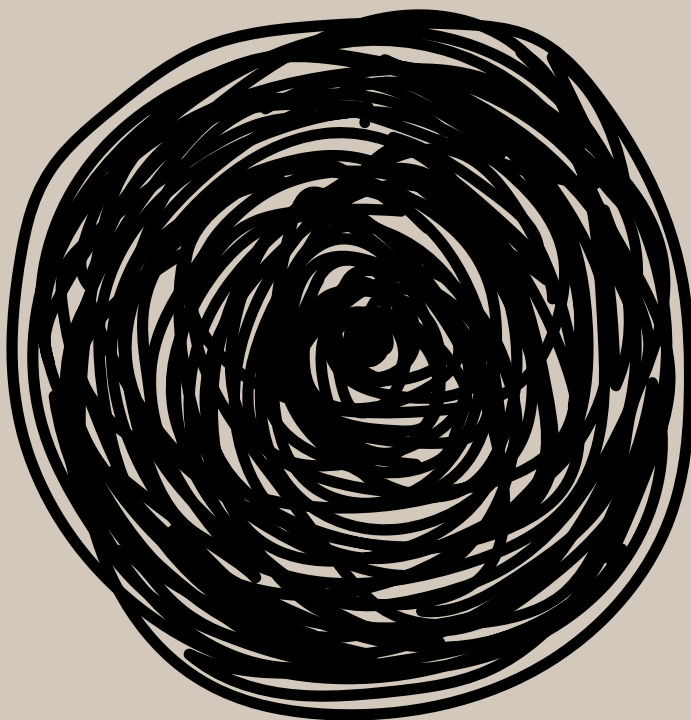


**Summary**

# **Undermining Democracy**

**Processes and Institutions in Serbia 2010-2020**



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**Summary**

# **Undermining Democracy**

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**CRTA:**

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# Introductory Word

As a civil society organization dedicated to developing the political culture and civic activism, at the very core of CRTA's mission and all our efforts lies a tireless fight for advancing democracy in Serbia. Through "Undermining Democracy", we wanted to take a deeper look at the decade behind us, recognize the crucial moments that shaped, or are to this day shaping the reality we live in, and, as much as possible, offer a roadmap for strengthening democratic institutions and forces in our society. At the same time, this was an opportunity to engage more actively with academic scholars, with whom we share our dedication to facts, collecting and verifying relevant data, critical thinking about our surroundings, and interpreting events that direct socio-political developments.

"Undermining Democracy" is the result of a two-year long research, and our intention to answer several questions: what is happening to democracy in Serbia, how has the previous decade altered its various aspects, and how can we fix it? Searching for these answers is not easy, and usually not optimistic either, but it is necessary if we genuinely want to leave in a better and more just society.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the authors whose articles explain and lead readers through key points of democratic processes in Serbia; to our reviewers, who significantly contributed to the quality and the precision of this publication; and especially to the editor, Dusan Spasojevic, who guided us through all the processes with patience and dedication, and made it possible to create a tangible testimony of a decade of democracy in our country. Additionally, this is an opportunity to thank the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands for their support and cooperation throughout the years. Finally, I want to thank the CRTA team who has, from the very start until the end of this endeavour, been a support along every step of the way, and who every day reminds us that it is only through joint efforts that we can change our society, as unattainable as those changes may seem.

The fight for democracy needs to be permanent, which we can see through challenges faced by societies at a much higher level of democratic culture development than in Serbia. I hope that this publication will be a tool in the hands that are protecting democracy in our society, and that it will serve as a reminder to never take our rights and freedoms for granted, but to pursue them every day, and defend them without compromise.

Vukosava Crnjanski  
Director of CRTA

Before you is a summary of CRTA's publication "Undermining Democracy - Processes and Institutions in Serbia 2010-2020", supported by the Government of the Kingdom of Netherlands. The publication as a whole can be found at [demokratija.cрта.rs](https://demokratija.cрта.rs) as an online presentation of all findings and related research.

Within each of the chapters, authors went beyond analyzing the state of democracy; and they defined the most important trends, their impact, as well as recommendations for improving all selected aspects of democracy in Serbia. Readers can access and download all trends, ratings, and recommendations at [demokratija.cрта.rs](https://demokratija.cрта.rs).

# State of Democracy in Serbia

Although Serbia has the formal characteristics of a democracy, over the past decade it has in practice ceased to be one. Today, Serbia does not meet the criteria to be categorized as a democratic society. The study shows negative trends in all areas that are important for democratic functioning. Above all, what makes this obvious is the absence of the minimum precondition for a democratic order - free and fair elections. Inequality in the electoral process and the advantage that the ruling parties have during the elections are then transferred to the most important political institutions and the relationship between different branches of government. The domination of the executive and the president significantly distorts the constitutional order and the principles of the rule of law, while completely marginalizing the parliament. Inequality of actors can also be seen in the party system, which is characterized by the predominant position of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and the atomization of the opposition. It is especially worrying that the negative political trends are spilling over to other spheres of society. Hence, we have media that is strongly influenced by the executive, and a civil society that is falling out of its (traditionally already weak) roles - representative and control. At the same time, growing social inequalities are preserving the existing power (dis)balance in society and making political competition more difficult. Finally, the international influence provided incentives for the democratization of society in the past. That influence is now focused on the regional stability issue and cooperation with the EU in crisis situations, thus occasionally encouraging undemocratic tendencies.

What is especially worrying is this synergistic effect of negative trends in all the pivotal areas, as well as the fact that it is nearly impossible to find trends that positively influence the state of democracy. In other words, a re-democratization of society is possible to achieve only through extraordinary effort of citizens, civil society organizations, political actors and institutions. On top of that, favorable international and regional conditions and incentives are necessary.

# Rule of Law

Danilo Vuković

For the establishment of the rule of law, by which we mean the legal and political system in which all citizens must act in accordance with positive law, the mechanisms that ensure the responsibility of members of the political elite are especially important. That responsibility can be political, legal, and a responsibility to civil society.

The institutions of the political system and the opposition enable the vertical responsibility of the politicians in power, i.e. the possibility of replacing them through elections. In this regard, the period after the October 5 changes until the SNS and SPS came to power in 2012 was marked by citizens' dissatisfaction with low living standards and corruption, but also the "normalization" of political and media pluralism. This enabled political competition which further led to the opposition gaining power. After change of government in 2012, the foundations of political and media pluralism collapsed. Serbia welcomed the end of 2020 without parliamentary opposition and independent national media, and thus without circumstances necessary for the current government to be held politically accountable for its actions.

Judicial institutions and independent regulatory and supervisory bodies are key to establishing the horizontal accountability of the political elite. In Serbia, the judiciary is constantly controlled by the executive. Through judicial reforms implemented in different periods, the executive has only strengthened that control. The public prosecutor's office also underwent organizational and personnel reforms to further establish lasting political influence, ensuring a lack of reaction in the event of numerous political and economic scandals. In recent years, the executive has gone beyond the pressures and institutional redesign. It has resorted to invalidation through public defamatory campaigns aimed at judges and general criticism of the work of the judiciary, as well as criticism of specific verdicts

**The work of judges and prosecutors is marked by daily pressure from representatives of the executive branch. Research shows that as many as 41% of judges have experienced direct pressure in their work and decision-making process (from court presidents, colleagues, politicians, the media, etc.). If the answer "yes, because there is systemic pressure" is taken into account, then as many as 58% of judges state that they were subject to pressure.**

Data obtained from the research *Lawyers and Legal Professions in Serbia and Croatia* which was conducted within the Center for Socio-Legal Research of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade.



Independent institutions, especially the Protector of Citizens and the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, were quickly met with resistance by the governing majority formed after the elections in 2012. The scale of these conflicts ranged from silent ignoring (in the period from 2015 to 2018, the National Assembly of Serbia did not discuss the reports of these institutions), obstruction (the Government refuses to enforce the Commissioner's decision, while the prosecution ignores criminal charges), to brutal media campaigns and personal attacks on former holders of these functions.

**At the beginning of the decade, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection recorded about 10% of unsuccessful interventions, while mid-decade, in 2016, the percentage of unexecuted decisions soared to 26.4%. In the last year of work (2018) of Rodoljub Šabić, the first Commissioner, the share of unexecuted decisions reached 30%. Even after the appointment of the new Commissioner, things have not changed. According to the 2019 annual report: resistance and obstruction by the authorities have continued in the same form and scope, except that the language of the report is more moderate and adapted to new circumstances.**

In case the previous two mechanisms fail, the civil society and the public represent the last line of defense for the rule of law and democracy. So, the independent media in Serbia pointed out numerous scandals and abuses of power, which the public would not otherwise find out about. The work of non-governmental organizations was more focused on raising the awareness of citizens than on their mobilization. Citizens have also repeatedly shown interest in activism and gathered around various topics - from the construction of small hydropower plants to protests against irregular elections and political violence. However, the media's findings did not result in legal liability. The democracy and the rule of law in Serbia are jeopardized, and while resistance exists, it is significantly affected by the relative lack of interest in politics and the poorly developed political and legal culture of Serbian citizens.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, it is not surprising that the rankings of international institutions indicate that, during the last decade, the rule of law in Serbia has mostly stagnated or decreased. At the same time, corruption, clientelism and patronage are holding the existing political and economic system captive. In such a social context, together with the events of the last decade of the 20th century marked by wars, poverty and political instability, a specific and widespread perception of Serbian society and politics as "abnormal" and "immoral" emerged.

# Elections in Serbia 2008-2020

Vujo Ilić

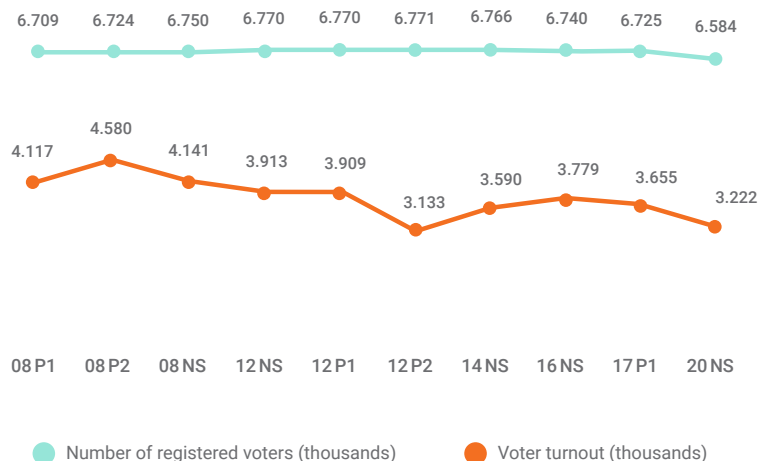
The period between 2008 and 2020 can be divided into two phases. In the first phase (2008-2014), the elections took place in a relatively stable environment, and in the second (2014-2020) the situation deteriorated and discussions on equal election conditions became more frequent. The formal rules regulating the elections have not changed much during this time. The key change is the sharp decline in the quality of election conditions since 2014. In the second phase, the ruling parties gained such an advantage that the elections essentially lost their competitive character. In turn, the participation of both individual parties and voters in the elections decreased. While the role of elections in ensuring the representation of different political options in parliament diminished, formal changes that encouraged better descriptive representation of different groups were happening.

The electoral system, the broader institutional framework that shapes the way votes are transformed into mandates, has been relatively static, with few minor changes toward greater gender and national minority representation. However, at the end of the analyzed period, there was a decrease in the electoral threshold from 5% to 3% and an increase in the share of candidates of the underrepresented sex to 40%, immediately before the elections, contrary to established international practice.

The level of proportionality of the electoral system was generally satisfactory and stable, although crossing the 5% electoral threshold in the conditions of party domination after 2014 is becoming an increasing obstacle for political actors. In the critical period 2012-2016 frequent elections led to an intense, almost uninterrupted, campaign and since 2014, elections have gradually lost their competitive character. The trend of pluralism disappearing from the main representative body culminates in 2020 after a boycott of elections by the majority of the opposition.

Within the framework of electoral participation, we can observe two negative trends: “departyzation” of electoral lists and reduction of voter turnout. Restrictive conditions for the registration of political parties, an inflexible electoral system and the pronounced dominance of the ruling parties led to an increase in the number of coalition lists and groups of citizens, to the detriment of independent lists of political parties. Voter turnout ranged from extremely high at the beginning of the period (68% in the second round of the 2008 presidential election) to below half in the later stages (48% in the 2020 parliamentary elections).

Graph 1: Voter turnout decreased by 1 million voters between 2008. and 2020.



Better representation of certain social segments of voters is the only positive change in this period. However, while the descriptive representation of women and national minorities in parliament grew, this was no guarantee that the position of these social groups would be improved. The drastic change in the generational structure of the parliament comes after the 2020 elections, when, for the first time, the generation of millennials in the parliament is more represented in relation to the estimated structure of voters.

Although weaknesses were present in the first phase, in the second phase, after 2014, there is a noticeable decline in the quality of the election process, in relation to the principles and standards to which the Serbian authorities are obligated to comply with domestic and international norms. The key factor that enabled this deterioration is the passivation of the election administration, regulatory and control bodies (such as REM or the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption).

The absence of a controlling role of independent institutions, with a politically biased election administration, and in a media environment that has already deteriorated, has created conditions for unhindered domination of ruling parties. This advantage is shown through the abuse of public resources, smear campaigns against political opponents that go unsanctioned and the development of clientelistic relationships with voters.

In order for the elections to become a process that improves the quality of democracy in Serbia, it is necessary to make efforts to improve several key areas. These are, above all: the role of the election administration, the functioning of independent bodies, the work of professional media, as well as changes in the rules and electoral system in the direction of encouraging participation in elections and a more direct relationship between voters and elected representatives.



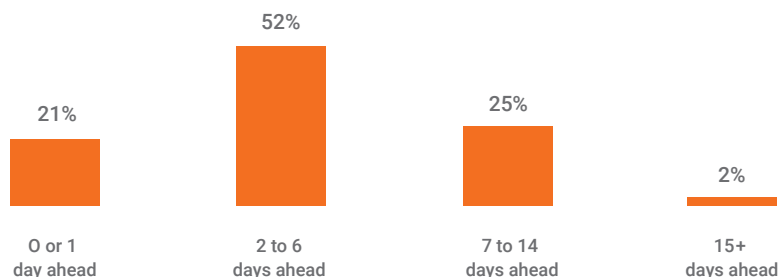
# Parliament of Serbia

Tara Tepavac

As stipulated by the Constitution, the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia is the highest representative body and the holder of legislative power. She is also in charge of monitoring the executive branch. In practice, citizens' interest in the parliament is declining, and the lack of trust in the National Assembly is associated with a collapse of confidence in democracy. The centralization of power, one-sided narratives widespread in public space and domineering the media as a whole contribute to the portrayal of the President of the Republic as the only authority in charge of all issues and topics, regardless of the constitutional system. This significantly degrades the position of the parliament. In addition to the centralization of power in the hands of the executive, the Parliament faces a number of structural weaknesses and poor internal practices.

When it comes to the legislative function, during the last decade, laws would most often "speed" through the Assembly, without significant involvement of MPs and with frequent and unjustified recourse to urgent procedures. Committees and plenary sessions were often hastily agreed upon, with the agenda of the plenary sessions being announced at the last minute, leaving MPs little time to prepare for the debate on the acts that are to be on the agenda and to draft amendments. In the absence of the annual work plan of the National Assembly, the problem of quality preparation of MPs for work is even clearer.

Graph 1: How many days ahead have the sittings been scheduled in the 11th convocation of the Parliament



Source: Open Parliament

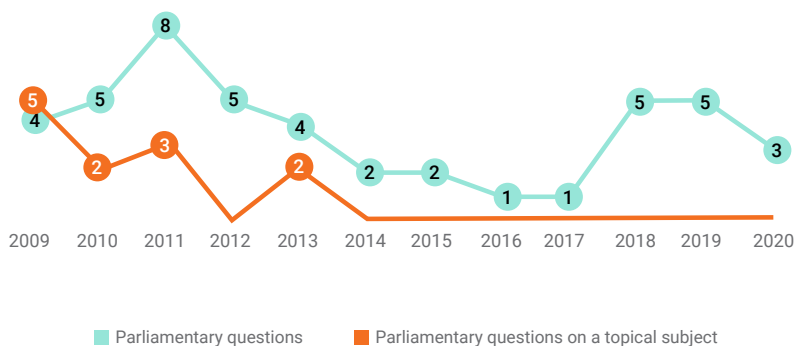
From 2005 to 2010, the Government proposed on average about 62% of laws and other acts, and from 2016 to 2020, that share increased to as much as 97% of all adopted laws. This growth is a consequence of the practice of overlooking law proposals made by opposition MPs when creating an agenda for the plenary session. So, although the MPs from the opposition have the right by the letter of the law to initiate and change the laws, in practice they failed. In addition, the ruling majority used various obstructive practices (filibustering), such as submitting numerous amendments to laws lacking truly relevant content in order to limit the time for opposition MPs to speak. This trivialized the parliamentary debate itself.

The monitoring role of the parliament is most often realized through the work of the committees and through parliamentary questions.

In practice, the actual power of the National Assembly committees is limited by the will of the ruling majority, as well as the capacities and resources of their members and staff, which often do not match the government's. The structure of a committee in the Serbian Assembly reflects the composition of the Parliament, proportionally representing the parliamentary groups in relation to the total number of committee members. Unlike the fine practice that was in place in the first decade of 2000, the distribution of seats in parliamentary committees between the majority and the opposition was changed to the detriment of opposition MPs. Finally, the functioning of parliamentary committees is in most cases characterized by a general lack of efficiency. Committee members do their jobs formally and hastily, instead of a fundamental approach to the topics that are on the agenda.

Parliamentary questions, in oral or written form, obligate the representative of the Government to answer. Although the use of this mechanism has increased compared to 2018, in practice, asking questions does not significantly contribute to the quality of Parliament's monitoring function. The second type of parliamentary questions are those that relate to the current topic. In the last seven years, they have been completely neglected in practice.

Graph 2: Parliamentary questions trend



In Serbia, a tradition of holding a public hearing before adoption of systemic acts does not exist. Nonetheless, when speaking about public hearings it's important to note that them being regularly held is not enough for it to be a true contribution to the monitoring role of the parliament. What is crucial is that parliamentary committees actually take the findings from these hearings seriously and follow them through. The format of the conclusions adopted after a public hearing is also of great importance.

Commissions and committees of inquiry, as the next monitoring mechanisms initiated by committees, are used even less frequently in practice. Intended as ad hoc bodies, they allow the Parliament to establish facts on certain matters of public interest or important events or aspects of the work of the executive. In practice, these mechanisms yielded no concrete results.

Despite a solid constitutional system stipulating a strong legislature, the position and influence of parliament over the past decade has been hindered by the prevailing centralization of power in the hands of the executive, making it largely dependent on government decisions, especially the President. In addition, as a result of the increasing abuse of mechanisms and obstructions, the Assembly has become a mere façade instead of a temple of democracy, which is a role assigned to it by the legislative framework.

# Political Parties in Serbia

Dušan Spasojević

Political parties are the most important means of political participation in Serbia. They play a central role in all political processes and limit the growing influence of new actors - social movements and civil society organizations. Despite such a dominant position, the party system itself is not particularly stable, nor do the parties enjoy a high level of trust among the citizens of Serbia.

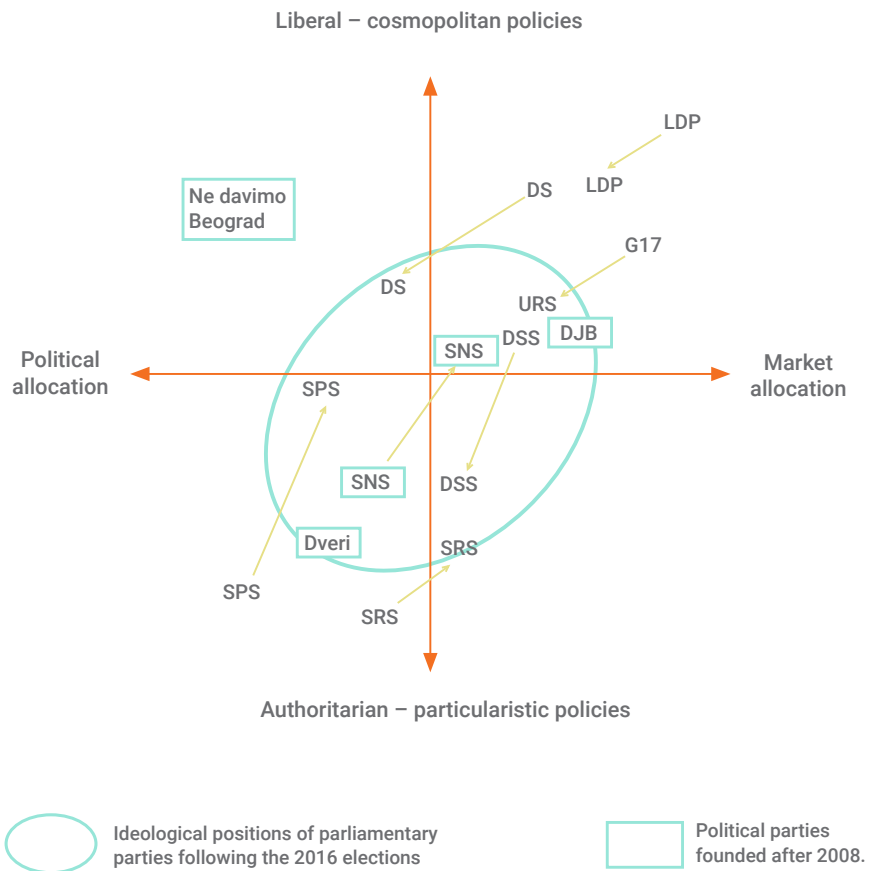
The direct consequence of such a situation is the exceptional volatility and variability of the party scene. On the other hand, the leaders and people in the management of the parties show unusual stability. The politicians that were there at the very beginning of party pluralism are still very much part of the political scene. This superiority of leaders is reflected in intra-party relations and promotes party discipline as one of the most noticeable characteristics. Probably the strongest proof of the lack of intra-party competition is the inviolability of party leaders and the fact that the removal of the leader, and most often the founder of the party, is the exception, not the rule. This data becomes even more intriguing when we keep in mind that many parties have not changed their leaders since their establishment (some even for 30 years), regardless of the decline in popularity.

The most important characteristic of the party system in Serbia is how narrow the ideological space is. Both the vertical - value - dimension, and the relatively narrow field of the center in relation to economic issues. In other words, after the dilemma of "Kosovo or the European Union" was (temporarily) removed from the top of the agenda, the parties in Serbia did not find new fundamental dividing lines. One of the reasons why new topics do not appear is the populist wave that swept the political scene of Serbia and which put a whole range of populist topics on the agenda. This also led to the opening of old issues in a, yet again, populist way, i.e. through a premise that society is divided into hardworking people and the corrupt elite. Under the influence of populism, a cleavage arose between the old and new parties, that is, between the populist and other parties.

However, the tone for the whole system is set by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). From the position of the dominant party, it successfully maintains its centrist and catch-all position, expanding its ideological scope more and more. The shift of the electorate from the anti-European position of the former SRS to the moderately pro-European SNS has led to a narrowing of the ideological space and a timid pro-European consensus.



Graph 1: Narrowing of ideological space, and the emergence of new political parties 2008-2018.



Source: Spasojević and Stojiljković, 2020:109

There is less and less political space for new parties, for similar reasons for which the space is narrowed for both the opposition and civil society. Therefore, the prerequisite for a new party is a kind of an initial political capital - leaders who are somewhat known to the public or reliance on an ideologically close civil society. The media space is equally small for all opposition parties, with the partial exception during the election campaign. The issue of available resources is therefore of great importance for both new and old parties.

When it comes to financing, regardless of several possible sources, political parties in Serbia are, as a rule, focused on the state budget and are dependent on it for financing. Regular annual reports that parties submit to the Anti-Corruption Agency show that by far the largest share of revenue comes from the state - between 85% and 100% for opposition parties, and about 65% of revenue for the Progressives and 40% for the Socialists; this practice is present in regular financing, but also in the financing of election campaigns. This results in two phenomena - (1) the parties are too state-oriented, which further diminishes the importance of membership and those who support the parties, and (2) the gap between budget-funded and non-budget-funded parties increases (this becomes especially evident when a parliamentary party loses budget finances because it has not passed the census and no alternative funding model has been developed).

The second most important source of funding are individual donations. However, regardless of the sources of financing and the degree of (non)control that the state implements, the last period is also characterized by a significant disproportion of available finances. This disproportion is the result of unequal representation in the parliament, and is further strengthened by existing legal solutions.

Table 1. Total party revenues 2016-2019 (in million EUR)

	SNS	SPS	DS	SRS
2016	6,2	1,56	0,47	0,95
2018	4,85	2.48	0,73	0,90
2019	9,35	3,2	0,65	1

The parties' ties with the citizens are scarce, which is proven by the significant distrust in political institutions. Parties are not the only "culprits" here - civil society does not provide enough incentives nor does it articulate interests well enough to put pressure on the parties. The links between citizens, civil society organizations and parties are rather weak and based on one-way top-down communication. It is especially worrying that these trends have not changed since the very beginning of the multi-party system.

# Human Rights and Democracy

Danilo Vuković

Despite the relatively developed legal and institutional framework that protects human rights in Serbia, in the past decade - which can be characterized as a period of marginal progress but also significant stagnation and setbacks - there have been numerous cases of their violation.

When it comes to freedom of expression, the lack of tolerance towards dissidents is a constant feature of Serbian society. Social intolerance first manifested itself in issues that marked the first decade of the "October 5 Republic". This was primarily related to the human rights of the LGBT community members and the interpretation of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed. However, there is a recent decline in the government's tolerance of criticism, which we are seeing in all spheres of political life, in parliamentary debates, media appearances, public discussions, etc. The media discourse and arguments of the ruling elites are increasingly reminiscent of the models of delegitimizing interlocutors from the 1990s. Government officials are also initiating lawsuits against journalists and political activists with the aim of further limiting public criticism.

Freedom of peaceful assembly has instrumental value, both for the government and for the citizens of Serbia, but its respect was dependent on the context. In cases where freedom of peaceful assembly was an indicator of the quality of democracy and the rule of law, the government provided adequate protection. On the other hand, numerous socio-economic and political protests were not treated favorably. Lately, when faced with strong civil discontent, the government has tolerated unreported protests and in a way guaranteed freedom of public expression. However, protests that erupted in mid-2020, sparked by the announcement of a new curfew, were met with excessive use of force by the police. There are also lingering suspicions that the government itself was involved in provoking numerous incidents.

The prohibition of discrimination became part of our legal system with the adoption of the Constitution in 2006 and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination in 2009, which established the institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and provided for judicial and misdemeanor protection. However, although institutional mechanisms have been established, citizens still don't trust the state institutions and therefore don't search for protection there.

**Institutional mechanisms for protection against discrimination have been established, but most citizens state that in case of discrimination they would not turn to anyone (41%), 22% would approach the Commissioner, 14% the police, and only 4% would go to court. Among citizens who would not turn to state institutions, as many as 59% cite distrust in institutions as the main reason (Commissioner, 2019).**

Limited progress has also been made on the right to a fair trial. The burning issues are the length of court proceedings, non-enforcement of judgments and protection of property. Numerous verdicts of the European Court of Human Rights make this obvious. The Law on the Protection of the Right to a Trial within a reasonable Time entered into force in 2016, but it has not yielded expected results. However, the data of the Supreme Court of Cassation indicate that, in the last decade, the average duration of the court process has been significantly shortened. The Law on Free Legal Aid began to be applied only at the end of 2019, and the first analyses indicate low institutional capacities for its application. Citizens who meet relatively restrictive criteria for receiving financial social assistance are entitled to free legal aid. On the other hand, citizens' associations have been given the right to provide free legal aid only in the areas of asylum and protection against discrimination, through hired lawyers. On their own, they can only give advice and fill out forms. Therefore, it is estimated that access to free legal aid, and thus access to justice, is still unavailable for a significant part of the citizens of Serbia.

It seems that, unlike civil and political rights, which have in some way remained in the center of public and media attention throughout the decade, socio-economic rights stay neglected. The interests of workers were neglected by both the political elites that were in power until 2012, and those that make up the current government. The situation on the Serbian labor market is characterized by low wages and a low level of labor law protection. Young and senior workers, as well as Roma, are in a particularly bad position at the job market. All of them are characterized not only by instability of employment, but also by poor working conditions, low incomes and a low level of labor and legal protection. Trade unions, which have the role of protecting workers' rights, lost their members and power during the transition.

Inequalities are seen not only in terms of employment and income, but also in access to public services, such as health care and education. Health insurance coverage is lower among the rural population and among Roma, and refugees, IDPs and undocumented persons also have difficulty accessing services. Similarly, certain groups in our society face barriers to accessing education. The rural population, the poorer social class and the Roma have less access to pre-school education services, while the greatest segregation between children from middle/upper and lower class occurs at the transition from primary to secondary school.

Children from the middle and upper class enroll in grammar schools, which later lead them to university education. Children from the lower class, even when they do well in primary school, choose secondary vocational schools that lead them to the labor market faster and impose lower tuition costs. In addition, the learning process shifts from school to home. This, along with the decline of some educational, recreational and upbringing functions of the school, creates a new market of educational and recreational services and new financial pressure on families with lower and middle incomes. All these are just some of the indicators of an inefficient and non-inclusive education system that fails to provide equal services to all citizens.

# Gender Equality in Serbia

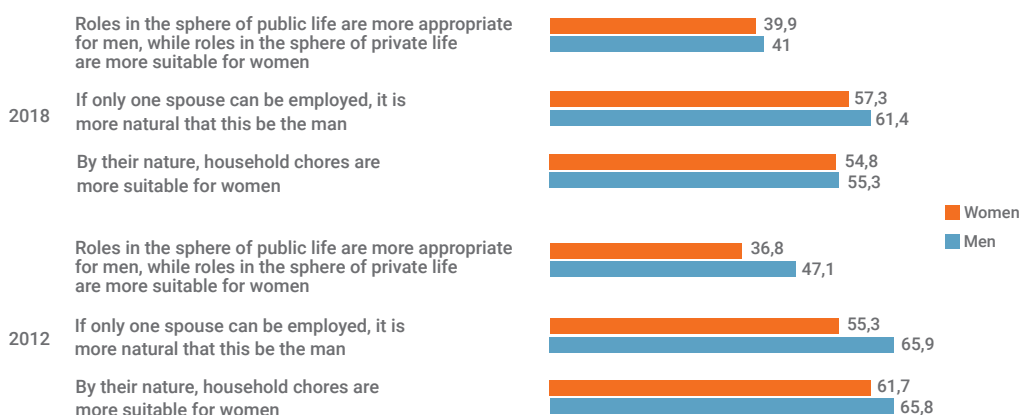
Marija Babović

The state of gender equality in Serbia has a few aspects. It has some elements of the preserved socialist heritage, with addition of gender inequalities that deepened during the difficult transition and social disintegration during the 1990s, as well as changes in systems and structures during the intensive transformation after 2000.

The last two decades of the reform process have brought about the establishment of a basic legal and political framework for improving gender equality. However, it seems that these reform processes are purely formal and do not lead to significant, substantial changes. The weakening of institutional mechanisms and marginalizing the issue of gender equality go side by side with the weakening of democratic institutions and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in government and society.

Gender inequalities in different spheres are rooted in the patriarchal points of view and values of the population of Serbia. Most men and women find it acceptable that there are gender-specific roles for women and men, with roles in public life being more appropriate for men and those in private life for women.

Graph 1: Attitudes towards gender roles, citizens aged 18 to 74, Serbia, 2012 and 2018



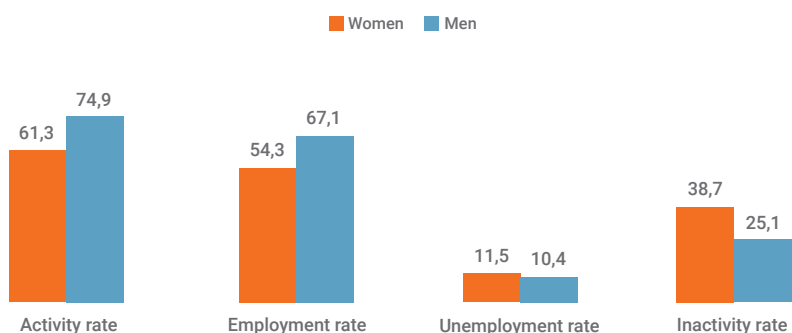
Source: Institute for Sociological Research, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, "Challenges of New Social Integration: Concepts and Actors", 2012 and 2018 (independent calculations)

In order to increase the participation of women in political decision-making, quotas for the underrepresented sex on the lists for parliamentary and local elections are prescribed by law. Thanks to these provisions, women make up more than a third of the MPs in the National Assembly and the same number of councilors in the municipal and city assemblies. However, the representation of women in the executive branch remains low, and they are even less represented in the highest positions of local government.

Access to different resources is extremely important for gender equality. When it comes to property rights, there are deep-rooted gender inequalities in Serbia, especially in rural communities. The main reason lies in the deep-rooted patriarchal inheriting patterns. Gender differences are also present in access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and means of transport, which are important for information, economic activity and social contacts.

Numerous differences that also exist in the field of education are later transferred to economic inequalities, since there are significant gender inequalities in the labor market. Women's activity rates are lower, as are employment rates. There is a clear distinction between women and men by sector and occupation. Women are less likely to hold management positions in companies, and there are fewer of them among entrepreneurs. Finally, there are gaps in wages, although they are not as wide as in Western economies. Discrimination against women in employment and the workplace is widespread.

Graph 2: Basic indicators on the labour market, men and women aged from 15 to 64, 2019



Source: SORS, 2019: 14-15



Gender inequalities go beyond the workplace. In our culture, unpaid domestic work is primarily the responsibility of women. Also, gender-based violence is widespread in Serbia, which is a consequence of structural inequalities in society and an omnipresent patriarchal attitude.

Women from marginalized groups are in an even more vulnerable position, i.e. women who are exposed to multiple marginalization – based on gender, but also on some other basis. The situation of Roma women is particularly unfavorable in all key dimensions of the socio-economic situation and human rights. Early marriages are a major problem, and according to the Istanbul Convention, they are a form of gender-based violence. Older women face problems related to pensions, adequate health care and long-term care. Women with disabilities face multiple barriers to social inclusion: they are almost completely excluded from the labor market, face physical and other barriers to accessing social institutions, and often lack adequate health and social protection.

# Media and Democracy

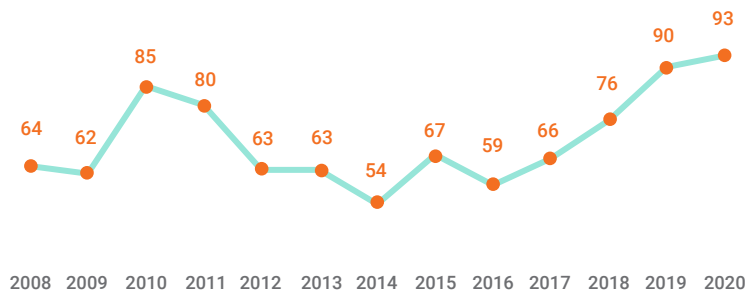
Jelena Kleut

In 2000, the Serbian media system began a slow and, as of today, unfinished transformation. This transformation included several main elements: 1) withdrawal of the state from media ownership, 2) transformation of state television into a public media service, 3) formation of an independent regulator in the field of electronic media, 4) introduction of measures that encourage media pluralism and diversity of content and 5) providing conditions for the realization of freedom of expression.

The adoption of media laws that prescribed these elements was accompanied by simultaneous processes that made fulfilling these goals impossible. The state reluctantly relinquished its role as a media owner and media regulator. The need to exert political influence in the media sphere, along with a low level of journalistic professionalism and impoverishment of the media market, led to non-transparent, clientelistic relations between government and the media. Media capture by the state has become increasingly evident since 2014, when pressure on journalists and media outlets that are not part of clientelistic networks began to grow. The overall impact of these processes is seen in the lack of media pluralism and media freedoms.

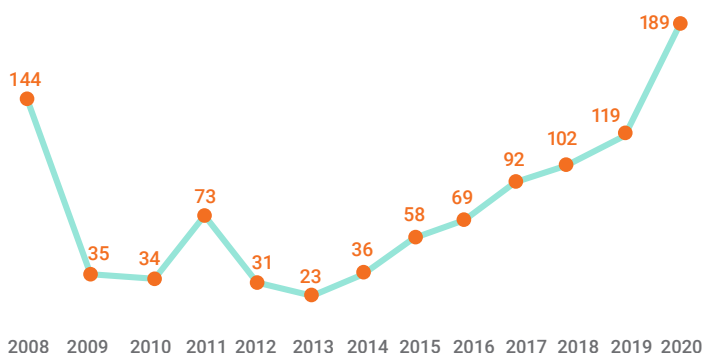
After a period of a relatively slow, but constant rise on international media freedom lists, Serbia has had a significant drop since 2014. According to Reporters Without Borders, Serbia dropped from 64th place in 2008 to 90th place in 2019.

Graph 1: Serbia's ranking in reports by Reporters without borders



Citizens of Serbia have very little trust in the media. Compared to the European average of 39% of citizens who trust the news, in Serbia that number is only 20%. The cause for this absence of trust and the decline of media freedom is found in many areas of the media system: a non-reactive media regulator, the fact the public media service is unable to reach complete independence, lack of media pluralism, as well as the ever growing pressure on journalists and the media in general.

Graph 2: Number of attacks on journalists, according to the Independent Journalists' of Serbia's data



An independent regulator in the field of audio and audiovisual media was introduced in 2003, and started operating in 2005. Until 2014, the regulator was called the Republic Broadcasting Agency (RBA, Serbian RRA), and today it is the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM). From the very beginning, the regulator failed to achieve the necessary independence, both in organizational and financial terms, as well as in the implementation of its competencies.

Two public media services - Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV) - were formed with a delay in 2006. The regulations ensure the autonomy and editorial independence by financing and the manner of electing the members of the managing boards, who elect the executive director. The task of satisfying the wishes of listeners and viewers in regard to the program content is entrusted to the program councils. Designed to enable media services to take on the role of public interest bearers in the media system, these mechanisms have never fully taken flight. The members of the management boards are elected by the REM Council, and the organizational (in)dependence of REM is in direct relation with the organizational (in)dependence of RTS and RTV. Instead of protecting the independence of media public services, the managing boards have repeatedly obstructed their work. When it comes to media content, relevant analyses show that RTS and RTV news programs do not

meet the standards and requirements related to impartial reporting, diversity and social inclusion.

The system of public information is moving to digital space, but it cannot be said that the expansion of digital communication has had exclusively positive effects on media freedom and pluralism of opinion in the virtual public sphere. Although the number of Internet users is growing, there is still a digital divide. The Internet, on the one hand, has provided a platform for excellent research newsrooms and enabled a richer offer of media content for groups that have been neglected in traditional media. On the other hand, online media that serve as party media have also multiplied. In addition, opportunities for covert influence on public opinion have opened up, and the Internet as a channel is often abused to intimidate and spread hate speech.

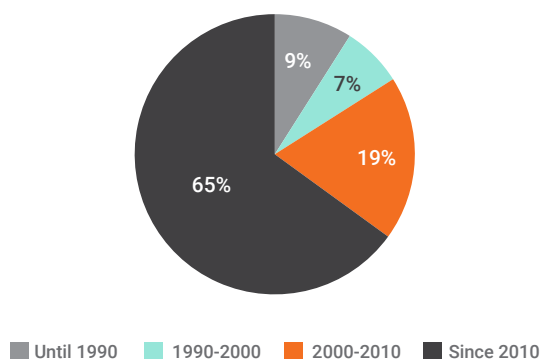
# Civil Society in Serbia

Jelena Lončar

The association of citizens and their involvement in decision-making and policy-making in Serbia is relatively favorably regulated by law, despite certain shortcomings. The key status laws that enable more favorable establishment and operation of citizens' associations were adopted at the beginning of the analyzed period, i.e. 2009-2010. After the adoption of these laws, the number of established citizens' associations grew. According to the data of the Business Registers Agency, 34,093 associations and 927 endowments and foundations are officially registered in Serbia. The largest number of these organizations, as many as 2/3, were founded after 2010, that is after the adoption of the Law on Associations.

Despite this, in practice we mostly see disinterested, passive and obedient citizens who rarely engage in civic activism. On the other hand, in the last few years there has been an expansion of social movements and civic initiatives that bring critical voices within civil society and provide hope for the possibility for development of the necessary pluralism.

Graph 1: Associations by year of establishment



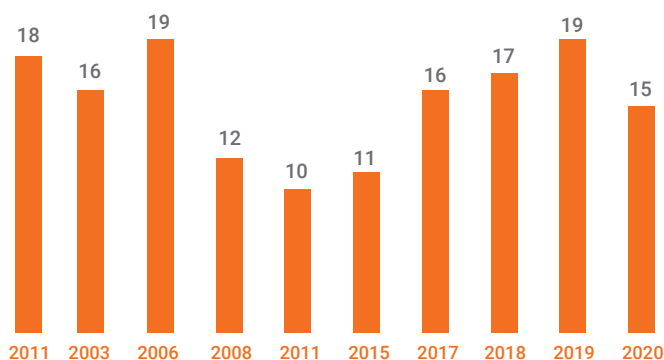
Source: (IPSOS Strategic Marketing and Velat, 2019)

On one hand there is a relatively democratic legal framework for citizens' associations that encourages action in civil society. On the other hand, the analysis shows that limited financial resources and the state policy of control, conditioning and holding the interests of the ruling parties above all else significantly channel the activities of organizations and essentially restrict the freedom of association.

The activities of civil society in Serbia are largely determined by the changes after October 5th, the democratic transition and the support and direction of international donors in the first years after 2000. Regarding the democratic environment for civil society in Serbia, two trends can be seen in the analyzed period. The first is the trend of easing the formal conditions for the organization and operation of civil society organizations from 2009 to 2012 and the consequent increase in the number of registered associations. In this period, the most influential and most visible part of civil society are non-governmental organizations that strive to cooperate with the state, limit its power and provide replacements for many state functions, especially in the field of social protection.

The second trend has been evident since 2014, when due to the collapse of democracy, the opportunities for free and independent action of civil society organizations decreased. This applies in particular to civil society activities related to monitoring the work of public institutions and advocating for public policies. During this period, new social movements and civic initiatives that were critical of the authorities and the way politics was conducted in the country began to emerge (again).

Graph 2: Trust in the work of unions in %



Source: Stojiljković, 2020: 3

In reality, civil society has very little influence on creating policies and regulations. Formal mechanisms aimed at involving the civil society in those processes merely feign democracy, instead of improving communication and cooperation. The government can't take criticism and conducts smear campaigns against civil society actors that in any way try to stand up to its authoritarian tendencies, or advocate for human rights and democratic governing. Simultaneously, the governing parties go out of their way to create their own NGOs for the purpose of abusing the means from the state budget allocated for the civil society, as well as invalidating critics and faking public support.

More over, a critical look at the civil society organizations (CSO) reveals that they are not open enough and lack in communication with citizens. Many CSOs don't have a clear idea whose interests or views they represent, nor do they show a need to change their approach to communication with citizens. Numerous studies have shown that citizens do not believe that these organizations have the power, capacity or desire to actually influence the resolving of issues important to citizens.

# Class Inequalities and Democracy

Slobodan Cvejić

Class inequalities are often covered up by identity patterns that are more dominant in the consciousness of people (e.g., gender or ethnicity). Nonetheless, the structural strength of class position and class relations is more enduring, which is why class relations are extremely important for the development of an equal, democratic society. The following aspects are especially important for the period of post-socialist democratic transition in Serbia: changes in the trend of class mobility, changes in the orientation towards democratic values and changes in the action potential of citizens and social classes.

The transformation from a socialist to a capitalist society in Serbia is slow and marked by state institutions and public resources being captured by political and economic elites, which tend to be closed off, exclusive networks that self-reproduce. The overall intergenerational class-layer self-reproduction has increased, given that more than 1/3 of the members of society remain in the same positions as their parents. Although the number of jobs has increased, this has not led to a reduction in inequality but to its growth. These new jobs have not been created with equal opportunity for members of different walks of life. The ratio of the chances of the descendants of the upper classes and those from the lower part of the ladder to find themselves in the middle or ruling class has increased in favor of the former, which leads to further growth of class inequalities and makes the transformation of Serbian society unfair.

The situation regarding class mobility also reflects on the support for the democratic values. Privileged “winners” of the post-socialist transition - members of the ruling class, experts and (less and less) small entrepreneurs, give greater declarative support to democratic values than other “losing” classes. The general trend of declining support for democratic values makes the position of the layer of experts even more striking. For them, the options for rising to the ruling class are somewhat narrowed. They, as the most educated and socially most aware layer, even though their economic position is gradually improving, believe that in the long run they can improve their social position only in circumstances of a strong democracy. A significant part of this class also expressed its political position through civil revolt, street protests and increased activism in the civil sector. Taking all that into account, they still need an alliance with other social groups to achieve any significant political goal.



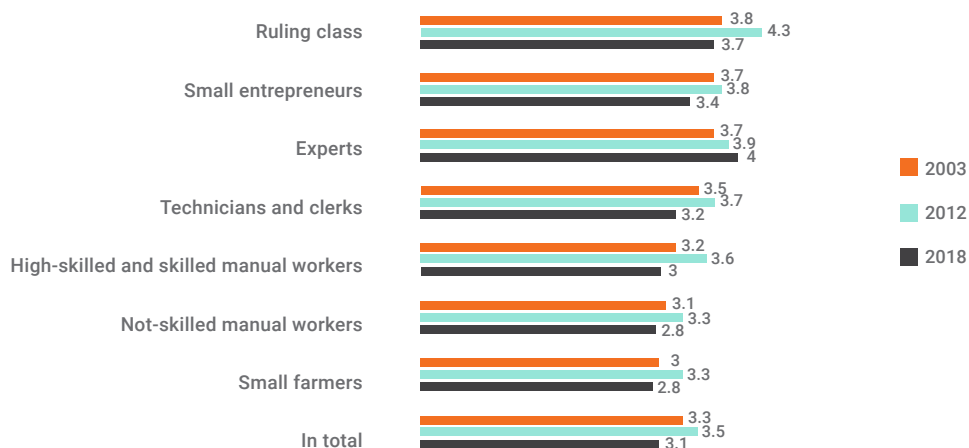
Graph 1: Testing the statement "Today, total freedom of speech leads to society disorganization"



Graph 2: Testing the statement "The judiciary must ultimately serve the government"



Graph 3: Testing the statement "The media should be more understanding towards the government"



The potential for an "action alliance" between the layer of experts and other social layers that are more numerous does not depend only on the similarity of their class and political interests, but also on the level of their activism. In that sense, visible are the trends that do not leave much space for creating a communal social action, but a spark for a flame of class alliances is there and has the potential of spreading. That spark is the orientation towards democratic values and civic activism that is practiced mostly by middle class and a small part of the working class. We must keep in mind that coalitions between middle and working class are rare and short-lived, thanks to confronting interests. They ask for a specific moment in time, good preparation and even better organization, especially looking at the broader context of political clientelism in Serbia.

# International Influence on Democracy in Serbia

Tijana Rečević

The international influence on the process of democratization of Serbia, although changed, is still as strong as it was two decades ago. Almost all actors who fostered the momentum of democratization in Serbia in the early 2000s - from the EU and the US, through individual Western countries, to their development agencies and party foundations - continued their engagement, making an external “supply and demand” for democracy in Serbia an important engine of its progress. On the other hand, the relative rise of actors who, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, still “licked their wounds” caused by the end of the Cold War, such as Russia and China, led to an increase in their previously negligible influence on democratization in Serbia.

**The largest donor of grants to the budget of the Republic of Serbia is the EU. During the observed period, the EU had (through the pre-accession funds IPA I (2007-2013) and IPA II (2014-2020)) financed numerous projects aimed at improving the rule of law and institution building, democratic reforms in key sectors, and the strengthening of civil society and the media. This is all in line with the priorities set by the national strategic documents on the needs and objectives of the reforms, as well as the recommendations of the European Commission from the annual progress reports on Serbia.**

A certain change in the patterns of external influences on democracy in Serbia - primarily reflected in the weakening of the normative and transformative power of the EU, on the one hand, and a stronger influence of forces from the East, on the other - became clearer in the second half of the 21st century. Although it would be wrong to draw strong cause-and-effect links between the two processes, the fact that this period saw a more intense collapse of democracy in Serbia shows that the changed dynamics in the international environment have undoubtedly contributed to this negative trend. However, despite this (still) limited change in the balance of power and patterns in the international environment, it seems that the entire observed period from 2008 to 2020 was marked by three relatively stable trends.

First of all, the state of democracy in Serbia still heavily depends on external incentives. Whether and to what extent international actors will put pressure on the authori-

ties in Serbia is often crucial for progress in democratization, since the adherence to democratic norms is still not strong enough among political elites or citizens.

In this regard, although over time there has been less international funding, almost all international actors have continued to fund a variety of projects in the second decade of democratic reforms in Serbia aimed at strengthening the democratic capacity of the executive, legislature and judiciary, political parties and civil society, and educating citizens for constructive participation in the democratic process. However, despite its significant and continuous influx, international assistance for democratization in Serbia has been only partially successful.

**Analyses of two decades of foreign aid to Serbia increasingly (unanimously) warn that the progress of democratization has remained permanently trapped between the daily political interests of the ruling elites, anti-democratic “veto players” and the interests of key external actors, and that domestic actors have not grown into their role of carriers of democratic development.**

Another trend in the observed period shows that, although necessary for the continuation of democratization, positive external incentives over the past decade have not automatically spilled over into the quality of the democratic process. Domestic political elites have become skilled in adapting pro-democracy incentives from the EU and other international actors to their own interests, while citizens have increasingly equated Europeanization and democratization.

Finally, insufficient resilience to intentional and unintentional negative external influences over the past decade has further exposed the weakness of democracy in Serbia. Political elites did not hesitate to enter into international arrangements that violate the rule of law and democratic order in Serbia, while the majority of citizens not only tolerated it but often even approved of undemocratic ways of governing in some partner countries.

If all three trends are taken into account, it can be said that the international influence on democracy in Serbia during the observed period remained a strong and important factor in the quality of democracy in Serbia, that positive influences were not enough to consolidate it, and that growing negative influences question its certainty.

Political elites and citizens of Serbia still view liberal democracy through the prism of failed expectations created by the narrative of “return to Europe” at the beginning of the 21st century. They do not see it as the most appropriate system for them to actually be involved in fulfilling those expectations. The current degree and nature of “lo-

cal ownership” of democracy in relation to international influences warn not only that democracy in Serbia cannot be considered consolidated, but also that it will probably remain burdened with unflattering prefixes and adjectives for a long time to come.

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