

# Banning political parties in post-Yugoslav states. Croatia and Serbia experiences of using instrument of militant democracy

## Introduction

Considering modern history, a post-Yugoslav area is a unique place on the European political map. First, in someplace have not been completed fully at the beginning of economic crisis 2007-2009, what Nenad Zakošek called *postponed democratization processes* (Zakošek, 2008, 606). Second, most post-Yugoslav states did not become consolidated democracies, like western states, classified as i. e. electoral democracies Index<sup>1</sup>. For that reason, the post-Yugoslav area has become a difficult case for the democratization paradigm. Despite the consolidation of institutions of democratic governance, and elections to change the ruling elites at the declaratory level, democratic participation is limited by ethno-national divisions, which jeopardizes the stability and vitality of democracy. In the first period of a political transition, Serbia and Croatia dealt with the foundation of a nation-state with a high level of ethno-nationalistic attitudes represented on the one hand by new ruling elites and on the other hand by members of the political community (Džihic, Segert, 2012, 240). The popularity of ethno-nationalistic rhetoric was not only based on the political elites' instrumental use of national sentiments to gain or sustain their power. V. Džihic and D. Segert explain those new elites use nationalism as a substitute for citizens supporting a government that provides the benefits of a welfare state (Džihic, Segert, 2012, 246). In Serbia and Croatia in the 1990 elections shaped by the nationalist rhetoric of the main political actors: the HDZ party in Croatia and the SPS party in Serbia both used ethno-nationalism to gain overwhelming victories. Still, it became a specific legitimization of post-Yugoslav states. That phenomenon created specific landscapes of political parties, where existing far-right and nationalist entities were legacy, despite statements

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<sup>1</sup> Electoral democracy was introduced by Diamond's original typology of political regime forms (Diamond, 1999). Vedran Džihic and Dieter Segert used that category in describing Croatia's and Serbia's political systems. Electoral democracy is a regime of elite governance endowed by certain support from the citizens but without any ambition of the ruling elite to increase the quality of democratic rule. Moreover, this type of regime is characterized by the dominating influence of small elite groups and, at the same time, by a low degree of participation in the population. Mentioned above authors pointed that electoral democracy at post-Yugoslav area rooted in the ethno-nationalism (Džihic, Segert, 2012, 242). Another typology is proposed by Freedom House, which in the last report classified Croatia as *Semi-Consolidated Democracy* and Serbia as a *Transitional or Hybrid Regime* (Freedom House, 2021).

about building a democratic regime. Erin Jenne (2018) proposed a new term, ethno-populism, which may be recognized as the next step of ethnonationalism after ending conflicts based on nationality. The core of ethno-populism is fabricated external enemies of the EU, mainly Muslim refugees and immigrants. It became an electoral strategy to win, maintain, and concentrate power that led to the erosion of liberal democracy (Vachudova, 2020, 318-320).

In this paper, I analyzed the effectiveness of the classical instrument of militant democracy – banning extremist parties, since starting political transition in Croatia and Serbia. In the face of booming national entities in the 1990s, which became a guarantee of consolidation, new types of political regimes. To explain which factors decided about banning extremist political parties in analyzed states, I ask the following questions: (1) What were the legal basis of banning political parties in Croatia and Serbia? (2) Did Croatia's or Serbia's authorities decide about banning political parties, and what factors? (3) What was the effectiveness of Serbian and Croatian regulations about political entities? Based on these questions, I formulate the following hypothesis: After collapsing of Yugoslavia, new republics started democratic consolidation when legislators adopted several instruments of neo-militant democracy. One of these measures to protect the democratic regime against its enemies is banning extremist political parties. Despite provisions of national legislation, similar to western democracies, in practice, ruling elites did not seek to ban parties classified as extremist, which is the result of founding post-Yugoslav democracies on ethno-nationalism. The idea of comparative studies on banning extremist parties in Croatia and Serbia is based on N. Zakošek's conclusions on analyzing democratization in both states. According to that sentence, despite both regimes' common populist and authoritarian preferences, their party systems and role of political entities in functioning democracy were different (Zakošek, 2008, 606). In Croatia in the 1990s, the stabilization of the new regime relied on a safe parliamentary majority, including extremists. During the first decade of transition in Serbia, an extreme right-wing party played a significant role in supporting Milošević's party, a coalition partner. After 2000 in Serbia, there is a vital right and left extremist potential represented by parliamentary parties. Croatia has no visible left populism, and the extreme right potential is confined to minor parties and extra-parliamentary groups. Changing of the political structure in Croatia and Serbia should be recognized as the most successful transition, what confirms accession to UE (Croatia) and preparation to accessing to UE by Serbia.

Conclusions from that study will expand knowledge about abolished political parties, recognized as enemies of democracy, in post-Yugoslav states. Lack of that detailed analysis in

literature is significant motivation. Moreover, it allows verifying valid existing approaches and models about anti-democratic organizations, including the specific types of political culture in Croatia and Serbia.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For analyzing banning extremist parties in literature, we find well-grounded theoretical categories. One of them is militant democracy, a proposition created in the interwar period by Karl Loewenstein, who called for equipping the political system with legal restrictions in the face of the growing threat of fascism in Europe. He claimed that it is necessary to combat enemies of democracy by democratic governments (Loewenstein 1937a, 1937b). One of those restrictions was banning extremist parties and their paramilitary organizations. Militant democracy links political scientists and legal sciences, especially constitutionalism. After ending World War II, banning extremist parties became a classic and most famous instrument of militant democracy (Capoccia, 2013), which confirms its legitimization by democratic societies as a response to political extremism. Gur Bligh used militant democracy in analyzing the phenomenon of banning extremist parties and made it a basis of the Weimar paradigm. In this approach, the legitimization for banning selected entities draws on the fear of the threat of democracy destruction and implementing an undemocratic program. Bligh considered Nazi, fascist, communist, and Islamist groups to be such parties (Bligh, 2013, 1335-1336). The utility of militant democracy to explore the mentioned phenomenon is confirmed by modern scholars (Minkenberg, 2006; Klamt, 2007; Uitz, 2009; Mareš, 2010; Bourne, 2012; Thiel, 2016; Backes, 2019). To sum up, militant democracy is defined as a set of tools used to ensure the survival of democratic systems against anti-democratic forces in fear of annihilating the political regime. In modern research dominated papers about banning political parties in militant democracy's perspective, authors analyzed cases of western states, so it is worth expanding our knowledge on experience from new democracies.

In literature, we find valuable premises for banning extremist parties proposed by Angela Bourne and Fernando Casal Bértoa, based on empirical analysis 1945-2015 in Europe. They pointed that: (1) anti-democratic ideologies; (2) undemocratic internal organization; (3) the name of the party; (4) the party's orientation towards violence; (5) issues of protecting the current order; (6) technical requirements regulating access to the democratic process are reasons of dissolving political entities. I refer to new democracies; they claimed that 'incomplete democracies' are more likely to ban political parties than 'established democracies', which is a

valuable observation for studying Croatia and Serbia. A. Bourne and F. Casal Bértoa explain that is a result of underdeveloped commitments to constitutional liberalism and other 'defective' aspects of democratic practice. Moreover, in conclusion, they confirmed that in modern democratic regimes, political communities formulate different expectations about banning political parties (Bourne, Casal Bértoa, 2017, 24). Significant differences exist between "mature democracies" and post-communist states about reasons for the legalization of political parties. Western European democracies ban parties based on anti-democratic ideology. In turn, post-communist states invoke protecting the present political order as grounds for banning parties (Bourne, Casal Bértoa, 2017, 27). Therefore, it is worth verifying how expectations occur in the post-Yugoslav area. In conclusions about analyzing using banning extremist parties as a measure of militant democracy in other post-communist states, Maciej Skrzypek pointed on four variants: (a) the exclusion of groups that directly originated and referred to the traditions of the ruling communist parties after the end of World War II; (b) the banning of parties considered to be extreme right; (c) exclusion of extreme left-wing and right-wing parties; (d) no party is banned (Skrzypek, 2020). In that study, I verify its utility in analyzing post-Yugoslav democracies.

### **Political Parties In Croatia And The Problem Of Banning Extremist Parties**

In Croatia, freedom of political association is guaranteed by Article 6 of by Constitution. However, functioning political parties must comply with democratic principles. Constitution prohibited existing entities, which by its program of activity violently endangers the democratic constitutional order, independence, unity, or territorial integrity of the Republic of Croatia is prohibited (Ustav Republike Hrvatske, Art. 6). Therefore, programs and actions of political parties must be following the fundamental constitutional democratic principles. Constitution provisions are refilled by Political Parties Act (2009). In Article 23 legislator pointed that a political party shall be dissolved in the case of a competent administrative body's decisions about banning - a Ministry of Public Administration, ceasing existing, banned by Constitutional Court (Ustav Republike Hrvatske, Art. 23). The circumstances specified above are to be established by the Ministry of Public Administration (MPA), responsible for deciding about banning parties. According to Article 24, these decisions may not be appealed. However, they may be subject to the initiation of administrative lawsuits (Ustav Republike Hrvatske, Art. 24). In that place, it is necessary to compare the declarative level with banning political parties. First, it is worth noting that in comparing Croatian parties in the 1990s and 2000s were significant

differences in their agenda and rhetoric. An example of that transition is the leading party Croatian Democratic Union (Croatian: *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ), which evaluated from nationalist and Eurosceptic to Christian-democratic and pro-European entities. In the 1990s, HDZ used an extreme right narrative about the divine Croatian nation, neglecting the minorities and corrupt financing schemes to keep itself in power. At the end of the 2000s HDZ transformed to pro-European, related to accession to the EU. In 2012-2016, as opposition party returned to nationalist rhetoric, but after taking over power in 2016, it became centrist again.

Back to the problem of banning extremist parties, I will discuss three cases. First, The Serb Democratic Party (Croatian: *Srpska demokratska stranka*, SDS) was founded in 1990 to create HDZ, as an ethnic Croatian political party, by Serbian minority. Characteristic itself as anti-communist after the declaration of Croatian independence, the activities of SDS were focused on promoting the unification of Serbs in the whole Yugoslavia by radical rhetoric. By leaderships of HDZ, SDS was accused of acting to weaken the new Croatian government (Knežević 2011, 22). The SDS organized an assembly of Croatian Serbs, which passed a 'Declaration on the sovereignty and autonomy of the Serbian people. Their activities led to the proclamation of the Serbian Autonomous Region of Krajina (SAO Krajina) at the end of 1990 (Kolstø, Paukovic 2014, 314; Jeffries 2002, 535). In May 1991, the SDS organized a referendum asking the Serbs in SAO Krajina whether they wanted to stay part of Yugoslavia, of which 90% voted yes (Jeffries 2002, 535). The SDS, however, passed a decision in the Krajina Parliament that Krajina is part several. In 1991-1992, the SDS organized a number of terrorist attacks in Croatia, and the Croatian Public Prosecutor's Office initiated proceedings before the Constitutional Court to ban the SDS. The Court, however, dismissed the case in 1995 as the Croatian Ministry of Public Administration had already deleted the SDS from the registry in February 1992, which was not true as the SDS was ruling the SAO Krajina. However, the fact is that the party stopped submitting reports to the Croatian authorities. The SDS ceased to exist in 1995 after being exiled by Croatian forces liberated the occupied territories. Its leadership was charged by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for crimes committed against Croats in the war, including the party leader Milan Babić, who pleaded guilty. Although the SDS acted as a criminal organization during the war.

Another entities, who used extreme right narrative in the 1990s was The Croatian Party of Rights (Croatian: *Hrvatska stranka prava*, HSP). HSP was a close partner of HDZ in the beginning of the political transition. The most important accusation against that party was openly defending the Independent State of Croatia, a puppet state of Nazi German and Fascist

Italy. In its political agenda HSP defeat the Serbs and establish Greater Croatia (Ramet 1999, 177). For this purpose, it established Croatian Defence Forces, a military wing to unit committed war crimes against the Serbs. In September 1992, the Public Prosecutor applied to Constitutional Court to ban the HSP. After that, in November 1992, a military court in Zagreb initiated an investigation against the HSP's leadership for terrorist activities and conspiracy to overthrow the Government (Human Rights Committee, 1999). Despite that both applications failed, HSP was marginalized and its popular support was declining. Finally, in 1993 the HSP split due to an internal dispute, and since 20exists is no longer a parliamentary party, but still exist. As a political party, it operates on political life's margin and declares acceptance for the basic values of the democratic order. However, Velimir Veselinović's analysis of the political ideology and activities of the HSP showed that this party is a typical example of a radical right-wing party. In HSP's rhetoric, Serbian policy was a constant enemy, danger, and threat to the Croatian state, and it disturbed the homogeneity of the Croatian people. To this must be added sexual minorities, Muslim immigrants, and external enemies such as the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia and the EU (Veselinović, 2018, 273). HSP characterized mentioned ethno-populism, which confirmed that its leaders proclaimed themselves the only true democrats and expressed the people's true will. They represent the people, as opposed to the "corrupt" elite - HDZ and SDP (Veselinović, 2018, 274).

After discussing two failed attempts of dissolving extremist parties, it is necessary to analyze the case of the New Croatian Right (Croatian: *Nova Hrvatska desnica*, NHD), which the Constitutional Court banned with success. In 1995, a Ministry of Administration rejected a request for registration NHD, which openly advocated a Nazi state and a greater Croatia. That statement was recognized threatened the constitutional democratic order of the state and the sovereignty of other countries. Mladen Schwartz, a founder of NHD, appealed the decision and brought the case to the Administrative Court, but in 1996 it confirmed the legality of the Ministry's decision. M. Schwartz decided to make complaints to the Constitutional Court, which judged that the political program of the NHD was contrary to the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Croatia, by calling for a violent change of the democratic constitutional order of Croatia and annexation of some Serbian territories, among other things Bosnia and Herzegovina. This could be recognized as 'breaking the ice for the Constitutional Court to apply militant democracy standards in banning political parties, but as Vedran Obučina noted, NHD existed for years as a part of an association of Croatian Nationalists (Obučina, 2012, 3).

To sum up, according to the declaratory level, activities of political parties may not endanger the realization of certain rights and freedoms and could jeopardize the democratic

system or the existence of the Republic of Croatia and its territorial integrity. However, the act about political parties does not describe detailed regulations about delegalization, which makes that legal framework are not solid, despite complying with international standards. It is worth saying that Croatian legislation gives a prerogative to the Minister of Public Administration to dissolve political parties, which increases the risk of using that instrument in political competition. However, MPA played a significant role in abolishing NHD. Mentioned evolution of parties' agenda had not impacted ethno-nationalism's role in legitimizing political actors. A specific type of nationalism is still significant for modern Croatian political culture. New entities' ideas manifest them as a solid and stable organization with social support. In the case of SDS, it deleted that party from the registry after stopping periodic reports to authorities that had no impact on its activities. In practice, SDS and NHD functioned beyond legal frameworks. In turn, HPS's example shows that despite existing reasons for banning – anti-Serbian, homophobic, anti-Muslim, and Eurosceptic policy, it was accepted by society and by ruling elites, which closely cooperate with that entity. Finally, banning NHD showed how essential engagement of MPA and the political will of ruling elites, but this entity may exist as non-party actors. Unfortunately, in the case of a similar reason in referring to HSP crucial factor was cooperation with HDZ. Therefore, in Croatia, the delegalization of political parties is the domain of ruling elites, which minimalizes the role of courts and reduces it to execute politicians' decisions. That practice is opponent of the idea of militant democracy and closer to the idea of quasi-militant democracy (Bäcker, Rak, 2019), which seek to expand the power competencies of the ruling elite by legal measures to reduce the level of the sovereignty of the political nation (Bäcker, 2020).

## **POLITICAL PARTIES IN SERBIA AND THE PROBLEM OF BANNING EXTREMIST PARTIES**

Serbian Constitution guarantees and recognizes the role of political parties in expressing the will of citizens in a democratic system. Article 5 does not limit the creation of political parties. However, activities of political parties aimed at destroying the constitutional order, violating guaranteed human rights, the rights of national minorities, or inciting hatred based on race, nationality, or religion are forbidden (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia). A decision about dissolving political parties is made by the Constitutional Court (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 167). In the Serbia Political Parties Act, a legislator in Article 3 introduces a special

category of a political party of a national minority, defined as representing that community's interests. Moreover, it protects and promotes the rights of minorities. The Law On Political Parties, Art. 3). Activities all kinds of parties may not be aimed at violently overthrowing the constitutional order, violating the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, violating the guaranteed minority right, or inciting and inciting racial, national, or religious hatred (The Law On Political Parties, Art. 4). This act in Article 37 confirms that prerogative of the Constitutional Court to make decisions about dissolving political entities (The Law On Political Parties, Art. 37). It is worth adding that the Serbian legislator directly pointed that banning political parties may be activities abroad and joining allies, which endanger Serbia's reason of state or violating provisions of that bill. To complete analyzing legal framework according to Article 38, a procedure for banning political parties is initiated at the request of the Government of the Public Republic, the Public Prosecutor, and the Ministry (The Law On Political Parties, Art. 38). One of the essential features of the Serbian parties system is a lack of solid grounds and meeting administrative requirements. Only in 2010, by Article 45, paragraph 3 of the Law on Political Parties, deleted 501 political entities from the Register of Associations, Social Organizations and Political Organizations and the Register of Political Organizations, which did not apply for entry in the Register of Political Parties and the relevant documentation (*Министарство правде и државне управе*). Moreover, after political transition, 23 parties, which at least had representatives in parliament, ceased to exist or transformed into a new or unit with other entities, which shows the fragility of Serbian parties. However, banning extremist entities by the Constitutional Court was not applied, but there is serious reason to use it in several cases.

First, of them, the Serbian Radical Party (Serbian: *Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS), recognized as an ultranationalist, Eurosceptic and Russophilic political party, which called to create "Greater Serbia", in the unification of "all Serbian countries" (Barić, 2010, 523). It was founded in 1991 by Vojislav Šešelj, a paramilitary leader and convicted war criminal (Obrenović, 2017). SRS members had been involved in conflicts in Croatia (Barić, 2010, 495). Members of SRS called Ratko Mladić Radovan Karadžić "Serbian heroes" (*Karadzic arrest: Reaction in quotes*, 2008). By years SRS participated in a general election with success, what confirmed number of representants in parliament<sup>2</sup>, and any attempts of its banning was not made, what is the result of legitimization SRS's participation in democratic public life, and in political community's opinion it does not violate democratic values. Second-party analysis in

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<sup>2</sup> Year of the election - numbers of deputies: 1992 – 73 (government coalition partner); 1993 - 39; 1997 - 82 (leading government party); 2000 - 23; 2003 - 82; 2007 - 81; 2008 - 78; 2016 - 22

that part of the paper is Serbian Movement "Dveri" (Serbian: *Srpski poker Dveri*; Dveri). This nationalist, right-wing populist, eurosceptic and anti-immigration political party (Wiesinger, 2008; Jovanović, 2018) was formed in 1999 as a student organization from the University of Belgrade. Since starting promotes a pronounced Serbian nationalist ideology, strengthened by *antisemitism, an anti-EU stance, support for Putin's Russia, clericalism, and homophobia* (Jovanović, 2018, 481). Barbara N. Wiesinger summarized that Dveri's program is based on *svetosavlje*, i.e., a combination of Serbian Orthodox piety and extremely nationalist attitudes, which manifest in *a conviction that there is a special bond between God and the Serbian nation* (Wiesinger, 2008, 4). One of the shocking decisions was that Dveri opposed a resolution passed by the Serbian parliament in March 2010, which condemned the Srebrenica massacre committed by the Bosnian Serb Army in eastern Bosnia in 1995 (*Right-wing movement to take part in elections*, 2011). Another reason for undermining its democratic approach is its opposition to LGBT rights and participation in anti-gay protesters using violence and homophobic rhetoric since 2010<sup>3</sup> (Mlinarić and Šljivić, 2016; Jovanović, 2018, 498). Some experts recognize that the turning point was adopting a new political program in 2020 when Dveri officially adopted environmentalism and Christian democracy and shifted away from their former far-right stances. However, its legality was not undermined by years, which allowed Dveri to participate in the democratic decision process without limits.

Other cases are the small entities without representatives in parliament after Yugoslav collapse: Serbian Party Oathkeepers (Serbian: *Srpska stranka Zavetnici*, SSZ or Zavetnici); Serbian Right (Serbian: *Srpska desnica*, SD); The Leviathan Movement (Serbian: *Pokret Levijatan*); Party of Serbian Unity (Serbian: *Stranka srpskog jedinstva*, SSJ). SSZ is an ultranationalist, national-conservative, Russophile, and anti-NATO political party founded in 2012 (Biserko, 2014, 272-274). Zavetnici represented a *characteristic of far-right movements in the Western Balkans since the end of the armed conflicts in the region is their push for historical revisionism* (Lažetić, 2021, 9). SD was founded in January 2018 and calls to resolve the issue of Kosovo and Metohija has. It has been recognized as a satellite of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which confirms favorable treatment in the pro-government media, like other SNS's partners (*Srpska desnica...*), and participation in violating elections rules before local elections in Medveđi 2019 (*MUTNE RADNJE...*). As the neo-fascist political party is recognized, The Leviathan Movement was formed in 2015 as an animal rights organization. However, in 2020, the organization announced running in the parliamentary election. Its

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<sup>3</sup> The year of the first Gay-Pride assembly in Belgrade.

members used Nazi symbols, manifest anti-Roma, anti-migrant, and homophobic agenda, and during the last electoral campaign, the animals' issues had fallen into the background (*Ljubitelji životinja...; Pavle Bihali...*). SSJ was a nationalist and irredentist political party (Wiesinger, 2008), founded by Serbian paramilitary leader and criminal Željko Ražnatović Arkan. Finally merged into Serbian Radical Party in 2007.

To summarize, all those parties were classified by B. Wiesinger as extremist parties, who refer to Roger Griffin's definition (Griffin, 2006). Moreover, that entities direct or indirect undermine principles of modern democracy, which allow confirming occurring second characteristic of extremism – a fundamental opposition to democratic values, institutions, and processes (Ignazi, 2002). The Serbian legal framework complies with international standards and militant democracy rules but stays weak and ineffective in practice, which confirms the lack of banned entities since the 1990s. Despite direct provisions and reasons for delegitimation, parties recognize as extremists society accept their nationalist agenda. Like in Croatia, a crucial role play ethno-nationalism in legitimization SRS, DVERI, and other minor parties. In the Serbian case, that political orientation was expanded on Russophile and Eurosceptic postulates. Therefore, militant democracy measures to combat anti-democrats are ineffective and do not exist in practice.

## **FUNDING**

This research paper is a result of the research project Civil Disorder in Pandemic-ridden European Union. It was financially supported by the National Science Centre, Poland [grant number 2021/43/ B/HS5/00290].

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The above comparative studies allow me to formulate some significant conclusions, which expand knowledge about using militant democracy measures in modern democratic regimes. That category has a long tradition in Western Europe and may be applicable in studies on post-communist UE member states, but meet reveals obstacles in weak post-Yugoslav states, which showed that analysis. Despite adopting rules characteristic for militant democracy idea in the legal framework, they have a low level of effectiveness in Croatia and any effectiveness in Serbia. What does it come from? To answer that question, it is worth referring to Max Steuer's observation about the relation between militant democracy and the values of the political

community (Steuer 2019, 5). In Croatia and Serbia, members of the political nation do not recognize nationalist, homophobic, chauvinistic entities as endanger for new political regimes. Civil society legitimizes the functioning of all analyzed entities in public life, resulting from ethno-nationalism success during the political transition. Therefore, militancy instruments cannot adequately protect the political system if society accepts occurring parties, which are based on anti-democratic principles – excluding some groups from participation in the decision-making process. Moreover, existing parties may still be classified as ethno-populistic by finding new enemies of the national community. Finally, mentioned in chapter 2 model of banning extremists parties in post-communist states cannot be adopted in analyzed cases. It is the reason for the ineffective that instrument states, which agenda of political parties based on anti-democratic rules.

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