



**COURSE:**

**PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEM**

**IN POST-COMMUNIST CENTRAL EUROPE**

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# Serbia's parties and party system in post Milosevic era



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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Butterfly Effect is a poetic metaphor, in chaos theory for the phenomenon of a system's sensitive dependence on initial conditions. The purpose of the following academic paper is to explain how, through this phenomenon, the Armistice of Mudros is responsible for the fact that Aleksandar Vučić, through his revisionist and anti-European policies, has proved to be the absolute winner-leader of the Serbian party system in the post-Milosevic era. Nevertheless, let us take things from the beginning.

## **2. FROM THE ARMISTICE OF MUDROS TO TITO'S SFR YUGOSLAVIA (1918-1980)**

The signing of the Armistice of Mudros, between the Western Allied Powers and the Ottoman Empire, was practically the end of the First World War, the legacy of which would essentially shape the attitude of these states and their leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, the disintegration of the multinational empires of Europe took place, which is an event of paramount importance for the historical and cultural change of the Old Continent. The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, because of the latter's defeat in the war, was succeeded by the merger of the provisional state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes with the independent kingdom of Serbia. This merger was to become the fuse of the genesis of Yugoslavia, the state that occupied European affairs until the beginning of the next century. Undoubtedly, the person who defined the developments and linked himself inextricably with the history of Yugoslavia was Josip Broz, popularly known by his partisan nickname Tito. Tito was a Yugoslav Communist, professional revolutionary and the absolute leader of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1943 until his death in 1980. Considered a unifying symbol, his policies, which aimed at building a unified Yugoslav national identity, maintained the peaceful coexistence of the various nations of the Yugoslav federation. In Tito's absence, Yugoslavia entered an unprecedented economic crisis, mainly due to the lack of competitiveness of its economy, which was a common occurrence of the communist states, explained by the communist nature and structure of their economy. Any economic crisis can be corrosive to any multinational state. The economic crisis of Yugoslavia, which developed into a multidimensional and multifaceted crisis, challenged not only the political status quo of the time, but also the entire construction of the state after the war. The results of these

were the riots that broke out in Kosovo in 1981, which fuelled the already existing Serbian nationalism, in which Kosovo holds a prominent place anyway. Kosovo, in this case, and the need for its proper management were the factors that started the career of a lawyer and politician, who was already familiar from 1984 in the Belgrade subsidiarity, Slobodan Milosevic.

### **3. THE MILOSEVIC ERA AND THE SERBIAN NATIONALISM (1986-2000)**

Milosevic, as is well known, is the absolute protagonist of the political scene of both Serbia and Yugoslavia in the last decade of the 20th century and the person who, through his policies, determined largely the political and social background of the Western Balkans, as we know it today. Many analysts have described Milosevic as an intelligent political executive who sought to address the crisis of communism in Yugoslavia and its degradation on the international stage by resorting to nationalism. Indeed, Milosevic managed to stay in power by instrumentalizing nationalism in a society with a strong sense of its history, which led to the dissolution of the once powerful Socialist Republic. The Hague indictment alleges that Milosevic, as early as 1986, endorsed a Serbian nationalist agenda and that he took advantage of the growing wave of Serbian nationalism to strengthen his centralised power in Yugoslavia and proclaim himself its absolute leader. Judging his political behaviour in the Yugoslav Wars, an opportunistic perception of both domestic and foreign policy is perceived, since not a few of his close associates argued that although he used Serbian nationalism in an imaginative and selfish way, although he never really believed in it. Milosevic went from being a mere bureaucrat politician in Belgrade to becoming the ultimate ambiguous *von grata persona* of the Balkans, as despite his clear involvement and guilt in the crimes of the Yugoslav Wars, his supporters even today argue that he was the guarantor of peace in the Balkans, the defender of Serbs and the Second Tito, in contrast to his critics who consider him the "butcher of the Balkans" and find similarities of him with the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, as both began their political careers as Marxists and they eventually turned to nationalism. His death in 2006 cleared him of charges by the UN's International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Kosovo, for violating the laws and customary law of war, for violations of the Geneva Conventions in Croatia and Bosnia,

and for genocide in Bosnia. The question, therefore, faced by a modern scholar of Serbia is whether and to what extent the Milosevic regime is a continuation not only of the one-party, communist regime of Tito that succeeded, but also of the Djindjic-Kostunica-Tadic government from which it was reversed.

#### **4. MILOSEVIC'S FALL AND THE OPPOSITION DURING HIS TIME (1991-2000)**

At that time, most opposition leaders, with the main exception of Kostunica, proved inadequate, opportunistic and did not hesitate at times to cooperate with Milosevic, which justifies the latter's easy victory at the top of Serbian politics. The political program, however, that he implemented, led to both the isolation and marginalization of Serbia from the international political scene and finally brought him face to face with the political problem that he deliberately created, Kosovo. In these circumstances, the victory of the Democratic Opposition in the elections of 24 September 2000 was to some extent expected, while Milosevic was in no way ready to accept it, and therefore tried to cancel it. He failed, however, as Russia, the other great Orthodox genus that was also his greatest ally on the international stage, had abandoned him. In the meantime, public discontent with the Milosevic regime and its machinations grew, resulting in its overthrow on 5 October 2000. The "Bulldozer Revolution", as it became known in history (due to an excavator used in the demonstration during which part of Parliament was burned), achieved its purpose. Milosevic left power and was taken to international authorities for the crimes he committed at the time of his rule. The leadership deficit created in the absence of Milosevic was at the outset exploited by the DOS (Democratic Opposition Serbia) Alliance, a coalition of eighteen parties under Vojislav Kostunica. Behind the revolutionary conditions that gave prominence to Kostunica's political career, lies the need to reconcile Serbia's old leadership with the new one, in a context that takes advantage of the country's entry into the Euro-Atlantic institutions. The leading figure of the reconciliation was Zoran Djindjic.

### **5. DJINDJIC'S GOVERNMENT AND HIS DEATH (2000-2003)**

Smart, pragmatic and effective Djindjic managed from a doctor of philosophy and co-founder of the Democratic Party of Serbia to reach the Office of Prime Minister of his country, which he retained until his death in 2003. During his two years in office, Djindjic found that without overturning the original reconciliation with the forces of the old leadership, Serbia would remain attached to the Balkans, while all its neighbors moved at a rapid pace in Europe. He thus clashed with a system, which he did not control and to which he himself was unknown. The results of this conflict were excruciatingly and led to his assassination on March 12, 2003, on the orders of the former commander of the Special Operations Unit of the Yugoslav secret police, Milorad Ulemek.

### **6. KOSTUNICA'S POLITICAL EMERGE AND FALL (2000-2008)**

Under these circumstances, Vojislav Kostunica emerged as Milosevic's de facto political successor. A paradox, especially if someone considers that during the years of opposition Kostunica was the one who elaborately avoided talking-collaborating with both the Milosevic regime and the communists. Conservative, anti-communist and professor of law at the University of Belgrade, Kostunica, in order to face political opponents Djindjic and Tadic, chose to adopt Milosevic's political program in order to gain access to popular strata that he himself, mainly due to his social-educational level, would never have. All this, combined with his legal understanding of politics, resulted in Kostunica not confirming the promise of transition and renewal left as a legacy by the democratic revolution of 2000. Serbia's European perspective was thus significantly reduced, while all of its neighbouring states took firm steps towards joining the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Eight years later, Kostunica's defeat in the 11 May 2008 elections has finally arrived. In the meantime, all the Western states were convinced that with him at the helm, Serbia looked more like an enemy than an ally to them. Certainly an important role for this, was played not only by Belgrade's refusal to sit at the negotiating table with Pristina, but also by its friendly attitude with Russia, at the head of which was no longer the moderate Yeltsin, but the authoritarian Putin.

## **7. FROM KOSTUNICA TO TADIC AND THE CHANGE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM OF SERBIA (2004-2008)**

After Kostunica, Serbia's political scene seemed to be clearing up. Both the victory of the pro-European party and the split of the Radicals into two formations (the progressive one under Tomislav Nikolic and the far right one under Vojislav Seselj) made Boris Tadic the ultimate winner of the game. Tadic was a progressive and democratic politician, with him Serbia's European perspective took on a new dimension, and began to become realistic. At the same time, Serbia's entire party systems had begun to Europeanise and organize around two main ideological pillars. It was now clear that with Tadic in the leadership Serbia's European dream seemed to be closer than ever.

## **8. THE SPP DOMINANCE (2012-TODAY)**

There is talk of a dream, which for many states turned out to be a nightmare, mainly because of the economic crisis that the European Union was called upon to manage and to a very large extent failed to do. A wave of Euroscepticism overwhelmed European citizens, who found a way to the intolerant and extremist forces of the far right, which for the first time since World War II made such a radical reappearance in European politics. In Serbia, in particular, it coalesced around the ruling Progressive Party. Nikolic's victory in the 2012 elections was more like a situation of anarchic reaction on the part of Serbian citizens with a beginning, middle and end, and not the beginning of a new chapter in the political life of Serbia, and indeed the largest since the end of the Yugoslav Wars. This year marks ten years since the Progressive Party has held the reins of the presidency of the Serbian state. Nikolic's successor, Aleksandar Vucic is not someone random in Serbian politics. He began his political career at the age of only twenty-three with his inclusion in the lists of the far-right Radical Party, the year in which he was even elected MP of the same party. He continued his rise within the party for years, until he reached the post Of Minister of Information in the last Milosevic presidency in 1998. Being a child of Serbia's Party Tube, Vucic from the outset showed a special sympathy for the policies of complete control of all state institutions implemented by his mentor Milosevic. In the presidential elections of 2017, Vucic officially announced his candidacy and the result fully justified him, since he proved to be the absolute winner of the



elections taking the shocking percentage of 56.01% against the 16.63% collected by the independent candidate Sasa Jankovic, while confirming all the polls that wanted him an autonomous winner of the elections from the very first round.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Five years later, Serbia seems to be in the most figurative phase of its history. Vucic's revisionism combined with his total control of the media, the judiciary and the secret services have lead Serbia to take step backwards in the democratic indicators and make it an unreliable partner for both the West and the East from which it tries to keep an equal distance. Its non-compliance with European sanctions policies against Russia over the war in Ukraine is proof of this. It is understood that Serbia is currently at a historic crossroads, in which it is called upon to make brave decisions that will determine its future. On the one hand, the European Union and on the other, Russia. Both have demonstrated to the international community what they are capable of. It remains for Serbia to prove which of the two it wants to look like.

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