currents. Boris Tadić became party president in February 2004, and the DS moved towards a new, more mainstream-oriented position, not at least due to its main competitor, the DSS. In the December 2003 elections, the incumbent government led by the DS lost its majority in parliament, and the DS did not become part of the new cabinet led by the nationalist-conservative DSS. Instead, Boris Tadić won the presidential elections in June 2004. In this position, Tadić and the DS pragmatically cooperated on some crucial points with the DSS-lead government. This led to growing dissatisfaction on the most reformist wing of the party. At the 2004 DS party congress, Čedomir Jovanović, deputy prime minister in the interim government in 2003, attacked the DS leadership for cooperating with DSS Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, whom he intitled the “new Milošević”. In the aftermath, a group around Jovanović tried to form a Liberal-Democratic Fraction inside the DS. This, however, was not accepted by the DS, and Jovanović was expelled from the DS by the end of the year (cf. Goati 2006: 172). He founded the new LDP on 5 November 2005.

The party tries to present itself as the only guarantee of a continuation of the Đinđić reform program, charging that the DS stalled its pro-European reform program after the Đinđić murder. Accordingly, reforms and change is the first priority in the party program,⁸ and a solution to the *questions of The Hague and Kosovo* – problems inherited from the Milošević regime – figures among the first points on the path of reform and European integration. The party argues that Serbia needs to face its recent past and deal with war crimes committed in the 1990s, as the basis of societal modernisation. Issues such as lustration, human rights, autonomy for multi-cultural regions, and Western integration (into EU, NATO, and also through increased cooperation with neighbouring states) take an important place in the program. With regards to economic issues the party takes clearly liberal-conservative stands, and wants to reduce the size of the government. The party favours an acceleration of the transition, increased efforts at privatisation, the transfer of state regulatory activities to independent, market-oriented regulatory bodies, and the abolishment of state-controlled prices, which should lead to economic growth and reduce poverty. With regards to social welfare, the party favours a reform of the Serbian education

⁸ Program “Drugačija Srbija” (Different Serbia), from 2007, available at <www.ldp.org.yu>. [last accessed on 16 June 2008]

system, wants to replace the state-controlled health care with mandatory health insurance, and, under the title “social policies”, the program speaks of equal opportunity instead of criminal networks and client-orientation, increased quality and efficiency instead of direct social subsidies. For the fight against poverty the party does not advocate redistributive programs, but instead blames feudal attitudes in the government’s positions, and “fascist, racist, and xenophobe tendencies” for excluding parts of the population from social and economic life.

The new party takes positions close to but more radical than the DS, and accuses the DS of a program too prone to compromise with the nationalists. It addresses voters who are disappointed by President Boris Tadić’s (DS) pragmatic cooperation with the Koštunica (DSS-lead) government. They feel disappointed by the fact that the reforms are not going forward fast enough, and Serbia is not moving fast enough on the European integration track; they believe that the DS guides itself too much by the public opinion when addressing issues of Serbia’s recent past and relations with Serbia’s minorities and neighbours, instead of speaking out clearly on these issues.

Indeed, the 2004–2006 period was characterised by the openness of Tadić and his DS towards the nationalist-conservative parties. This gave Tadić the nickname of *mannequin*, due to his role of being not only popular in the population, but also of having little political weight. Prime Minister Koštunica (DSS) was perceived as the real leader, with substantial influence over Tadić. Examples are the DS’s approval for strong ties between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the state (Gajić 2005), Tadić’s half-hearted excuses for Serbian war crimes,⁹ or his radical rhetoric on the Kosovo issue for domestic consumption, in particular his symbolic visit to the Kosovo Serbs in March 2005.¹⁰

One of the possibly most painful flirtations with the nationalists and the supposed opinion of the majority was the DS’s support for the new Serbian constitution in the 2006 referendum. Initially the DS favoured a constitution with emphasis on greater decentralisation,

⁹ His strategy relies on a recognition of Serbian war crimes, and excuses for such, but the common Serbian relativizing that war crimes were committed by all the former Yugoslav countries alike (Danas, 7 December 2004, “Tadić: Svi jedni drugima dugujemo izvinjenje”). Commenting on an assembly that was aimed at denying the crimes committed in Srebrenica, Tadić stressed freedom of opinion (Nin, 2 July 2005, Ljiljana Smajlović, “Srebrenica kao sudbina”).

¹⁰ When speaking to the Serbs in Kosovo and the international community, Tadić was apparently more moderate and sent certain signals of support for a multiethnic Kosovo. Namely, Tadić encouraged the Kosovo Serbs to participate in the 2004 parliamentary elections in Kosovo, and was trying to cool down emotions after the Kosovo riots in March 2004 (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2005).

particularly a restitution of autonomy to Vojvodina province, and “liberal democratic values in a civic state” (International Crisis Group 2006: 2), all issues which clearly belong to the pro-reformist field in Serbian politics. However, all these points were opposed by the DSS. In the text that was the subject of a referendum in October 2006, Serbia was defined as a nation state (while Milošević’s constitution had defined Serbia as a civic state), and Serbian and the Cyrillic alphabet were mandated as the only national language (despite the numerous minorities, some of whom have their own languages, and others who use the Latin alphabet). The preamble described Kosovo as integral part of Serbia, ruling out any possibility of recognizing Kosovo’s independence (International Crisis Group 2006: 13-14). A coalition of all relevant parliamentary parties, including the DS, rallied for the project in a united campaign. The Kosovo issue constrained a broad coalition to support the proposal, because “Koštunica used the preambular statement that Kosovo is a part of Serbia to force other parties to support the draft lest he accuse them publicly of insufficient loyalty at a time when the province is in danger of being lost” (International Crisis Group 2006: 4). Similarly, the accent of the referendum campaign was put on the Kosovo issue, and opponents branded as Albanian separatists.

Only the coalition around the LDP along with a few minority parties was opposed to the new constitution and called for a boycott of the referendum.¹¹ As a consequence, the party was subjected to heavy attacks by most Serbian media and by demonstrators, but this helped the party to position itself during the referendum campaign as the main protagonist in the anti-nationalist field. The low turnout in the referendum of 55 % can be read as a massive success of the opposition around the LDP. If reports of fraud and manipulation are to be taken seriously, turnout was even below 50 % (International Crisis Group 2006). This would mean that a substantial part of the voters who usually support the DS or other pro-constitution parties observed the boycott called by the LDP and its allies.

The centripetal logic of multi-party systems, and destabilization through new entries

Both the DS’s move towards a more nationalist position and the entry of the LDP can be understood in a spatial model of party politics. To facilitate the argument, I consider only credible competitors in the electoral market; i.e. parties which are able to pass the 5% legal threshold in parliamentary elections, so that votes cast for these parties can be converted into seats.¹² Before

¹¹ The vote would only have been valid if more than half of the registered voters turned out.

¹² Otherwise we would expect that voters and politicians defeat these parties, because supporting them does not help to influence politics (Duverger 1951).

the entry of the LDP, three such pro-reform parties, DS, G17+, and SPO,¹³ were able to get into parliament in the 2003 elections. Afterward, both G17+ and SPO may have lost votes in the pro-reform camp due to their support for a nationalist–conservative cabinet in the beginning of 2004; thus the DS remained the most pronounced and credible pro-European reform party. Other parties located next to the DS repeatedly failed to pass the 5% legal threshold in elections, and were thus unable to survive on their own in national politics.

While many theoretical models have discussed the strategic positioning of two-party configurations, McGann (2002) has argued theoretically how political parties might position and re-position themselves in a multi-party system. He assumes that there is one dominant axis of party orientation, and voters are distributed along a lognormal function. In Serbia the most salient political issues (in 2003) could be located along one dominant axis, with the pro-European reformers at one end, and the ultra-nationalist forces close to the old regime at the other extreme. Furthermore, McGann assumes that the number of parties is stable, which is often quite reasonable, given that the institutional framework and preventive counter-action by established parties makes it quite difficult for new parties to enter (Hug 2001). McGann shows that when party leaders are free to decide strategically about the positioning of their parties, then there will be a centripetal effect, which means that the parties with the most pronounced positions on the dominant dimension will tend to move towards the political centre, so that “the parties near the center are ‘squeezed’ by the more extreme parties” (2002: 54). They do this even against the will of the own members and their previous electorate, driven by the incentive to win new voters from the centrist parties. The scenario is highly plausible for the Serbian party system, given that its internal party democracy is extremely limited (Goati 2004). This theoretical background is accurately exemplified in the empirical observation of the DS’s move towards the nationalists. In such a situation, space at the end of the political axis is created. Some voters feel little represented, but they can only choose between abstaining in elections, or voting for the lesser evil, and as long as a party can win more voters in the centre than it loses when radical voters abstain, it will move further towards the centre of the political spectrum.

However, this leaves the pronounced reformist partisans disappointed, because they see the DS distancing itself from their position; and the whole setting changes if a new party manages to get into the party system. Indeed, in the Serbian case, the DS’s move towards the political mainstream left so many voters disappointed that at the end of the main political axis the space was created for a new political option. This perfectly explains why the LDP emerged in this

¹³ Allied with NS. Later on, the NS turned around and joined the DSS in an alliance.

position. On the other hand, the emergence of a new party at the end of the axis of party competition changes the mechanisms of party competition completely: As long as the DS is the only credible competent for pronounced reformist voters, spatial models of party competition would predict a centripetal change towards the centre; after the entry of a more pronounced reformist party, the DS party leadership can no longer neglect its pro-reform voters and members. For voters at the reformist periphery of the axis, the LDP offers a new alternative, and accordingly the DS must pay more attention to them, meaning it needs to move back towards its strongly reformist electorate. Or, alternatively, it can attempt to create reasons which make it less attractive to vote for the new LDP option.

How the *political mannequin* gets back to his roots

As one would predict based on spatial models, the DS reacted to the LDP entry in two ways. First, in order to prevent the LDP from gaining too many disappointed former DS voters, it moved back towards the pro-reformist field. Second, it ruled out any governing coalition with the LDP, partly depriving the LDP of any option to be part of a government, and making it less attractive to its voters (because the party appears to potential voters to have little chance of getting real influence on politics). DS leader Boris Tadić said that the LDP was not acceptable as a coalition partner because it would accept Kosovo's independence. While this might partly be understood as a reaffirmation of the DS's clear position against Kosovo independence, this rejection was also needed in order to signal that the LDP had no chance to get into any governing coalition.

On the other hand, the DS made several policy moves and created symbolic events in order to re-position itself as a pronounced pro-reformist force, and not to leave this field to the LDP. In the 2007 elections, the DS tried to attach itself to the legacy of former DS Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (DS), and not to leave this symbol to the LDP. While the LDP promised a program in the spirit of Đinđić, the DS called for the renaming of a Belgrade boulevard after the murdered prime minister, and put his widow Ružica Đinđić on top of its electoral list (although she did not enter the DS parliamentary delegation after the elections). In terms of its program, the DS reacted to the entry of the LDP with an emphasis on tolerance, on Europe, and on the extradition of war criminals. This was supported by the nomination of Božidar Đelić as prime ministerial candidate; he was finance minister in the Đinđić government and is seen as being committed to strong economic reforms.¹⁴ The pro-European and reformist credentials of

¹⁴ Nin, 16 November 2006, „Šta nudim Srbiji?”.

the DS were underlined by the visit of EU enlargement commissar Olli Rehn to President Boris Tadić in the last days of the campaign.

In early 2008, the break up of the DS with its nationalist–conservative coalition partners and its re-orientation as a clear reformist protagonist was perfectly executed. The turn had been fuelled by Kosovo’s proclamation of independence and the succeeding developments. The nationalist–conservative parties, under the leadership of Prime Minister Koštunica, tried to link the question of Kosovo independence with Serbian foreign policy and the issue of EU integration. Accordingly, the nationalist–conservatives demanded a stop to EU integration of Serbia, and wanted to re-orient the Serbian foreign policy towards Russia; Serbia redrew its ambassadors from all countries that recognised the new state. However, the DS could not risk international self-isolation and a stalling of the EU integration process, which is among the most important issues for its electorate, and on which it is particularly vulnerable to electoral losses to the LDP. The existence of a clear pro-European alternative makes it impossible for the DS to make any compromises on this question. This policy difference was already a major issue in the campaign for the presidential elections 2008, when Koštunica refused to support the candidacy of Tadić (Bochsler 2008c: 746). Shortly after these elections, the governing coalition of Tadić and Koštunica broke up over the question of whether the integration process should be continued. When on 21 February Koštunica and deputy SRS leader Tomislav Nikolić organised mass protests in Belgrade against Kosovo independence, with orchestrated physical attacks on the then-unprotected embassies of the US and European Union member states, Tadić clearly distanced himself from this issue, escaping on a state visit to Romania.

Against the votes of the nationalist–conservative ministers in the government, the pro-European cabinet majority decided to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, which led the break-up of the governing coalition, and provoked early elections in May 2008. The elections were mainly fought over the EU integration of Serbia, and won by the pro-European reformers around the DS. While it is difficult to judge how much the LDP advanced in the 2008 elections in terms of votes,¹⁵ the party’s success might rather be thought of in terms of a policy change by the ruling party: bringing the DS back to its old position, or helping the *mannequin* Boris Tadić to find his old roots. However, the rational logic of political

¹⁵ In 2007, the party obtained 5.3 % of the votes, one year later 5.2 %. However, in 2007 the party was allied to Nenad Čanak’s League of Vojvodina Social Democrats (*Liga Socijaldemokrata Vojvodine*, LSV), and one year later, Čanak allied with the DS. Probably the LSV contributed more than 0.1 % of the votes in 2007, so the LDP might claim a net increase in votes.

positioning in the issue space teaches us that a radical competitor is needed in order to prevent the DS from moving too close to the mainstream and making concessions to the nationalist–conservative parties. Assuming that the suggested logic has applied to Serbian politics (along with other factors), then the LDP entry would have forced the DS to accelerate its steps towards EU integration, and for this reason to break up with Koštunica.

The hawk in dove's clothing?

The second case of a party shift regards the Socialist Party of Serbia. The party has a long legacy as the successor of the Union of Communists in Serbia (*Savez Komunističke Srbije*). It was re-named in 1990, but remained under the leadership of the previous secretary of the Serbian communists, Slobodan Milošević. After the death of Milošević in March 2006, and more importantly around the parliamentary elections in 2008, the SPS underwent a spectacular political shift. Previously linked to Milošević and his authoritarian–nationalist program, the party attempted to re-position and to cut (to some extent) the ties to its past. The main re-positioning, however, occurs less through a fundamental change of position than through the Socialists' new accent on social welfare policies. Three aspects appear as important in understanding the move. First, I discuss the genuine problem of the communist successor parties' strategies in post-communist politics, and their new location in the issue space. Thereafter, I explain the re-positioning of the Socialist party of Serbia; third, I show how this is related to its wish to become a member of the Socialist International.

Reform, disappear... or sit it out: trajectories of post-communist parties

After transformation to democracy, the political survival of former communist parties is endangered. Having lost their political monopoly, they are often discredited for substantial parts of the electorate. In the first elections right after (or during) the political transition, the *old regime conflict* overwhelms, and with very few exceptions, the elections are won in a landslide victory by the reform parties, which usually compete in a broad umbrella coalition (Olson 1998; Bochsler 2007). The situation in Serbia was not different in the first reasonably free elections in 2000, the Socialists fell back to some 14 % of the votes.

Despite the losses, the former communists managed to survive in most post-communist countries, often after having been excluded from government for several years and after having undergone deep-going party reforms. In the beginning of the democratic period, the communist successor parties are so discredited that it is hard for them to get back into government

(Druckman, Roberts 2007; Grzymala-Busse 2001). In a few exceptional cases, such as Albania, Bulgaria or Romania, the former communists stayed in power throughout the wave of partial democratisation in 1989/90 (Grzymala-Busse 2006); similarly, there was no clear break in Montenegro. Where the former communists managed to return as reformed Social Democratic parties, they helped to structure the orientation of the new party system, and to create a robust competition.

While the communist successor parties suffer from their negative political heritage, their crucial advantage over other parties is that they already have strong organisational structures at time of democratisation. The argument holds even for Serbia, where a multi-party system was introduced in 1990; by the time of the “bulldozer revolution” in 2000, the opposition pro-democratic parties had developed their structures. Still, the Socialist Party had an organisational advantage, since it could take over the party funds, and it could inherit political elites across the country in numerous positions in local politics and in the economy, even if leading figures were swept out of positions in national politics (Goati 2002: 18).

Apart from organizational and programmatic reforms, the transformability of former communist parties into new parties in the democratic system relies on the personal (dis)continuity of the parties’ leadership. While a few countries in Central and Eastern Europe went through very extensive processes of lustration, and others through some kinds of mini lustration, Serbia rather resembles countries such as Albania, Romania or Ukraine that lack even minor attempts at lustration (Letki 2002). Trials for political crimes committed in the authoritarian period were limited to the prosecutions by the ICTY, where among others the SPS leader Slobodan Milošević and the SRS leader Vojislav Šešelj stood trial. These were not accompanied by any prosecution for crimes not related to the wars. On the contrary, both party leaders kept their positions at the top of the SPS, respectively the SRS; in the case of Milošević until his decease in 2006. Domestic courts opened trials only for a few acts of political violence. In sum, there was no lustration in Serbia, but rather personal continuity within the old regime parties.

Rather than party reforms being a condition for the entry of the Socialist Party, it is suspected that some of the few trials for political crimes of the Milošević regime were called off in 2008 in order to facilitate the Socialists’ return into power. There is silence from both parts of the DS–SPS coalition about the historical role of Slobodan Milošević and the Socialist Party. On the one hand, for the first time, no high ranked SPS officials attended the yearly commemoration on 28 June 2008 of Milošević’s extradition to ICTY.¹⁶ On the other hand, while negotiations

¹⁶ Radio Free Europe (*Radio Slobodna Evropa*), 28 June 2008, Serbian news program.

about the new Serbian government were going on, one of the most important Serbian court cases over political crimes was stopped. Allegedly on the orders of political authorities, the public prosecutor's office in the Serbian town Požarevac cancelled its accusation against Marko Milošević, son of the former president, and five of his collaborators, who had attacked and heavily injured three members of the opposition in May 2000. If other trials should be cancelled later, members of the Milošević's family who at this writing were still fugitive in Russia might return to Serbia.¹⁷ Finally, on 18 October 2008, DS leader Boris Tadić and SPS leader Ivica Dačić signed an agreement of reconciliation, declaring that they wanted to settle their former conflict, which can be seen as a rehabilitation of the Serbian Socialists.¹⁸

Considering the level of violence exerted by the Milošević regime, and the deep cleavage between the old regime and the democratic opposition a few years earlier, it appears puzzling why in 2008 an unreformed communist successor party could become acceptable to the reformists. In the case of the return of the Socialist Party of Serbia to political power, *time* might have been more relevant in why it became acceptable, first as a supporter of the DSS minority government in 2004, and later as a coalition partner of DS in 2008. On one hand, time naturally resolves the question of personal continuity. With Milošević's death in 2006, the most important problem of personal continuity was resolved. Moreover, time makes the old regime conflict less important in relation to other political cleavages. The more other conflicts become salient, however, the more difficult it becomes for the reform parties to form a politically united government. In the Serbian case, as a consequence of the growing differences within the former DOS coalition, the formation of a common and politically coherent government of DS and DSS appeared much more difficult than reconciliation with the SPS. And in the period of 2004–2008, the Socialists were able to enter a number of municipal governments and to cooperate pragmatically in local coalitions with pro-European parties.¹⁹ It appears that the SPS has so far successfully chosen a third path for communist successor parties: neither reform, nor disappearance, but just sitting it out.

¹⁷ B92, 10 June 2008, "Oslobođen Marko Milošević". A similar arrangement concerning legal procedures against the Milošević family seems already to have been part of the 2004 agreement when the SPS supported the first Koštunica cabinet (Goati 2006: 244-245).

¹⁸ Politika, 21 and 22 October 2008, "Deklaracija o političkom pomirenju i zajedničkoj odgovornosti za ostvarivanje vizije Srbije kao demokratske, slobodne, celovite, ekonomski i kulturno razvijene i socijalno pravedne zemlje".

¹⁹ According to my count in some 20 municipalities, including Niš, the second largest city in Serbia, and most of the Niš city municipalities.

The inversion of Western Social Democratic values in the East

Having discussed external acceptability, in the following paragraphs I switch to the SPS's internal motivations to move away from its natural coalition partners. Specifically, the new SPS strategy is less related to personal or organisational aspects than to the search for a new position in the political issue space. While there is substantial work on the impact of historical legacies on the ability of communist successor parties to reform and to become successful new players in the new party system,²⁰ few authors have investigated the same problem as a strategic question of positioning in the issue space, based on spatial models of politics. Two dominant dimensions of political orientation might help to understand the strategic decisions taken by the communist successor parties regarding their positioning. The first issue mainly concerns the importance and intensity of redistributive policies. In the economic dimension, the position favouring strong redistributive policies and state intervention is related to the left, whereas the right wants to reduce the role of the state and redistribution to a minimum. The second issue concerns the nationalist–authoritarian dimension, or socio–cultural values, where the left is usually related to liberalism, and the right to social authoritarianism.

Both political dimensions exist in Western Europe as well as in Central and Eastern Europe, and determine the electoral orientation of the voters to a large extent, but the link between the two political axes is inverted in the two parts of the continent: “While in Western Europe preferences in favour of economic redistribution go hand in hand with socio–culturally libertarian and post-materialist values, this is not the case in Central and Eastern Europe. There, socio–cultural libertarianism goes often along with the economic right whereas the economic left is closer to social authoritarianism” (Fischer 2008). In the West, Social Democratic parties are called leftist, combining socio–cultural liberalism and the advocating of (moderate) economic redistribution. But in post-communist Europe, due to the negative correlation of the two value axes, only a small field of voters supports this combination of values.

Accordingly, Social Democratic parties in the Western European sense have remained rare. Instead, parties position themselves as left-wing only in one dimension that is important to Western Social Democrats. Some communist successor parties have adopted a reform agenda, with Western values of social liberalism, but a severe reform agenda which creates social hardships, best visible in the case of Hungary, and to a lesser extent in Poland, demonstrated in both cases by the legacy of the Communists' policies in the last decade (Evans 2006: 258; Kitschelt, Mansfeldová, Markowski, Tóka 1999). Other, non-reformed parties typically remain

²⁰ See for instance the two edited volumes by Ishiyama (1999) and by Bozóki and Ishiyama (2002).

authoritarian and economically egalitarian or patrimonial, such as in the cases of the communist successor parties in Albania, Romania or Bulgaria in the 1990s, or the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (which is not a direct successor of the Communists, however). Thus it is not astonishing that the former Communists were often coalition partners with nationalist and ultra-nationalist parties (Ishiyama 1998).

In Serbia, like in other post-communist countries, orientation along the left-right dimension is difficult, and the Western European value axis inverted (Stojiljković 2007a: 136). There are descriptions of the left-right positioning of political parties in Serbia (Slavujević 2006), but it is questionable how useful the dimension is; and after 2000 the share of Serbian voters who could identify their position on the left-right axis was much lower than in Western Europe (Mihailović 2006a: 127). The perception of the left-right dimension in Serbia *might not be issue-driven, but rather party-driven*, which means that by definition, voters assume that the Socialist Party is left, and the more a party is distant from the Socialists (on all issues, including those that elsewhere do not belong to the left-right-axis), the more it is to the right. In everyday politics the economic axis does not play a major role; rather, orientations and coalitions are formed along the nationalist–authoritarian dimension.

The new strategy of the Serbian Socialists

The positioning of political parties along these two dimensions has created a strategically challenging situation for the Socialist Party in Serbia. With regards to international integration, civic–liberal values, and Serbian nationalism, the party's policies were authoritarian and nationalist. After 1991 the party started to advocate a Greater Serbia,²¹ and in the program of 1992 it called the Northern-Atlantic and European institutions, EU, OSCE, and NATO imperialist organisations and enemies of Serbia (Vykoupilová, Stojarová 2007). The Socialists rejected any autonomy for Vojvodina and Kosovo (in the 1996 program), and minority–friendly program points existed only on paper, with no impact on the implemented policies (Goati 2004: 50-51).

But the ultra-nationalist program of the party did not pay off after 2000 in terms of votes. The issue might have lost salience, since everyday economic problems have gained a higher priority to many citizens, and more importantly the Socialist Party does not own the nationalist issue as its own. The Socialist and the Radicals are linked not by their common governing

²¹ In the 1993–1997 period, when Slobodan Milošević was a central figure in the international peace negotiations for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the party position on Greater Serbia was more nuanced.

experience in the 1990s, but they also share similar positions on several important issues, such as the old regime cleavage, nationalism, EU integration, and the promise of social change for losers in the transition. The Radical party has increasingly campaigned for losers of transition, promising a combination of social welfare and nationalism. In the public opinion, however, it remains a right-wing party, with an accent on nationalist issues rather than on redistributive policies. There is no other Serbian party that might credibly mobilise on these issues, apart from a few tiny parties that fail to pass the electoral threshold on their own.

For authoritarian–nationalist voters, the Serbian Radical Party offers the more credible alternative to the Socialists. Recently, on the eve of the proclamation of Kosovo independence, Prime Minister Koštunica and the coalition of DSS and NS drew closer to the ultra-nationalists. The Socialist Party's lack of ownership of the nationalist issue was further reflected in its relationship to Slobodan Milošević. He and his fellow prisoner Vojislav Šešelj, standing trial at ICTY, were promoting in their televised defences a Serbian nationalist view of recent history, and accordingly they were even able to increase their symbolic importance for the nationalists back home. However, while the Radical leader Šešelj stayed in close contact with his SRS, regularly giving orders as to the programmatic direction of the party, this could not be said of Socialist leader Slobodan Milošević, who in the 2004 presidential elections even supported a Radical instead of the own SPS candidate.²² The Radicals thus increasingly became the only dominant party which could represent the hardcore nationalist vote.

A look at the electoral results confirms the impression that the SRS wins when voters put an accent on nationalist issues. The SPS holds on to voters mostly in Central Serbia, where the ethnic composition of the population is homogeneously Serbian, particularly in municipalities where it is still represented with local notables in important posts. In stark contrast, the SRS is highly successful in areas with an ethnically–mixed population, where nationalist issues are much more salient among ethnic Serbian voters (Stefanović 2008). Marginalised by the Radical's success, the Socialists were in danger in every parliamentary election of failing to reach the 5% legal threshold.

Against this background, the trajectory of the Socialist party gets more understandable. There are two main changes in the Socialists' program. On the one hand, they changed their position regarding EU integration, creating common policy space with parties of the pro-European reform bloc. On the other hand, the Socialists tried to reinforce the economic policy axis, where they can be better able to compete against other parties.

²² Vreme, 7 December 2006, "Izborna Kampanja: Dvojci i Kormilari".

At the December 2006 party congress ahead of the 2007 elections, the Socialists stressed their new social orientation, putting an accent on economic policies and an extension of the welfare state. The party promised to reintroduce the social welfare system of the early 1990s, and claimed to be the only real left-wing party in Serbia. It spoke out in favour of market regulation, a mixed property structure, and full employment. More specifically, it bases its economic and welfare policies on the importance of collective employment agreements and on participation of employees at their workplaces. It speaks of a better, just, and humane society, and democratic socialism (Stojiljković 2007b: 189). As early as at its party congress in 2003 the party had switched its position with regards to the European Union,²³ a position re-confirmed three years later. The party is still negative towards cooperation with NATO, but it stepped back from its firm rejection of the 1990s, and stated in 2006 that it would accept the people's verdict in this question.²⁴ Apart from that, the party no longer campaigned on nationalist issues. The SPS repeatedly declared itself to be the only relevant left-wing party in Serbia, pointing to its left-wing economic program. Finally, in the new program of 2006, the Socialist Party writes that its goal is membership in the Socialist International (SI).²⁵

The goal of this new direction by the Socialists is to increase the relevance of the economic dimension in Serbian politics in place of the authoritarian–liberal dimension, knowing that on the latter dimension they are not very competitive.

This new direction was not only clearly reflected in the SPS campaign ahead of the 2008 parliamentary elections, but also during coalition formation in summer 2008, when the SPS became the junior partner in the pro-European government of Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković (DS). The slight re-positioning of the Socialists opened a few new windows of opportunity. First, the opening of the EU question made the Socialists a possible coalition partner for the pro-Europeans. This, however, means that they can play the role of the pivotal voter in the national parliament as well as in local assemblies all across Serbia, since they are acceptable as a coalition

²³ Deklaracija šestog kongresa Socijalističke partije Srbije, 18 January 2003, Belgrade, available at <<http://www.sps.org.yu/uploads/DEKLERACIJA%206%20KONGRESA.pdf>>. [last accessed on 16 June 2008]

²⁴ Programska deklaracija sedmog kongresa Socijalističke partije Srbije, 3 December 2006, Belgrade, available at <http://www.sps.org.yu/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=5&Itemid=77>. [last accessed on 16 June 2008]

²⁵ Programska deklaracija sedmog kongresa Socijalističke partije Srbije, 3 December 2006, Belgrade, available at <http://www.sps.org.yu/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=5&Itemid=77>. [last accessed on 16 June 2008]

partner both for the pro-Europeans around the DS, and for the nationalists around the DSS and SRS. This gives the party much more power in coalition negotiations.

Certainly for the electorate of the SPS the new orientation is a major rupture – and the party risks losing some of its voters on the way to a new pro-European identity. However, and most importantly, the party could bring in the strengthening of social redistribution as one of the main pillars of the coalition agreement, and make “social justice” one of the most frequently used words in Serbian politics. This positions the SPS in the public perception as the issue-leader in favour of a strong social welfare state. The clear positioning of the SPS might force other parties to take clearer stands on the economic dimension, and SPS might hope that this dimension obtains greater importance in Serbian politics. Welfare policies are very popular with many Serbian citizens, who are still used to a state that takes care of citizens “from the cradle to the grave” (Stojiljković 2007a: 135). Finally, the party hopes that its inclusion in a pro-European coalition might help its plans to become a member of the SI.

***Social Democracy*® and the role of the Socialist International**

The best way of gaining credibility as *the* Social Democratic party is membership in the Socialist International. Most SI members, like the Party of European Socialists (PES), today do not only advocate a strong welfare state and policies of redistribution, but specifically include values and policies of societal liberalism and democracy. However, this creates problems of cohesion when it comes to the integration of parties in post-communist Europe into the Social Democratic family. The SI has been reluctant to accept members with a nationalist–authoritarian program, so that a few parties with such a direction were only able to become SI members through mergers with other Social Democratic parties with whom they shared some economic stands. The problem of integrating Social Democrats in Central and Eastern Europe into the Western Social Democratic family was seen recently, when the Slovakian Smer was suspended from membership in the PES when it formed a coalition with Slovakian ultra-nationalists (Fischer 2008).

Several parties aspire to hold the place of the main social democratic party in Serbia. There are a few parties which not only call themselves Social Democrats, but also oriented on the Western European social democratic model, with civic–liberal values and a social–redistributive program. The most important party in this field is the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija*, SDP), which is an SI member. But these parties fall short of votes; none of these parties is able to pass the electoral threshold on its own, or as the leader of a party coalition. Apart from

these parties, the Social Democratic space is occupied by the DS, another SI member. It mainly distinguishes itself through its anti-authoritarian position, but with regards to economic policies, it is difficult to pin down; certainly it does not stand out for its strongly redistributive policies; instead, certain of its ministers are pushing for economic reforms in the direction of a liberal economy. Finally, several regional Vojvodina parties locate themselves in the Social Democratic realm (cf. Bochsler 2008b). The SPS, however, has so far been refused membership in the SI due to the party's historical legacies, the enduring link to Slobodan Milošević and the lack of reform (Stojiljković 2007a: 132-133). Against this background it can be understood why the SPS tried to become an SI member through a coalition with the DS. Furthermore, the party leadership hopes to change its authoritarian legacy through a programmatic reorientation. But this reorientation has so far remained weak. Social Democratic parties and SI members from neighbouring countries have announced that they would oppose SPS membership in the SI.²⁶

What can we learn from these party trajectories?

This article describes the strategic considerations of two Serbian parties when choosing their position in the policy space. Often, party systems in post-communist countries in Europe are perceived as fuzzy, with party positions inconsistent and fed by personal quarrels and politicians' personal interest, while voters tend to fall for populists. In contrast to this view, this article attempts to explain recent positional changes within the Serbian party system by looking at the spatial logics which determines the strategies of political parties. Arguing that political parties are strategically-behaving political organisms, I show that re-positioning occurs in order to get access to a new, larger potential of voters. If this is the case, then party trajectories should rather tend to a differentiation of political parties in the party space, and stabilise the party system.

Based on the analysis of the two main party shifts in Serbia in the period 2003–2008, I show that both parties are attempting to access a part of the electorate which previously has not been well-served by political parties. The first case presented is the emergence of the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), which positions itself as a pro-European party in favour of radical social and economic reforms, and advocates reconciliation with neighbouring states and internal minorities. It is argued that the appearance of the party at this location is perfectly understandable given that the Democratic Party (DS), which is the main pro-European reform party, has increasingly begun to cooperate with the nationalist–conservative field after 2003. This created

²⁶ Politika, 1 July 2008, "Prilika za novi život socijalista".

a political vacuum on the strongly pro-European end of the political space, which was filled by the LDP.

On this position, the LDP appeared less as a new natural coalition partner with similar political preferences, but more as a natural competitor for DS voters and members. This forced the DS to pull the wheel over hard. On one hand, it fought against the credibility of the LDP, stressing that it is not a viable coalition partner, that the LDP would find it hard to become part of a coalition government responsibility, despite the LDP in many cases being the natural coalition partner of the DS. On the other hand, the DS moved back towards its programmatic origins, preventing the possible desertion of the most reform-oriented part of its voters towards the LDP, given that the new party defends their position more pronouncedly than the DS. When the political representatives of Kosovo proclaimed independence for their country, the coalition of pro-Europeans along with the nationalist-conservative parties fell into a deep crisis over the orientation of Serbia, particularly the question of EU integration, which might allow the country to better defend its claims on Kosovo. While the nationalist-conservatives wanted to interrupt the EU negotiations and to break off relations with the countries that recognized Kosovo's independence, the pro-Europeans did not see Kosovo as a reason to stop the European integration process. Unlike the earlier situation before the entry of LDP, the DS was now constrained to remain loyal to its pro-European electorate, and to insist on an EU-friendly policy. Thus I suggest that the competitive situation in the pro-European field, with the new LDP taking a more radical position than the DS, may have prevented the DS from compromising on these issues with the Koštunica nationalists.

The second party trajectory investigated in this article regards the recent re-positioning of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). I show that the SPS, as long as it was identified as an ultra-nationalist, anti-European and authoritarian party, had a very similar position to the Serbian Radicals (SRS), but the SRS had more credibility on these issues. The losers in the transition, which are addressed both by SRS as SPS, preferred to vote for the more pronounced Radicals than for the Socialists. The SPS could only act as a junior partner to the SRS, and survived only based on a few remaining ties with its old followers. For the SPS, however, it was highly problematic if its own survival was linked to the life expectancy of its voters. Against this background, the trajectory of the Socialists appears to have been a strategic move to stress a new issue dimension in Serbian politics that so far has not been clearly structured. The Socialists moved towards a pro-European position, but most importantly they stressed economic questions and social welfare, and toned down on nationalist issues, allowing them to form a governing

coalition with the DS and emphasize EU integration and social justice. The SPS expects that this will help to politicise the economic dimension much more, and that they will be the issue-holder on welfare policies. In this way they are not only attempting to access new groups of voters, but also to bridge the regime cleavage, and to become a more modern Social Democratic party, which could possibly gain them the access to the Socialist International.

Although these examples are very selective and the findings rather suggestive than definite, they offer a small piece of evidence for a change in how we see party systems in post-communist countries. Have political parties in Central and Eastern Europe become highly rational actors, with very sophisticated sensors for electoral potential and spatial positioning? Or do we still perceive them as driven by random and incoherent decisions, by personal interests, and making unexplained shifts? So far, this study remains on a descriptive level, based on rather rudimentary measures of party positions, unlike other studies on spatial models that are usually based on quantitative measures and calculations. Rather than presenting a definite, systematically tested argument, this study focuses on the party trajectories in one country, and prepares the basis for a more comprehensive test worthy of being applied to other countries and cases, and using quantitative data.

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