Consolidation of democracy in Serbia after 2000

Summary

by Dušan Pavlović & Slobodan Antonić

Main Idea. This book attempts, by way of regime type analysis, to identify the major bottlenecks for Serbia to consolidate as a full-fledged democracy seven years after it exited a decade of the semi-authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević. We argue that Serbia has undergone the initial phase of democratization, left the era of hybrid institutions, established itself as an electoral democracy, but still did not go past the point of no return, meaning it is still faced with the risk of the breakdown of democratic institutions. We define political regime in Serbia as an underconsolidated democracy, not entirely free of troubles that pertain to electoral authoritarianism.

What is new? Most books written in English about Serbia thus far failed to properly address the nature of the regime before and after the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic. This is not surprising, as most were actually books about the personality of Slobodan Milosevic and the war in former Yugoslavia. Because of their focus on war atrocities, these books typically neglected the nature of the Serbian regime during the 1990s. We argue that the best way to explain state of democracy in Serbia today is to focus on the type of political regime.

This is a book on Serbia. Yet, by using Serbia as an example, the book fills in several critical gaps and addresses several theoretical concepts used in the literature of democratic consolidation:

- This is the first study on the Serbian political transformation since 1990 written from a political science perspective;
- It brings in the independent variables of institution and culture in order to discuss their relation and interdependence with structures and actors, thus going beyond the structure vs agency debate (chapter 1);
- It introduces the concept of underconsolidation in order to enrich the concept of consolidation; it also enlarges on the concept of equilibrium in stating what is required for equilibrium in electoral democracy by emphasizing normative consensus (chapter 3);
- Finally, the book considers the role of nationalism and ethnic conflicts and how they can be factored in the overall theory of democratic consolidation (chapter 4)

Audience. This book will be appealing to the following audience:

- The academic and the policy making community that deal with the second wave of democratization process in East Europe triggered by a wave of electoral revolutions by the end of the 1990s;
- A larger political science community will find interesting the concepts discussed in this book (consolidation of democracy, equilibrium, the role of ethnic conflict in democratic consolidation), as they are of relevance for political science in general;
- The undergraduate and graduate students around the world who take classes in Central and East European democratization and democratization in general.
Draft

**Breakdown by chapters.** The book is divided into five chapters. In chapter 1 we bring up (we hope) for the last time the discussion between actors and structures. Our major claim is that, in a structural sense, Serbia was ready for democracy in 1989. The major obstacle was undemocratic actors who, as a consequence of a series of strategic games, took power in Serbia in 1987 and used the nationalist discourse to stoke up ethnic tensions. If actors were undemocratic, what blocked the establishment of full-blown non-democratic regime in this decade? There was indeed something extremely odd, almost bizarre, in the fact that Milosevic so stubbornly stuck to the popular ballot (which eventually brought him down), although even before the 1999 NATO bombing he might have easily gotten away without it. Here we focus on the missing concept of institutions and the concept of culture. Democratic institutions that Milosevic maintained precluded him from becoming more authoritarian. In order to explain the emergence and maintenance of such institutions we evoke the cultural variable developed under the strong program in cultural theory by Jeffrey Alexander. We claim that the need for democracy was a cultural phenomenon that can be expressed by *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the time) that forced the communist regime to allow and maintain multiparty system and formal division of power that prevented it from reverting immediately to the non-democratic order.

Chapter 2 defines the type of the political regime before and after Milosevic. We classify political system in Serbia in 1990-2003 as a form of electoral authoritarianism (a concept recently advanced by Levitsky & Way and enlarged on by Andreas Schedler). In a word, electoral authoritarianism is a regime type in which elections are held and designate the authorization to rule but the opposition cannot win unless it resorts to extra legal activities. We discuss at some length how the government both before and after 2000 interfered with elections, judiciary, parliament, and the media. While claiming that, for the largest part, the regime is Serbia after the downfall of Milosevic has remained hybrid, we yet maintain that the pre-2000 and post-2000 regimes differ to a sufficient extent. Here we differentiate between two sub-types of hybrid regimes and a form of underconsolidated democracy:

- hybrid regime that can be changed only by radical means (1990-2000);
- hybrid regime that undergoes dynamic change and is set to evolve into electoral democracy (2000-2003);

The major claim of this chapter is that the breaking point for Serbian democracy was not 2000 but rather 2003. It was after the December 2003 elections that we could no longer refer to Serbia as a form of electoral authoritarianism (hybrid regime), but rather as a form of electoral democracy (underconsolidated democracy). Although the Serbian government after 2003 still tampers with media, independence of judiciary, and parliamentary procedures, the scope of this interference has narrowed, with a clear tendency to moderate even more in the future. To explain why the Serbian electoral democracy has troubles to evolve into a consolidated democracy, we bring in the concept of defective democracy advanced by Wolfgang Merkel who defines it as a system in which certain actors—such as the military, guerrillas, militia, entrepreneurs, landlords, or multi-national corporations—take certain political domains out of the hands of democratically elected representatives, which results in domain democracy. The

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*a* This chapter is written by Dušan Pavlović.

*b* This chapter is cowritten by Dušan Pavlović (theoretical part) and Slobodan Antonić (empirical part). A shortened version of this chapter can be found in the piece titled “Serbia Before and After Democracy” written by Dušan Pavlović.
major structural setback for such type of democracy to consolidate is reserved domain, area that resists reforms despite the government’s attempt to implement them. The case in point is state security service, to which a concluding part of the chapter is devoted.

Chapter 3 discusses three things. First, in order to explain differences between two types of hybrid regimes, we discuss the mode of extrication from the hybrid regime prior to 2000. We believe that what happened on October 5, 2000 substantially reveals why the Serbian democracy remained hybrid for a while after 2000 and what generates institutional obstacles for faster consolidation after 2003.

Second, while accepting the concept of full-blown consolidation (that rests on horizontal and vertical consolidation, which is essentially a concept of institution building), we introduce the concept of underconsolidation. The reason why we bring in this concept is to be able to cover a type of regimes that do not have a sufficiently developed institutional framework necessary for consolidated democracy but that, at least, can be said to meet some democratic standards (e.g. reasonably free and fair elections). We argue that Serbian democracy after the 2003 December elections does not have a developed set of institutions that vouch for horizontal and vertical accountability but can nonetheless be said to be consolidated at a lower level in that no-one wants to rig the elections or reverse their outcome. This is important, as it may lead to full consolidation eventually.

The third contribution of this chapter is a redefinition of the concept of equilibrium necessary for the concept of democracy. Serbia is by many standards today an electoral democracy but the electoral process is not stable. The equilibrium about electoral institutions exists but its nature is ambiguous. While one group of actors may see democratic institutions in their strategic interest, another group may view them as tactical. Chapter 2 ends with a conclusion that, due to the lack of normative consensus on democratic institutions, Serbia in 2007 is an electoral democracy that might suffer from the troubles typical for electoral authoritarianism.

The previous chapters presented some evidence as to what troubles Serbia today; chapter 4 begins to address why. We want to examine to what extent and in what way nationalistic factor constitutes an obstacle for political and economic transformation. Although we agree that ethnically divided societies neither necessarily cause breakdown of democracy or nor are an necessary obstacle to democratic consolidation, we argue that ethnical cleavages in the post-communist context have proven to be the major obstacle to consolidation. (It is sometimes easily forgotten that some successful East European cases had none or very little problems with ethnic minorities and ethnic mobilization. Some other successful stories had huge minorities but have kept these minorities disfranchised or denied them some basic collective ethnic rights (including the right to citizenship), which appeared to be no obstacle for democracy promoters (such as Freedom House) to declare them champions of political transformation.)

Here we claim that the reason for slow consolidation lies squarely with the type of political cleavages that have dominated Serbian politics since the mid-1980s. The dominance of nationalism led to the symbolical character of the Serbian political culture in which voters have generally been mobilized not by the presentation of policies but

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\(^c\) This chapter is written by Dušan Pavlović. A shortened version of this chapter can be found in the piece titled “What Kind of Equilibrium is Required for Democracy.”

\(^d\) This chapter is written by Slobodan Antońić.
rather by manipulation and invocation of symbols and myths. The dominance of symbolic cleavages, in contrast to distributional cleavages, rarely leaves room for compromise and is, therefore, undermining for democracy. The dominance of such cleavages remained in the post-Milošević Serbia in which the governments had to prevalently deal with what it inherited from the Milošević era – Kosovo, the cooperation with The Hague, and the relations with Montenegro.

The first part of the chapter looks into the structure of ethnic and other identity-based cleavages that have been dominating the political scene in Serbia since the mid-1980s. The second part looks at how politics based on symbolic cleavages affects the Serbian party system. Due to the resistance of symbolical and ideological cleavages (patriots/traitors, old regime forces/reformers etc.) that override socio-economic cleavages, we define the party system of Serbia as deeply polarized with the existence of anti-system parties. The existence of anti-system parties along with deep polarization and the inability of the first two post Milosevic governments to remove the symbolical issues from the political agenda in seven years is what undermines the weak foundation for electoral democracy in Serbia today and why electoral democracy keeps failing to consolidate.

Chapter 5 concludes by bringing together the three key findings from chapters 1-4. First, we found that the role of institutions and culture are critical for understanding the dynamics between actors and structures in the post-communist Serbia but also to help explain major independent variable which is dealt with in chapter 4. Second, we identify the regime type in Serbia as a combination of electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy by pointing at the absence of normative consensus and the phenomenon of reserved domain. Third, we find that in the post-Milošević Serbia symbolical cleavages trump distributional cleavages, and that symbolical cleavages generate anti-system parties which adversely affect the creation of the normative consensus and consolidation of democracy.

\* The concluding chapter is written by Dušan Pavlović.