

UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation

A.Y. 2019/2020

(In)Stability over Democracy

National Populism, Media Manipulation and Creeping
Authoritarianism in Serbia

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Abstract

The phenomena of populism, media manipulation and authoritarianism in the context of Serbia are interwoven on several different levels. The author perceives them both as political and sociological phenomena, including human rights implications and consequences they have for a society as a whole. While populism has only recently been recognized as one of the most important challenges for present-day democracy worldwide, in Serbia it has almost always been an intrinsic element of political culture. In Serbia, populism is primarily manifested through anti-pluralism, anti-globalism and glorification of the people. While populism originates as an answer to weaknesses of representative democracy, in case of transitional countries, cracks of the unconsolidated democratic regime open the space for a more radical form of political style – demagoguery. Although incumbent Serbian leadership has left the nationalistic ideology in the past, narratives about the national identity, superiority of the nation and emphasis on its cultural heritage are still dominant in political discourse. Moreover, during the last 8 years under rule of Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia has taken a path disturbingly reminiscent of Milosevic's era, characterized by strong grip on the institutions, instrumentalization of the media and the exploitation of "people's voice". The Serbian parliamentary elections of 2020 resulted with a landslide victory of the ruling party, finally revealing the veil of the illusionary pluralistic democratic system and exposing the autocratic rule of the President Vucic. Besides, the government's turbulent and irresponsible management of the pandemic crisis, multilayered human rights implications, and the shift in foreign policy, make this research even more pertinent. The political and social analyses show strong dependency between the populist governance, media manipulation and creeping authoritarianism, and point out the indispensable character of the right to freedom of expression in addressing the aforementioned political combination. The author advocates for a more farsighted reaction from the international community, and emphasis on freeing the media from government's grip instead of prioritizing stability at the cost of strongman politics. Finally, the results of this research culminate in the need to understand the impact of populism on human rights and democracy, both through political and media lens, and underline that efforts aiming to guarantee an unbiased and pluralistic media are necessary in order to avoid societal polarization and consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Keywords: populism; democracy; media manipulation; nationalism; stabilitocracy; authoritarianism; transition; freedom of expression; human rights; journalism

Word count: This thesis has 24,748 words. This includes footnotes but excludes the abstract, table of abbreviations, table of contents and works cited.

Table of Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe Countries
CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DS	Democratic Party
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
EFJ	Regional European Federation of Journalists
Ex-Yu	Ex (Former) Yugoslavia
ICTY	International Court for the Former Yugoslavia
IFJ	The International Federation of Journalists
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PBS	Public Broadcast Service
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UN	United Nations
WB	Western Balkans

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"In November last year, windows and doors opened on that room of the political system in which we were imprisoned for seven or eight years. Some fresh air squeezed into it, through those windows. Serbia woke up from its winter dream, in the midst of winter. Our message to this Parliament is: do not allow yourselves to close those windows, let the fresh air remain common in Serbia, let us include all those who inhaled that fresh air of freedom for eighty eight days together with you, do not close the windows because thus we will shut the windows to Serbia and we will suffocate in such Serbia if its windows remain closed."

— Zoran Djindjic¹

¹ From Zoran Djindjic's speech held at Democratic Party's Assembly, 23 May 1997 (*Hipoteka* 2013).

Introduction

"Populism is on the rise" has rapidly become one of the most common titles or introductory sentences of political and social commentary texts all over the world. Often entangled with equally infamous malaises such as clientelism, kleptocracy, or demagoguery (Bakic 2013) and controversially paralleled with certain aspects of mass democracy (Grdesic 2019), populism is indubitably the nucleus of contemporary political affairs and, as such, has become an unavoidable component of the study of democratization. Therefore, explaining the democratic backslide in particular regions and across the globe is dependent on a discussion of far-right populism, authoritarianism, and strongman politics (Lavric and Bieber 2020).

Considering that a broad group of observers and analysts initially tended to view populism as a healthy corrective for a dysfunctional democratic system that lost the voice of the people and failed to reflect their genuine interests (Spiegeleire et al. 2017), the phenomenon ironically represents the self-destructive or self-contradictory nature of democracy itself. Dutch social scientist Cas Mudde defined populism as an "illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism" (2015), a premise that is a natural derivation of democracy and which — exactly for that reason — can be lethal for democracy. Having both components, both democratic and authoritarian, populism continues to be plagued by definitional issues and ambiguities (Taggart 2000; Laclau 2005; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

Contrary to the question of its nature and definition, the ubiquity of the phenomenon was never questioned (Mounk and Foa 2018; Abramowitz and Repucci 2018). The peril of the anti-liberal movements in Europe and the United States throughout the last decade lies in the emboldening of their counterparts across the world in following the populist pattern (Freedom House 2019), which — depending on the level of democracy in question — can easily turn into a far more menacing trend, that of authoritarianism (Varga 2018).

Contemporary right-wing populism is to a great extent a legacy of what was once defined as nationalism. In line with this, many political scientists find this contemporary cross-border societal and political movement to be a mixture of these earlier precedents, including nationalism, particularism, and sovereignism, and thus explain its accelerating rise with the elements of economic insecurity, globalization, cultural alienation, and

disillusionment with the ideological convergence within "the establishment." the core nemesis of populists (Spiegeleire 2017).

Aside from a number of complications within studies of this phenomenon, there is one great contradiction to the already weakly-established concept of populism: populists were not supposed to last because staying in power makes them the "dangerous elite" against which the "real people" are fighting — the very core dichotomy that the ideology is founded upon. Nevertheless, populists do last. Tellingly, this nuisance can be explained by taking into account populism's symbiotic and ambivalent nature. The ideational approach refers to populism as a thin ideology when paralleled to hard or thick ones such as fascism, nationalism, or liberalism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) that can adopt various forms and combine with other political and societal ideas and doctrines. But, what happens when the the thick and the thin are mixed and matched? Is right-wing populism just a politically correct term for populist nationalism? Does populism essentially base itself on media capture and propaganda? Taking these premises into account, could populism be treated as a thick strategy for even thicker ideologies?

Not only has the beginning of the 21st century been characterized as the golden age of populism, it has also been marked by a deterioration in press freedom across the globe, and, moreover, the year 2020 is the high point of the free press crisis (Snowden, RSF webinar 2020). Press freedom is waning in strong and weak democracies alike, proving that even the strongest bastions of democratic societies are not immune to populist governments and their manipulative strategies. Provided that the media is supposed to perform a role of democracy's watchdog and guardian of citizens' rights and freedoms, the loss of the independence and credibility of the press can be detrimental to democratic sustainability. The media has been historically misused for different purposes, ranging from revolutionary achievements, such as the end of slavery, to, on the other hand, radio propaganda that gave support to the Nazi regime. Aside from the unchallenged power it holds, media manipulation is an indispensable element of populism since it ensures the bond between the supply — populist content in the form of political discourse and sensational news — and the demand — citizens as the receivers of the content (Dragicevic Sesis and Nikolic 2019).

While democracies across the globe are being threatened by the harrowing dangers of right-wing populism, Serbia stands alone with its interrupted democratization process and a previously tested ground for populism *gone wild*. A country with a historically strong affiliation for dictatorial leaders, a downward trend in press freedom and civil

liberties (RSF 2020; Freedom House 2020), and a one-party regime resulting in the outcome of the most recent elections, Serbia is on the verge of slipping into authoritarianism and, as such, presents an urgent case study in the field of human rights and democratization.

As nationalism, populism, and democratic decline tend to form a symbiotic relationship (Bonikowski 2017; 2019) that produces authoritarian rule, this noxious mix is far from unfamiliar to Southeastern Europe. For countries of the Western Balkans (WB), ethnic nationalism in the 1990s was naturally advocated or manipulated by totalitarian leaders (Gordy 1999; Gagnon 2004). Despite their respective transitions, none of these countries are considered to be consolidated democracies but rather hybrid regimes, flawed² and defective democracies, according to the Democracy Indexes of Bertelsmann Transformation, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit.

The reelection of the corrupt and populist government in Serbia in 2020 demonstrates a societal "disease," a political depression that results in a propensity for demagoguery. The Serbian population has lost patience in anticipated reforms that are in effect long and exhausting transitions that are likely to outlast the current generation, and hence they embraced – or simply reconciled with – what was seemingly the easiest way out of the burden of collective responsibility — one man rule (Varga 2018). However, the "one man, one party, one state" choice – in addition to a number of restrictions on various freedoms, most notably that of freedom of expression and press – backfired on multiple levels, including the protection of the most basic and urgent human rights during the current pandemic crisis, whereas *one party* and *one man* prioritized consolidation of power over hundreds of innocent lives.

Research Aims and Scope of the Thesis:

Despite the prevalence of populism and the increasing interest in political development in the region of the WB, this topic has not received enough attention due to the prioritization of the "frozen" status of Kosovar independence and the focus on building a stable and peaceful society in post-conflict areas, while largely neglecting the erosive anti-democratic efforts by the incumbent leaders and their governments. Moreover, particularly due to the popularity of the phenomenon of populism and the rising misuse of media in its pursuit, careful and particular case studies related to this concept are all

² The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index considers all of the Western Balkans countries hybrid regimes, except Serbia, which qualifies as flawed democracy.

the more important. This paper aims to contribute to three bodies of scholarly work: (1) political sociology (2) the literature on populism and democratization, and (3) the literature on the WB, specifically Serbia.

This paper will discuss and analyze the underlying reasons for the aforementioned phenomena in Serbia, examine how they reflect characteristics of the country's undemocratic and nationalistic past, and assess the media's complicity in democratic backsliding. By drawing parallels between the concepts of nationalism, populism, and media manipulation, this paper will try to draw conclusions on their interdependence and pose the hypothesis that if the media is the closest aide to the Serbian populist government and a vehicle for a slide into authoritarianism, could it also be the very antidote to it?

Therefore, several questions arise that will be addressed in this paper, the most significant of which are the following:

- (i) Is media the indispensable factor in nationalistic propaganda and populist movements and do these phenomena inevitably lead to authoritarian regime?
- (ii) How is the current health crisis exploited by populist government and how to address its severe human rights implications?
- (iii) If media is the force that gives the populist movements their momentum, could its freedom and independence serve as an antidote to creeping authoritarianism?

This thesis aims, through an in-depth analysis of the aforementioned movements and elements in the context of Serbia, to draw conclusions and make suggestions on how to address and mitigate the accelerating rise of populism on the Serbian political scene, its manifold implications for human rights, and the serious threat it imposes on the country's process of democratization.

Research Methodology:

The paper will rely on a mixture of methods, including qualitative and interpretive analysis. Using a multi-dimensional approach, my research will combine a variety of sources, ranging from political and sociological studies and scholarly articles through surveys and reports of NGOs, independent research institutes, and international organizations to field-based research. Field-based research will include analyses of the

mass media in the country of the case study, qualitative interviews with country's citizens, and formal and informal discussions with civil society and media representatives.

Most studies of populism rely largely or even exclusively on the supply side – that is, the discourses of populist leaders and parties. However, it is important to note that the people themselves — the demand side — represent a fundamental aspect of the research of populist movements (Grdesic 2019). That said, first-hand research of the thesis comprises twenty structured interviews conducted with citizens from across Serbia, taking into consideration age, gender, and ethnic balance. The content of the interviews, as well as the information gathered from discussion with CSO representatives, will nevertheless not be fully representative. Input gathered from qualitative interviews will ensure that both aspects of the phenomenon are taken into consideration and will additionally contribute to help navigate the discussion throughout the paper. However, it is important to note that the global pandemic crisis poses certain difficulties and limitations to field-research, and thereby certain segments of the research were adapted to the current crisis and conducted online.

*

The thesis is organized into five different sections that are both complementary and overlapping in many domains. Each part will focus on the specific object of the research, but the role of the media as the central element of the thesis question will be considered throughout the entire paper.

The first part of the paper will explore the problematic nature of populism and the ambivalence of its definition and understanding as well as its relationship with nationalism and its dependence on the media as a means of implementation. After a brief overview of the relationship between these concepts and their impact on the process of transition and democratization, I will introduce the phenomenon in the context of Serbia through a concise political, religious, and social background of the country.

The following section will go further and discuss the specificities of the particular breed of national populism that emerged and remains in Serbia through a qualitative analysis of the incumbent president's political style, domestic society's response to his populist governance and authoritarian tendencies, as well as the vicious circle of support among

populist leaders across the world and specifically the role of Serbia on the global political scene today.

In the third part, this paper will discuss Serbia's populist governance during the present-day health crisis, the human rights implications, and the shift in foreign policy that places the country in a unique position of balancing between the democratic West and the autocratic East. The government's controversial response to the pandemic — from a severe state of emergency measures through discrepancies in the management between the pre- and post-election period, to the anger that the mismanagement provoked among citizens — plays a great role in the potential future of the country's politics and, as such, presents a pertinent topic to this research.

The fourth section will be devoted to the general role of the media in a democratic society and both the potential and the threat it can present when manipulated by an undemocratic government. The chapter will take into account the worrying status quo of the media globally, with a more in-depth discussion of the media manipulation in Serbia throughout the last decades and the role it played in the rising authoritarianism in the region.

Finally, if the media proves to be the motor that drives populism and the force that gives it momentum, could it also serve as the means to counteract it? The fifth and final part of the paper will discuss the role of international community in safeguarding democratic standards, the European Union's internal crisis of values and external role in fostering peace and stability in the Balkans, and whether there are antidotes to the rising authoritarianism as a result of right-wing populism in Serbia and elsewhere. As the paper proposes a hypothesis that the key mechanism propelling populism forward is the media, considering the findings of the interviews, analyses of political rhetoric, and supporting theories, I will attempt to draw conclusions and propose alternatives to combating the downward trend in the process of democratization in Serbia that could possibly serve as mechanisms to counter populist and authoritarian movements elsewhere, particularly in the case of unconsolidated or flawed democracies.

Part One

The Tale of Serbia: the Demons of Nationalism, Authoritarianism and Populism

While the anti-liberal populist movements in the West, namely Western Europe and the United States, are widely characterized by the exclusionary national identity reflected in hostility towards immigrants and minorities and the rebuff of constitutional checks on the will of the majority (Abramowitz 2019), antidemocratic leaders in Central Europe and the Balkans have a slightly different agenda. Emboldened by their counterparts in the wealthy West and the powerful East, and fueled by the remnants of their countries' undemocratic pasts, populist leaders in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have manipulated their party politics depending on the people's needs — known as "catch-all" parties or big tent ideology — all while continuing to work methodically to deny critical voices a platform in the media or civil society.

The story about the merging of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism in Serbia dates back to the period of Yugoslavia, and in order to situate the case within the frames of the contemporary political landscape and outline the dynamics of the phenomena as both an intense outburst and a lingering legacy, a short, yet comprehensive analysis on the region's complex political, social, and religious context is necessary.

1.1. Background

"The Balkans produce more history than they can consume."

— Winston Churchill

Paradoxically, the appeal of the former Yugoslavia as the case study in the fields of international relations, political and social sciences, has drastically increased with the outbreak of the war in 1991 and the dissolution of the state of Yugoslavia. This infamously gained popularity has produced hundreds of books, articles and various research which are relevant even to this day. However, the broad interest in the historical and political background of the "state that withered away" (Jovic 2009) overshadowed and further convoluted the distinct storylines of the seven successor states³ of Yugoslavia, resulting in extremely biased, emotionally charged and mutually conflicting sides of the truth.

³ After declaring its independence in 2008, the Republic of Kosovo has received 115 diplomatic recognitions as an independent state, of which 15 have been withdrawn. Thus, Kosovo is referred here to as the seventh successor state of Yugoslavia.

The manner in which Yugoslavia failed to survive paved the way for what followed, and this is why in order to understand the contemporary political phenomenon in Serbia, it is necessary to get acquainted with what and who happened before and after the collapse of Serbia's mother country, Yugoslavia. In respect to the Serbian historical narrative, which largely dominates the tale of Yugoslavia, it is of crucial importance for developing the reader's critical and objective perspective to this paper, to break down the intricate nexus of Serbian history, politics, culture and society.

The period of more than 400 years under the rule of Ottoman Empire, had and still does have a great impact on Serbia and its nation. Ottoman occupation of the region was marked by both forced and natural process of islamization, assimilation and adaptation of Turkish customs, cuisine and language, remnants of which are still largely present. Tellingly, this national experience awoke resistance to these influences and strengthened the "ethos" of the Serb identity and fortified its close connection with religion of Orthodox Christian Church. Therefore, the most vocalized attitude was against the Muslim Albanian community based on Serbian urge to reclaim Kosovo as the site of the famous defeat in a 1389 battle, which will be discussed later in this paper in the context of mythicism and the idea of self-victimization used in populist narratives. This notion furthered the religious rivalry, and gave birth to the idea of the Orthodox Serbia, similar to Greek's tendencies after its breakaway from Ottoman Empire. Parallel to the movement of *enosis* in Greece, once linguistically based idea of Pan-Serbism to unionize all Slavoserbian people culminated in irredentist movement known as "Greater Serbia", celebrated by a number of prominent public figures to the day, and instrumentalized by many political leaders, including ICTY convicted war criminals, such as Vojislav Seselj, whose former political disciple Aleksandar Vucic holds a presidency of the Republic of Serbia today. There is an unspoken and, sporadically and as a method of populist leaders, also spoken, understanding that any ethnic, ie. exclusively orthodox Serb anywhere in the world is a Serb who is welcomed and protected by the state of Serbia. This notion is prevalent in Serbia's policies towards its kin minorities, ie. ethnic Serbs in neighboring countries. Along with the poor implementation of legal protection and adherence to European standards, this narrow yet fully accepted concept of what a Serb citizen is supposed to embody is what persists to create discrepancies within multicultural Serbian society and general discomfort among minorities. According to a survey conducted in 2017 by the Institute of Social Sciences, absolute majority of Serbian population agreed with the statement that minorities need to assimilate to Serbian customs and almost half (41%) said that national minorities are abusing the rights they're given (Lutovac and Basic 2017).

Notwithstanding, Serbian national ideology was inclusive at first, embracing the neighbor countries and Serbo-Croatian speaking populations, as contrary to Croats and Slovenes, who were determined to be perceived as separate and independent, emphasizing the linguistic distinctions as well. As Serbs were the first in the Balkans to attain autonomy from Ottoman Empire, their national identity and pride taken in being both the war heroes and the victims, only grew stronger over time.

However, the occupation and liberation from Ottoman Empire were not the only historical events which triggered or rather deepened the already existing dangerous national ideologies of the region. Breaking away from the "Ottoman sea" left Serbia in a vulnerable position between the two empires and the two rivals, Germany on one side, Russia on the other (Stojadinovic 2017). Moreover, series of escalations known as the July crisis of 1914, starting with the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in the name of irredentist movement "Greater Serbia", which was and still is widely believed to be the ultimate cause of the World War I, granted Serbia with an unfavorable reputation.

The inclusion before mentioned, however, was a mere product of Serbian vanity and superior attitude obtained by considering themselves to be the leaders and the liberators of the the fellow Slavs. This pride encouraged Serbia to shed its "ethnically-clean nationalism" for the grander of Yugoslavia (Keridis 2008). However, Serbia's strident and ethnocentric inclinations towards using Yugoslavia as the vehicle for its domination spread like a virus, and soon enough it was responded by Croatian national opposition. Being unable to tone down the atmosphere of resentment and rigid national ideologies, the first Yugoslav state (1918-41) collapsed in World War II and left myriad of unresolved conflicts (Pescic 1996).

As opposed to the first attempt of Yugoslav state, Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, subsequently renamed in Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia managed to endure longer and suppress the menacing internal clashes of nationalistic ideological nature. Through pursuing the policy of neutrality, the state enjoyed a favorable and profitable position during the Cold War. However, with the death of the benevolent leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the Yugoslav economy started to collapse and the ethnic nationalist ideologies which had been dormant for decades arose. The forty-five years of "brotherhood and unity" came to result in enmity and partition (Hayden 1995).

A salient component of Serbian nationalism is indubitably religion. Therefore, in order to understand the complexity and specificity of the region, nationalism in Western Balkans should be classified as ethnic, ie. ethno-nationalism, nationalistic ideology

based on "a common language, a common faith, and a common ethnic ancestry" (Muller 2008). Although it is often argued that it was not religious identities which incited conflicts in the region, religion played a crucial role in widening gaps between the fragments of the multi-ethnic and religiously pluralistic Yugoslav society, and in shaping nationalistic ideologies, which persist even today. The reawakening of the nationhoods based on state religions formed three ethno-confessional blocks, Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croat and Muslim Bosnians, and the collective identity which endured for two decades under Titoist "godless communism" was annulled. Ethnoreligious nationality which used to be largely defied until the early 1990s became the basis for the armed conflicts and atrocities which took place in the 1990s (Perica 2002).

The correlation of nation with ethnicity, and the identification of ethnicity with religion, has predominantly shaped Serbia's alliances, relations and politics. Besides Russo-Serbian brotherhood which dates back to 19th century, Serbia had found allies in other Slavic and Eastern Orthodox fellow countries, like Greece and Ukraine. On the other side, as a result of the involvement of foreign combatants in Yugoslav Wars, it found itself on the unfavorable side of Germany and Vatican as Croatia's diplomatic supporters, and international jihadists who joined the the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Subsequently, both diplomatic and military interventions from the West during Kosovo conflict, defined Serbian diplomacy. Despite maintaining its candidacy for EU accession and possibility of joining NATO, Serbia's reliance remains largely in the East and strong ties with authoritarian leaders.

Despite the transition which came with the abolishment of Milosevic regime at the turn of the century, the unwillingness and inability to reconcile with the past has made the country stagger on its way to Euro-integrations and stalled the process of democratization. With the assassination of the first democratic prime minister, Zoran Djindjic in 2003, the process of democratization has taken upon a slow rhythm, and the unsuccessful reforms of subsequent democrats paved the way for the right-wing populism to thrive, challenging core democratic principles and reviving the ugly past of the nationalist sentiments.

In the past decade Serbia has experienced a shift from democratic pro-European leadership to the right-wing radicals, fruitless attempts of Brussels agreement on normalizing the relations with Kosovo, worrying switch from "free" through "partly free country" to a "hybrid regime" (Freedom House 2020) in a matter of years, and a number of retrogressive trends in domain of the rule of law. Under a facade of parliamentary democracy with competitive multi-party elections lies a hazardous and patient regime-

to-be, characterized by charismatic leader, restricted freedoms, eroded political rights and brazen control of the media – in many ways, resembling the one under Milosevic's rule.

1.2. The Toxic Relationship Between Populism and Democracy

"In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme."
— Aristotle, "Politics"

Recent developments in global politics have gone neither unnoticed nor undermined by the intelligentsia, and the era we live in is broadly considered to be an unprecedented crisis of democracy. Strong authoritarian states, such as Russia and China, are spreading both their economic and political influence at a concerning speed (Varga 2018), and the West, the "imposer" of democratic values, is struggling to find its way back to stability after an array of crises since the turn of the century. The dominant factor in this new global politico-social environment recognized by various scholars is populism, which is ironically perceived both as an anti-democratic strategy or activity and a logical derivative of the democratic system (Mudde 2004; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008).

As Levitsky and Way argue, most of the failing democratic regimes were actually just illusory democracies, namely ephemeral "democratic moments" that were bound to fail when confronted with any type of crisis. They add that there are two factors which triggered the recession of democracy: the exhausted democratization wave of the 2000s, which encompassed a number of post-communist states, and the negligence of the societal, cultural, and economic obstacles followed by the fallacious presumption that "democratization could happen anywhere in the world" (Levitsky and Way 2015: 53–55). This argument can be brought to the foreground when trying to understand why and how authoritarianism snuck back into countries that were under the spell of democracy for decades.

The meaning of populism has been debated for over fifty years, and despite the unanimity on its non-definable nature, one thing stands out: populism is regarded as self-evident. What makes this people-driven approach to politics so menacing is that it drives in and furthers the cracks of democratic procedures and leads to an erosion of already fragile democratic principles. While populist aspirations ironically do correspond to those of democracy, there is also a seed of totalitarianism contained within populism (D'Eramo 2013). German philosopher Jan-Werner Muller explores this notion in his book *What is Populism?* by approving the definition presented by fiction

writer William Gibson that populism is "a nightmare state of democracy" (2016). A slippery concept, both ill-defined and overused, populism is not only present in anti-liberal political environments, but it is a permanent shadow of representative politics.

Nationalism was conducted similarly in the past. Yet, for its explicitly negative connotation, it has become a dangerous ideology to hold, especially in *democratic* Europe. For this reason, right-wing populist leaders cleverly eschew the exclusively nationalist label in the character of their parties and instead base their political agendas of building a nation-state on less conspicuous elements of anti-establishment, anti-migrant, or anti-elite policies — the *popular* "what the people want" notion that is always on the verge of turning into demagoguery and autocratic rule.

1.3. Populism in Serbia

"We are not angels. Nor are we the devils you have made us out to be."
— Slobodan Milosevic⁴

It was right around the time when something that no preachers of democratic values could have expected to take place in the very cradle of democracy, the United States, happened, or when the citizens of a land sitting on two continents, Turkey, were forced to watch the unprecedented loss of their country as it was (Temelkuran 2018), or when the embodiment of stability and power, namely the European Union, lost an essential member state due to a separatist ideology that prompted Brexit — that populism as prominent movement gained a spotlight in world politics. However, the reality is that the phenomenon of populism has existed and endured long before these tragic failures of democracy. In the case of Serbia, it was so prevalent throughout the history that there was hardly any political choice left that had not been stained with populist brand (Stojanovic 2017). From the Communist era and the benevolence of the workers' rights movement under Titoism⁵ through unscrupulous mass mobilizations and propaganda manipulated by war criminals in the 1990s to the 2012 election campaign and the Machiavellians plots dominating since then, the tendency of the Serbian political scene as well as the general public towards populism has become indisputably intrinsic to society. Many Serbian sociologists and historians argue that Serbia set a precedent for national populism through frames of radicalism and socialism long before it took over the rest of the Europe and beyond (Stojanovic 2017; Varga 2018).

⁴ From Slobodan Milošević's last presidential speech, 2 Oct 2000 ("Slobodan Milosevic: Proracanstvo..." 2016).

⁵ Titoism refers to policies and principles advocated by the former Yugoslav statesman Tito.

The emergence of a failed nationalist radical party that changed its clothes into a progressive party overnight (Serbian Radical Party to Serbian Progressive Party) was a breath of *fresh air* that the West supported for the political versatility of the region and functioned as a white flag that the population secretly wished to raise after years of exhausting democratic efforts. After the victorious overthrow of the Milosevic regime and the short-lived hope in a democratic future that withered away with the assassination of the Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003, there was only an aftertaste of the spirit of resistance and ambition among both Serbian society and the democratic leadership itself.

The current regime in Serbia is highly centralized around one party and one man, which maintain a tight grip on the media and judicial system and constant pressure on squashing civic liberties. While Milosevic gave the people something solid to hate and in return they gave him their votes (Temelkuran 2018), Aleksandar Vucic gave them a way out of the failing fight and the feeling of being mediocre or below mediocre through the promise of economic betterment, a righting of his predecessors' wrongdoings.

What is pervasive at the time of writing is an atmosphere of defeated politics — for the first time the opposition gave up before the elections. Paradoxically, even a large part of the coalition that initially planned to boycott the elections as a form of protesting the authoritarian rule and the unfair electoral system raised a white flag by conforming to the undemocratic pre-election atmosphere and participating in parliamentary elections, which President of Serbian Academy of Art and Science Vladimir Kostic called a "mere ballot casting which has to be done" rather than elections (Kostic 2020). This lack of political probity is a long-standing menace to Serbian society and an obstacle to any form of enduring resistance that would bring relevant changes or halt the downward trends.

For a more accurate analysis of the current political developments in Serbia, it can be helpful to put aside the generic label of populism for a minute and borrow the idea of Pavlovic (2016), Bieber (2018), and other prominent scholars who argue that the populist leaders in the Western Balkans are better defined as stabilitocrats (Primatrova and Deimel 2012). As Pavlovic asserts, stabilitocracy is a regime of persistent undemocratic practices to which the "West has turned the blind eye" for the sake of regional stability (Pavlovic 2016). Since the introduction of the multi-party system in 1990, Serbia has had 15 governments. The overthrow of Milosevic in 2000 put an end to a bloody era in the region, but hopes for the free, democratic, and European future for

Serbia were crushed shortly thereafter with the assassination of the PM Zoran Djindjic. Since 2012, there has actually been in effect the same government led by the same man, poorly disguised under different titles (Djajic 2017). When that same man, who has concentrated nearly all political power around himself, won the presidential elections in 2017, youth found their spirit — not in hope but in anger — and went out to the streets to raise their voices about media capture, the unequal treatment of candidates, pressure on voters, and the lack of free elections. Years of sporadic protests were met with denials and accusations from officials and brought no change. However, the outcome of the elections, despite the number of irregularities, demonstrated a sharp polarization of society among those entirely alienated from politics and disaffected with their available choices and those who vote for personal, tangible benefits or out of fear (Djajic 2017). The crowd that was once fearless and ready to confront the most scrupulous war criminal in the nation's history was gradually deflated over years of democratic stagnation and systematic oppression, leading to a depressing aftertaste in a society left with no other choice. This pattern has continued to this day, reflected in the lowest voter turnout since the beginning of the multi-party system in the country in the 2020 parliamentary elections at only 49%⁶ (Brankovic and Tepavac 2020).

However, aside from this illustration of democracy on the surface, the regime of stable autocratic management is not completely denounced among Serbian society. When populists cease to make an effort to disguise and manipulate the masses and pass on this role to the media under their control, the true danger of creeping authoritarianism emerges (Bieber 2020). A power grab is not a one-way street in the country of Serbia but rather a bilateral agreement, forced or voluntary, between the strong leader and the politically disheartened population. A survey conducted by the Center for Political Research and Public Opinion in 2017 shortly after the presidential elections demonstrated the worrying degree of the society's tendency towards authoritarianism, namely that 26,7% of survey respondents agreed that Serbia needs a strong leader rather than a multi-party parliament, while 53,5% said that democracy is just "lots of talk and little work" (Lutovac 2017). However, current events show what one of the interviewees told me prior to the elections regarding his view of the present political atmosphere in the country:

"Our society has always been dynamic. From the complete apathy to revolution is a fine line. It wouldn't be surprised to see the people rise in the

⁶ It is noteworthy that according to in-depth analysis conducted by CRTA (Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability) election observation mission pointed out that serious irregularities contributed to around four percent higher turnout. For a full report, see: cрта.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CRTA-Preliminary-Report-Election-Day-2020.pdf

middle of pandemic for being fed up with the kleptocratic government and a one-man regime." (Kocan 2020)

Given the undemocratic political culture, underdeveloped institutions, and almost constant atmosphere of political and economic crises, populist parties in Serbia could not be served with a more fertile ground for power grab. With the help of the media, which either for reasons of the entertainment appeal of such figures, financial dependence, or political influence choose not to defy, demagogic leaders have no obstacles in suppressing pluralism, silencing critical thought, and limiting media freedoms. Treating institutions as personal services instead of public goods, the populism of today, just as the Serbian populist episode of the 20th century, demonstrates its inability to play a remedial or "corrective" role in a democracy (Spiegeleire et al. 2017; Lutovac 2017).

The infamous image of the right-wing populism comes from the fear of the re-awoken nationalism. Although not as explicit, nor as belligerent as it was in its past manifestations, Serbian nationalism still plays a great role in shaping political and social landscape of the country. Therefore, in order to move further with the analysis of the present phenomena of populism, authoritarianism and media manipulation, it is essential to discuss the origins and the implications of Serbian nationalism.

1.4. Nationalism and Serbia: Origins, Causes, Content and Effects

"We are not angels, nor saints. But when compared to them (Croatsians), we are both angels and saints."

—Aleksandar Vucic

While many scholars believe that the indispensable characteristic of a strong and stable nation is nationalism, others argue that it is one of, if not the, most significant threat to democracy and the democratization process. Certain authors, such as Hazony and Lowry, go as far as to praise the idea of nationalism as the essential tool in protecting liberty and argue that the global political stability depends on whether nations can embrace nationalism and learn to cultivate their traditions, culture, and creed without the interference by other nations. Yoram Hazony, in his book *Virtue of Nationalism* (2018), argues that the concept of nationalism is not correlated with ethnicity, racism, or fascism. Similarly, Rich Lowry's *The Case for Nationalism* (2019) defines nationalism as a "natural devotion to their home and their country" and argues that, as such, it can only be beneficial to the nation's development. Nevertheless, there are historical cases that oppose the idea of nationalism as a positive tool to navigate and defend liberty and democracy and, on the contrary, demonstrate how nationalism undermines basic

democratic principles and, if let loose, can be equated with racism, ethnic supremacy, militarism, and fascism (Holmes 2019; Sugar 1995).

In order not to dismiss any of the mentioned theories, it is important to make a distinction between nationalism and national identity. Fukuyama in "We The People" in his book *Identity* (2018) contends that a national identity is crucial for establishing a stable entity and that the main cause for failed states is weak or a lack of sense of national identity, as demonstrated in many Middle East countries, including Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Furthermore, he argues that states with a well-grounded national identity, such as China, South Korea, and Japan, are quick to recover even after major obstacles, such as occupations or civil wars (Fukuyama 2018).

The idea that settling internal questions of identity hinders a state's process of growth, particularly economic, would be impossible to dismiss in the case of the former Yugoslavia and especially Serbia, a country with over 20 national minorities and a deeply-rooted issue of national identity. There are two possible conclusions to draw from this perspective. One is that the issue of national identity was the core obstacle for Yugoslavia and, as such, served as the *X factor* in the violent dissolution of the federation. The second is that weak national identity has become a burden to the republics which was carried on after the breakup of their union and continues to stand in the way of their sustained development.

1.4.1. Historical Overview: Serbia as the Infamous War Criminal of the Balkans

However, immediately prior to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, former federal states returned to their own national consciousness that had been relatively dormant for decades and reasserted their identities in the most accessible way at the moment — in hatred against the enemy nation. In order to fortify this notion and give it a meaning larger than simply the opposition to neighbors/enemies, nations underwent/submitted to techniques of memory control to selective episodes of history and highly mythologized notions of heroism and victimhood. Ergo, ethno-populisms proliferated in the ruins of Yugoslavia (D'Eramo 2013).

Serbian nationalism is still today fueled by the mythologized sacrifice that is most conspicuous in the Kosovo narrative. In 1389 at Kosovo Polje, 30.000 Serbs who defended Serbia's ancient empire were defeated by the Ottoman ruler Murad I, a story that later became a substantial feature of Serbian nationalist ideology and a deciding

factor in the fate of Serbian politics related to the territory of Kosovo. Furthermore, the various interpretations of the Kosovo Polje Battle created the sense of spiritual superiority of the "heavenly people" that continues to be part of the national identity to this day. Serbian right-wing leaders have historically exploited social and national discontent and transformed it into a hegemonic ideology fueled by the fear of being threatened, oppressed, and hated in the region and elsewhere (Pesic 1996). This notion polarized the societies of the former Yugoslav states along religious, economic, and cultural grounds — ethnic identities thus became a "matter of life and death" (Jovic 2009). The aforementioned mythological attachment to Kosovo is the heart of Serbian territorial politics and an impediment to a more democratic and European society even today.

The legacy of the Balkan wars, Serbia's involvement in World War I, and the memories of the 1990s conflicts — which are still too recent for the world to set aside and still too unresolved for the victims and perpetrators to bury the hatchet — have painted a picture of Serbia as the infamous nationalist and war criminal of the Balkans. The label revives the feelings of societal insecurity and inferiority from the time of the Ottoman Empire, which, if exploited well enough, can easily be manipulated by a man who offers to take the people out of this "forever demonized" portrayal. By tapping social and national discontent in the republic, populist leaders from Svetozar Markovic through Milosevic to incumbent President Vucic, have exploited the notion of nationhood for their own despotic ambitions.

*

In the absence of nationalism as an effective mobilizing ideology, it has become a resort to turn to in order to delegitimize criticism and opposition. During the mass anti-government protests in Belgrade amidst the pandemic crisis, the President and SNS officials as well as pro-government media outlets labeled the protests as fascist, pro-Russian right-wing, and anti-EU movements (Vuksanovic 2020). This shift in propaganda from traditionally blaming Western intelligence for dissident demonstrations to a willingness to scapegoat even Russia demonstrates the hypocrisy behind the government's foreign policy and Serbia's double-faced coronavirus diplomacy, which will be discussed later in the paper. Nevertheless, nationalism as an indispensable element of the right-wing populism is not absent in the incumbent party's politics, but rather disguised into a less radical elements of anti-globalism and identity politics.

Part Two

The Exceptionalism of Serbian National Populism

One of the most significant problems with the concept of populism is its overly broad understanding of it (Mounk and Foa 2018; Abramowitz and Repucci 2018). With the accelerated popularity and omnipresence of this phenomenon in contemporary political studies, polemics, and writings, it has become subject to an extremely generalized notion. It is for this reason, among others, that it is difficult to identify and address certain aspects of the populist movement in one country, specifically the underlying factors for its emergence. This is why it is important to treat a certain populist movement within the realms of the society it occurs while at the same time taking a global perspective into consideration, and hence this paper deals with the specific form of populism and its effects on a specific type of democracy, namely the transitional system in post-communist Serbian society. As it emerges in various ideological flavors, populist movements tend to be dependent on the regional context and, as such, are often successors of past ideologies.

Previously, I discussed the origins of Serbian nationalism and its implications for the society, along with the populist and autocratic episodes of past and present leaders. However, in order to understand how nationalist and populist actors threaten democratic values or hinder the performance of transitional democracies, it is essential to break down the nature of the phenomenon specific to the context in question (Spasojevic 2019, 64). From discussing how Serbian nationalism is transfused by populism and vice versa through a careful analysis of the present day ruling party's politics to the role of the citizenry within it, this part of the paper will direct the reader to a better understanding of the concept of "populism the Serbian way" (Stojanovic 2017).

Aside from the basic definition of nationalism and its presence as such, there is an idiosyncratic form of national pride among the Serbian population that goes beyond broadly established connotations and transcends the boundaries of "hunger for power in the name of love for the nation and hatred for the other nations" (Sugar 1995). The underdogs of the world, the enemies of the West, the "genocidal nation," the guilty party for the World War I, the evil manipulator of Yugoslavia, and the list goes on: Serbia has been demonized for more than a century, and these labels seem to persist despite international efforts to reintegrate or rather introduce Serbia to a "civilized West." This notion gives birth to another form of nationalism aside from its ethnic and belligerent form and also prepares the ground for what would be later recognized as a successful

populist movement. A naive, presumably benign form of nationalism that can and does go under almost everyone's skin, even among leftists, those who were chanting anti-fascist slogans on October 3rd, those marching on the streets of Belgrade every Saturday over the past three years, and those who plan to flee from their homeland for a better, Western tomorrow. It is the shape of nationalism that arises from a deeply rooted collective insecurity and the underlying feeling of inferiority, and it creeps into the minds and hearts of those who never recognize it for what it is. One of the results of this non-fascist, non-jingoist, nationalistic manifestation is a rising animosity towards neighboring Croatia, for it is the country that has once been Serbia's inferior but, soon after the fall of Yugoslavia, joined the "civilized" West, leaving its poor and the barbarian Western Balkan cousins behind. Being a citizen of a country in a seemingly perpetual transitional process with a kleptocratic system, high rates of unemployment, and the inability to escape the realms of politics in any sphere of life all leave one with a very limited spectrum of alternatives other than embracing the role as an "underdog who will come through finally". This curious anomaly of national populism gives birth to extremely contradicting ideologies, making it possible for one to be a leftist and a nationalist at the same time (Pavićević 2020).

The population of the countries that comprise the former Yugoslavia could be roughly divided into those who reminisce about the times of communism and equalize it with brotherhood and prosperity — an ideology known as Yuga-Nostalgia; those who hold nationalistic grudges from the past and aspire for a Greater whichever ex-Yu state; and those who feel utterly failed by communism, Titoism, liberalism, and democracy. Transition brought expectations, and, once those expectations were not realized, resentment was all that was left.

Comparing the Serbian case with the rise of anti-liberalism in other CEE countries, namely Poland and Hungary, can provide a useful provisional timeline for future developments and a warning. While, as discussed before, there are certain specificities to be taken into consideration when analyzing contemporary populism in Serbian politics, there are also a number of prominent elements that are duplicated and typical of the whole CEE region. Compared to the West, countries of CEE have experienced the "dark" side of liberalism - the post-communist underdogs of the continent were conditioned to believe in unrealistic expectations and were once again failed by a system seemingly unable to meet the needs of the region. Liberalism was in general terms identified with EU enlargement and integration with the West, and thus the West became a role model to be imitated at all costs in order to reach long-anticipated goals.

After the 2008 global recession, which permanently damaged the reputation of liberalism, CEE found the struggles of "becoming at best an inferior copy of a superior European model" humiliating and in vain — a dead-end (Krastev and Holmes 2020).

Another distinctive characteristic of Serbian populism is its strong affinity for mythicized identity, as discussed in the previous chapter. Manufactured history has been an instrument for manipulating and hypnotizing the masses in the region for centuries, and the romanticization of historical figures and events was the main contributor to nationalistic and irredentist ideologies (Stojanovic 2017). As George Orwell wrote: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past" (1948). Thus, the most effective way to maneuver the will of the people to one's own interests and gains is to deny, obliterate, or simply alter their own understanding of their history. For Serbia's conniving political elite, this has never been a particularly challenging task, for the society has, ever since the Ottoman occupation, developed a pathological inclination to believe in a history that paints them as "the good guys", the martyrs who never got the treatment they deserved (Armatta 2003) — an idea embodied by the President and reflected in his relativization of history and biased truth.

"I will prove once again that I can lift our country from the ruins it was during our predecessors' rule. The highest decrease and the lowest decrease ever. This year, we will have the best economy in the whole Europe. Better than Germany. And this is not a fable - IMF (International Monetary Fund) said it. But I also tell you humbly that our results will be even better than this, unless coronavirus kills us." (Vucic 2020)

Vucic's greatest political success is the fact that he managed both to persuade society that the demise of Serbia began after 2000 with Democratic Party (DS) and, through changing the narrative and playing with history, present himself as the one who will restore it (Pavićević 2020). This discourse based on the arrogant ambition of one leader — which, despite its indisputable fallacy, appeals to the masses hungry for some sort of acknowledgment and respect — is only a segment of an elaborate political scheme that will be further discussed in the next chapter.

2.1. The Portrait of a Popular Martyr: He Who Became the Media

"I never work less than 12 hours a day, and sometimes it's even 19. I take one Sunday off per year."

— Aleksandar Vucic

After their party lost in 2008, Tomislav Nikolic and Aleksandar Vucic recognized the need for modernization of their party in order to succeed, specifically a form of pro-Europeanization. Upon realizing that Vojislav Seselj would never give up on his throne within his party, Aleksandar Vucic together with Tomislav Nikolic left the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and formed a new one. They changed their clothes, their narrative, and the name. From far-right radicals to progressives, eurosceptics to Europhiles, the Serbian Progressive Party was the right amount of populism for a society that was in dire need of change. the diplomatic encouragement from both the West and the East, the party quickly became a serious alternative to the Democratic Party (DS), and in 2012, despite the irregularities of the elections, the chameleon efforts proved to be victorious — Nikolic took over the presidency from democrat Tadic and Vucic became the president of the party and a Deputy Prime Minister. Their campaign was based on economic betterment and the righting of the wrongdoings of the former government (Kojic 2020). Voters did not realize that by punishing the Democratic Party (DS), they were bringing a parliamentary monarchy into their homeland (Prpa 2020).

If one looks at populism as a phenomenon that emerged together with infotainment⁷ and the post-truth⁸, today's politics could be placed in a frame of a TV show, with the leading actors the populist leaders. Naturally, the TV show is a product of the media, and the actor becomes famous thanks first and foremost to their acting and only secondarily to their entertainment and charisma skills. It is an unpleasant realization to accept that Donald Trump is the most discussed and media-covered president of all times and is nevertheless ranked worst in US history (Shugerman 2018), but given this aforementioned perspective, it is no surprise. Populist leaders create a broad space for entertainment, mockery, and debate and invoke opposite ends of extreme emotions among the public, which, at the end of the day, is what popularity is about. Leaders of such an ilk are either adored or abhorred and extremely rarely given objective treatment. In the case of the President Vucic, there is an interesting variable in the love-hate scale, quintessentially present in systems that Hungarian author Paul Lendvai calls "mafia state" (2018). Both public figures and ordinary citizens in Serbia tend to have a change of heart and a change of party as is convenient for their needs. Hence, a close aide of former President Tadic and a proud member of Democratic Party, Aleksandar Senic,

⁷ The term "infotainment" refers to broadcast material that present news and political subjects in a way that entertains; also referred to as soft news (Boukes 2018).

⁸ The term "post-truth" relates to environment in which the alleged "truth" depends on personal views and appeals to emotions, and thus objective facts are undermined in process of shaping public opinion ("Post-truth" 2016).

publicly vowed not to shave his beard until Vucic is overturned, yet, shortly thereafter, he shaved both the beard and his political beliefs (*Vladalac* 2020).

Aside from the personal gains-driven support, populist leaders draw attention through the simple instrument of presence. Media means power, and power attracts. During his mandate as a Minister of Information, Vucic signed a restrictive law on media (Law of Public Informing 1998), banning electronic media from broadcasting foreign channels and imposing financial penalties for journalists who wrote against the Milosevic regime, actions which marked a starting point of the oppressive practice that a handful of free journalists in Serbia today refer to as Seselj's or Vucic's law — a systematic destruction of independent media (*Malesic* 2020). During the NATO bombing and the Kosovo conflict, all media outlets were obliged to pass through Vucic's censorship. Although the law was abolished in 2001 and Vucic during his PM mandate assessed that "it was a stupid law provision" that he "could not realize at the time," his abuse of the media did not stop there (*Skrozza* 2018). However, while his power back then was limited and his efforts in delegitimizing the independent press were within the law, today, with the constitutional power granted by his absolute majority in the parliament, and the capture of national media outlets, he manipulates the media inside and outside the sphere of law.

Behind the big screens and a nonchalant technique of deceit, there is a constant effort made in portraying himself as a beloved martyr. Megalomania is a trait inherent to most populists and closely related to hunger for power, but the means of concealing it differs from case to case. The identity that President Vucic adopted and displayed, especially in the early years of his autocratic-like leadership, was that of a victim, a "small man from the Balkans" (Vucic) before the alleged giants of the West and their mercenaries disguised as independent media and political opponents whose purpose is to destroy the country (*Prpa* 2020; *Georgiev* 2020). In one of the interviews I conducted, the interviewee said: "National media in Serbia has become a face of Vucic. Nothing less. Nothing more" (*Savcic* 2020). Another said that she "finds it absurd having to explain to her kids why is this one man (Vucic) on all TV channels" (*Alcan* 2020). However, with a slippage into a parliamentary monarchy, the autocrat and his entourage have begun to neglect the trickery efforts as the power is consolidated, and the public can do little but accept the status quo. During the anti-government protests prompted by the coronavirus crisis mismanagement, the President blatantly rejected the possibility of government overturn, stating that he "does not mind the citizens protesting", and that "as long as they are not violent, they can be in the streets until 2030" (2020).

What makes Vucic such an attractive political figure is not as typical as it is in other cases of surging populism; the respect for religious identity that Erdogan manufactured in Turkey, the way out of the EU for proud Brits, Trump's real people vs. the "evil" American establishment (Temelkuran 2018); for Vucic and Serbia, it is the ostensible stability that the people long for after decades of an unsettling atmosphere evidenced by both political and economic insecurity and that he offers — the "golden age of Serbia, in his words. This very notion of stability as an ultimate priority for the region of the Western Balkans is his asset that keeps him at a safe distance from Western criticism.

However, it would be naive to completely dismiss the basic principle of populism in Vucic's politics, and this one must examine it while taking into consideration that he astutely recognized the potential drawbacks of a simple "evil elite versus good people" division within the nation. Considering that the Serbian population comprises 20 ethnic minorities (nearly 20% of the total), he silently drifted away from nationalist rhetoric; his infamous "100 Muslims for one Serb" ideology was swept under the carpet and the ever-lasting electoral campaigns began to focus on the votes of the "100 Muslims". One of the interviewees from Sandzak, the Muslim-majority region in Serbia, said that he votes for Vucic because "none of the leaders before visited Novi Pazar [capital of Sandzak] as many times as he did" (Palamar 2020).

Stability requires a certain dose of discipline, but once external leaders mistake maintaining discipline in a country for producing disciples, the state can enter a system of stabilitocracy, combining a monolithic exercise of power and a hypocritical democratic facade. Since Vucic's return to the political scene in 2012 and his rise from Minister of Defense through PM to his final ascendance to the presidency, he has been guiding the country through an alarming democratic backslide. Enjoying complete control of Serbia's government, judiciary, security services, and the media, his party became immune from the handful of independent outlets and individuals who dare to publicly voice allegations of corruption, cronyism, voter intimidation, or violation of human rights and freedoms (Rudic 2018). Over the last 8 years, Vucic has succeeded in presenting himself as a leader "playing by the rules of democracy" and Serbia as a society with free elections and open space for the opposition and dissident voices, building what can be described as a soft autocracy (Csaky 2018; Eror 2018).

"Wherever you go, you encounter the companies that I opened, whichever road you take, I built it, whichever railway you see, I made it. The airport is modernizing now, that's also all me. I raised pensions and salaries, and I will keep raising them. What can they say about that?" (Vucic 2020)

The megalomaniac character demonstrated by the statement above is not a novelty in Vucic's performance. According to 2015 Media Monitoring Reports, Aleksandar Vucic, then Prime Minister, was the most frequently mentioned actor in the central newscast on the Public Broadcast Services (PBS) (Nedeljkovic 2015). Additionally, with a tight stranglehold on the all forms of national media as a result of the Public Broadcasting Service Act (2014) allowing financing of the PBS from the state budget, the frequency and duration of appearances, direct quotations, and mentions of Aleksandar Vucic and SNS representatives have increased over recent years, leading to absolute dominance in the domestic media landscape (Marko 2017; Kleut 2020).

This tendency to be popular at any cost is not a unique case, but rather a typical characteristic of modern politicians worldwide (Dragičević Šešić 2019). In the digital era, populist leaders recognized the potential of social platforms to advance their image and even move from popularity to familiarity within the nation. The seduction and manipulation of the public has never been as easy — Vucic's self-promotion as a "man of the people" through 140-character-long tweets or entertaining Instagram photos of him enjoying home-made local dishes, shaking hands with farmers, or holding a student book and a small basketball to announce "going back to school" (Vucic 2019; 2020).

2.2. A Polarized Society: the *People* and the "Enemies of Their Own Nation"

"The further a society drifts from truth the more it hates those who speak it."
— George Orwell, "On Truth"

As political and media realms are overwhelmed with populist content, the people remain the key link between the two. Although encouraged to be active in the political arena, citizens are constantly treated as less than political adults by populist leaders (Grdesic 2019). In comparison to the supply side of populism discussed in the previous chapter, the demand side is projected in the central populist element — the pure, honest people whose voice is represented by their big brother, the populist leader.

The problem with understanding the origin of populist movements often lies in not being able to comprehend who are these *real people* and how someone who hardly makes enough for a living can take pride in the fact that their president sits at the same table as Putin or Trump or lives in the grandest villa (Temelkuran 2018). Although it has been a systemic and gradual backslide not unfamiliar to Serbian society, to the general public it still seems as if they woke up one day to news abounding in scapegoating narratives and brainwashing sessions of the pro-government media and with nothing left

but to believe the nonsense of a single man. Then the hypnotized masses who choose to believe this nonsense over the decades-long feeling of discontent and hopelessness is ready to trade bits of freedom for promises of economic security. A 32-year old bank accountant whom I interviewed told me that she clearly remembers "that one morning in 2014" when she "realized the 1990s were back, and not in the good way" (Popovic 2020).

Academics, independent journalists, and well-educated youth find themselves baffled by the idea that these *real people* are people around them, individuals that used to be apathetic to politics or world affairs, and those who were until recently repelled by the unscrupulous deceptions performed by the officials – and furthermore disheartened to realize that they themselves have become the "enemy of the state", "the foreign mercenaries" or the "youth brainwashed by the West". Free media representatives question their ability to satisfy the public and more importantly their own safety; the youth, disaffected and lost, seek their future elsewhere; the elderly mourn the years they spent believing in change; and the few activists still eager to fight conceal their utter desire to quit under the veil of satire. This is what may be the worst sin of populist politics – the numbing effect it has on society (Grdesic 2019).

Satirical talk shows hosts, cartoon artists, and humorous netizens tend to entertain their like-minded compatriots with creativity and humor through jokes, memes, and sardonic columns – a collective trait so archetypical to Southeast Europeans. But the question is, what happens once the laughter is over? Does it turn into the accumulated anger that the streets of Belgrade felt on their surfaces multiple times? Or does it fade away into a well-trained sort of I've-heard-it-all-before condescending, yet indifferent smirk followed by a "good one"? Both outcomes are plausible and already tested to certain extents. However, this indignation turned into rage or mockery as escape alternatives to distance oneself from the demonized act of politicization cannot be fruitful in combating the pervasive illusion of democracy. Hence the question of civic responsibility eventually leads to a dead end. Is the Serbian population as a whole to blame for repetitive populist episodes? One segment of the population for developing a Stockholm Syndrome relationship with their superiors and the other for not being ambitious enough to make a difference?

It is important to note that Serbian, ie. Slavic word "narod", aside from bearing connotation of both "the people" and "the nation," also indicates the underdog identity, describing the common citizens, the poor, and the underprivileged (Muller 2016). Moreover, the fact that the word can be used in the singular adds a special value in

populist discourses and the antagonistic divide between the people and the elite (Grdesic 2019). Vucic repeatedly toys with the idea of the elite, attributing various groups to it as it serves his ad hoc purpose. "We're not this fake elite who thinks they're better than the rest of us, simple people." By keeping the notion of the "enemy elite" vague, he manages to veer its reference back and forth between the Serbian intelligentsia, opposition parties, Brussels, Balkan rivals, and so on.

There is a sharp divide among Serbian society between those seduced or coerced by the empty promises of better tomorrow and those who are not, and the perspectives of the two groups rarely meet. This is why it is almost impossible for the independent media to reach out to people with a credible and objective truth if they never step out of their zone. The pro-government media, with all the means at their disposal, trains its audience to not only believe, but also sell their version of the truth, which is often targeted at demonizing dissident voices and independent journalists. The result is that opposing fan bases only become more aggressive without shifting the balance of the population's divisions (Dojcinovic 2020). A 62-year old cab mechanic whom I interviewed told me that the complex landscape of Serbian politics taught him to believe only what he can see with his own eyes, and he said that he sees "the roads and the companies that he (Vucic) built during his mandates" and that "everyone who says otherwise is either blind or spiteful" (Palamar 2020).

Despite the fact that for most of the population and politicians in Serbia, the financial and societal status provided by the EU membership has been an ideal since the fall of Yugoslavia, there is also as pronounced general feeling of discomfort in regard to the Brussels elite. Eastern Europe has always been the black sheep of the continent, and furthermore, in recent decades, Serbia has come to be one of the black sheep of Eastern Europe. Along with the rising tensions around Kosovo's independence, this furthers a sense of victimhood that is historically instilled in the society and additionally advanced with the populist narrative. Although the ruling party toys with ideologies and political agendas — spreading anti-Western sentiments while negotiating for EU candidacy or demonstrating readiness to resolve the Kosovo issue before Western leaders while promising to the nation that Kosovo remains the heart of Serbia — they manage to preserve the main character of their "people versus elite" element through an extremely simplified polarity of pro- and anti-Serbia.

The idealized and imagined community that stands for *people* are those who never contradict the authorities because the authorities are the heartland (state). Hence, by tarnishing the "dangerous others" — from Western forces through opposition parties to

dissidents, independents journalists and truth-tellers — Vucic and his party win easy political points by stirring up emotions and flirting with the masses to obtain support (Lutovac 2020). They label their enemies by their own personality traits (opportunists, tricksters, egoists) and accuse them for their own wrongdoings, whether it is the upsurge in COVID-19 cases or the country's stained democratic image, creating a misleading web of scapegoating in which citizens find themselves perplexed.

Populists easily promise swiftness of change for the better, and they smear the "others" and stir the emotions of the masses, manipulating depoliticized people into a political choice that is against their own benefit (Temelkuran 2020). However, they depend and count on the ignorance of the masses, an ignorance that is systematically fueled by stimulating and elaborate propaganda campaign. The clear polarization of society is closely dependent on media affiliation, leaving one of the two polar opposites with a considerably smaller space for voicing their views and concerns. Moreover, as a result of the dilapidated politics in Serbia, political affiliation has become a somewhat shameful act among the intelligentsia. In the interviews I conducted with Serbian citizens, I noted contradictory opinions and a great deal of unease in their responses regarding their political affiliations. Even those who clearly voiced their support for the President were reluctant to affiliate with his party.

Profoundly polarized, Serbian society is afflicted by a deep cultural and political malaise. The recent SNS online rally held in a very Orwellian, pandemic-adapted, style featuring the President and disconcertingly synchronized applause coming from his supporters through hundreds of screens, is a perfect metaphor for the overall societal and political dynamics in Serbia (Ejdus 2020). The only way for one to be heard is to clap to *the Party* — any deviation from that, any who dare to hold a critical thought are not treated as people, but as "dangerous others" who jeopardize the "good people" and the national interests.

2.3. The Populist Club: Serbia and its Role Models

Under Aleksandar Vucic rule over the last 6 years, Serbian foreign policy has undergone some drastic but also gradual changes, and in certain cases, contradictory outcomes. For instance, after nearly two decades of firmly established animosity towards NATO, which in the eyes of the Serbian government and majority of people has always been represented by the United States, Serbia has suddenly turned to friendly relations with the Trump administration. Moreover, antagonistic emotions deriving from centuries

under the Ottoman Empire have been put to sleep with the increasing interest of Turkish investors in Serbian infrastructure.

While pro-European sentiments had been so vociferous throughout the first decade of 21st century, they seem to have simmered down in recent years, resulting in only two political parties with a clear Euro-integration agenda in their campaigns for 2020 elections (Velebit 2020). On the other hand, China emerged as a faithful and lucrative friend, even ahead of what Russia used to represent for the Serbian people.

Aside from taking pride in his close ties with the Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian Vladimir Putin, Vucic has eagerly expressed his respect for infamous contemporary leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or, arguably the most controversial president in the history of United States, Donald Trump. This admiration and its close alliance with countries based on actual or de-facto authoritarian regimes hint at the political goals of the Serbian ruling party. The following subchapters will discuss more closely the relations and parallels to be drawn in governance and political methods between Serbia and some of the aforementioned states as well as the repercussions for Serbian diplomacy under Vucic on future developments.

2.3.1 Serbia Torn Between East and West: EU Candidacy and Close Ties With Russia and China

"Serbia is on European way, but we have strong friendships in the East that are not to be undermined."

— Aleksandar Vucic

While Russia has historically been a *big brother* to Serbia, this notion was chiefly theoretical, whereas China, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, has become the center of Serbian foreign affairs and is inaccurately considered by the Serbian public as the biggest foreign donor to their country (Radio Free Europe* - 4 out of 10 2020). These "iron-clad friendships," as Vucic calls them, present a hindrance on the path towards Euro-integration, but the President enjoys the position of being caught between the two poles, claiming that "Belgrade will not choose between Russia, a natural Slavic and Orthodox ally; the EU, Serbian's main trading partner; and China, a friend" (Vasovic 2020). Yet, recent developments indicate that the Serbo-Russian partnership may be past its prime (Vuksanovic 2020).

Since the fall of Yugoslavia, Serbs have aspired to identify with something or someone bigger, especially in comparison to its immediate neighbors. Hence they found a fellow

and a role model in the great Orthodox Russia. Naturally, these ties have roots that go back to Communist times, but considering the Tito-Stalin split, the friendship could have easily been dismissed, had there not been the deep-seated religious identification. Moreover, the geopolitical factor plays a great role in Serbia's affection for Russia – sharing a common enemy, namely the United States, meant having each other's back. While these relations were until recently characterized by mere *folkloric loving* through billboards, culture and mythological stories, Serbian diplomacy in regards to China is more empirical (Bojovic 2020).

On the other hand, China has become the center of Serbia's foreign policy affairs seemingly overnight. This "brotherhood" swiftly included the general public as well, and videos of the Serbian President's speech in Chinese and the two leaders exchanging a "half-hug" circulated social media platforms. However, the reciprocal relationship that has peaked during the COVID-19 crisis brought the motives of both sides to the foreground. China is using Serbia as a bargaining chip over the European Union, and Serbia is enjoying the unique and lucrative position of "sitting on the two chairs" at the moment.

Nevertheless, the reality is that this alliance did not happen overnight and there is a long tradition of China working to expand its influence in Western Balkans and Europe, starting with Serbia. Considering the series of crises starting from the 2008 global recession through the migrant crisis, Brexit, and all the way to today's pandemic, the EU de-prioritized expansion into the Balkans, leaving Serbia neglected and prone to alliances with Eastern powers (Vuksanovic 2020).

This oxymoron in balancing between pro- and anti-EU sentiments is also cultivated in public opinion. According to a survey conducted by the Institute for Social Sciences 70,8% of the population thinks that the EU harms Serbia (40,9% - seriously harms, 29,9% moderately harms), indicating that despite the fact that the EU accession is publicly proclaimed a foreign policy priority, public opinion is largely shaped by direct and indirect messages coming from top officials regarding the alleged bias of the Brussels elite, disproportionate requirements, and unequal condition (Lutovac i Basic 2017). On the other side, the Sino-Serbian relationship is well-accepted by the majority of population thanks to extremely selective and positive propaganda on Chinese interest in Serbia and a lack of information and understanding of the Chinese Communist Party and its exertion of power domestically and abroad (Vukanovic 2020).

With the embrace of China's efforts in repairing its damaged international prestige due to the pandemic, the policy known as "mask diplomacy" (Wong 2020), not only did

Serbia drift away from Europe but also from Russia. Serbia's response to Russia's aid was lukewarm in comparison to energetic reception of China's aircraft followed by a gesture of Serbian President kissing the Chinese flag (Milenkovic 2020). Furthermore, the usual Russophilia has been notably absent in the discourse of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) officials and the pro-government or government-owned media since the beginning of pandemic.

Although Putin remains to be most popular foreign leader among Serbian population (REF), this notion seems to be more of a legacy of the 1990s and the independence of Kosovo combined with the religious identification, rather than genuine solidarity with the Russian worldview. On contrary, according to recent polls, Serbians identify much more with the Western world and values (Lutovac 2017), a public opinion carefully noted and exploited by the populist government, which jumped to label the recent anti-government protests in Belgrade prompted by its mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis as "pro-Russian" and "anti-European" movement directed at "dismantling Serbian democracy". Pro-government media outlets Prva TV and *Infomer* indicated "Russian fingerprint" in the demonstrations, creating a favorable base for the President to sell his version of the events to the West, particularly since the demonstrations took place night before the Serbia-Kosovo talks with French president Emmanuel Macron in Brussels ("Nasilne demonstracije nisu..." 2020).

Apart from the reliance on Russia's support and its veto in the UN Security Council on the issue of Kosovo, China has become the more appealing ally in building leverage in Serbia's engagement with the West (Vuksanovic 2020). On the other side, China's geopolitical ambitions and its vision of global order come to the foreground during the global pandemic crisis and the weakening of Western democracies, and Serbia serves as a leverage (Albert 2020).

2.3.2 *Burning the Bridges*: Turkey and the United States

"He (Donald Trump) shook hands with me four times. All of the others got only three."

— Aleksandar Vucic

As the hostile narrative moved slowly towards the Western Europe elite, it has drifted away from the overseas enemy. From the number one enemy and detested guardian of Kosovo, the narrative about the United States gradually changed over the past decade. NATO is no longer exclusively associated with the US in public discourse of the politicians, and even the Alliance itself almost disappeared from the "enemy" narrative.

This shift of the US elite as a chief nemesis of Serbian people to Brussels indirectly purported by government officials can also be perceived in public opinion - there is a noticeable change in discourse among ordinary people and political activists over the recent period of time. On Youtube videos and news portals, there are comments such as "Germany bombed us, now they're ordering us what to do" ("Vlada EU odoborila..." 2020). In the interviews I conducted with the citizens, statements like "Chancellor Merkel manipulates our region" (Alcan 2020) or "Germany is favoring Kosovo and blocking our EU accession" (Sabanovic 2020) represented this position (2020). Germany has been often equated with both EU and NATO of late, and while the confusing Euro-integrations discourse puts it in a position of a friend of the state, it also disseminates the image of a menacing manipulator from above. This harkens back to the notion of complete ignorance of the masses to a highly problematic contradiction in the political discourse of populists, and, as perceived with the public opinion on the EU discussed above, the Serbian population is accustomed and comfortable with mutually-exclusive ideas/views.

Considering the outrageous event of setting fire to the US embassy in Belgrade during protests against Kosovo independence in 2008 ("Serbia charges 12..." 2012), it is confounding that this has become water under the bridge less than a decade after. However, there are certain circumstances that one must take into account when discussing this "change of heart". Bill Clinton was considered to be the main culprit of the Merciful Angel bombing intervention in 1999, which was considered anything but merciful to a great majority of the Serbian population. The outcome of the US presidential elections in 2016 was accepted with joy and relief in Serbia, as they saw the electoral rivalry simply as "Clintons or no Clintons". However, it should not be neglected that this newly-embraced respect for American politics has increased with the presidency of Trump, the least pro-democratic president of any US administration since Nixon's (Levitsky and Ziblatt 261 2018).

Similarly, a century-old arch-enemy turned into a "sultan" welcomed with a Turkish song performed by Serbian Foreign Affairs Minister Ivica Dacic ("Serbian FM sings..." 2017). Despite the long-term hostile rhetoric on Turkey that is deeply rooted in Serbian history as a result of centuries of domination by the Ottoman Empire, relations between Ankara and Belgrade have taken a different route in recent decade. Erdogan estimates that relations between Turkey and Serbia are at "the best level in history", with strong diplomatic relations that encouraged a number of Turkish businesses to invest in the region, and he noted that this is largely due to Vucic, who he addressed as a "dear friend" of his (Ozturk 2019).

Vucic's admiration for President Erdogan is not only reflected in his praises and appreciation of the "friendly diplomacy" between the two countries, but also in the shift of his political strategies. For Erdogan, it took less than full PM mandate to distort politics and pull Turkish democracy apart (Temelkuran 2018). Both leaders rose to power through the position of PM and ultimately captured the state as authoritarian presidents. Erdogan rose to absolute power and succeeds in maintaining it largely through the ongoing government crackdown on dissent, including "scaring away" independent journalists, "purging the government" of opposition and "defending" the *real* people (Johny 2017). Although Vucic and his party have theoretically been less efficient due to the economic and time constraints, both leaders have undeniable similarities in their governance. Erdogan said that "Those who did not vote for us are also different colors of Turkey." (Temelkuran 2018), while Vucic and his PM call the opposition parties and their voters the "the enemies of the nation" (Brnabic; Vucic 2020).

2.3.3 *Long Live the Populists*: Orban's and Vucic's 3-Decades Long Political Careers

"Life is not easy in politics."

— Viktor Orban

Serbia and Hungary not only share the same status according to Freedom House 2020 report of being *hybrid regimes*, but also a long history of feeling "oppressed" by the European elite and resultant mutual solidarity. This notion gave birth to the insistence on defending the dignity of the nation that was characteristic of Milosevic's populist politics during the 90s and is now mirrored in the current strategies of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Hungary has been an incarnation of populist politics for years now as well as a harbinger of the broader political crisis in the EU. Its governance and success in enchanting the masses with anti-liberal and ultra-nationalistic ideals that have had a contagious effect on the rest of the EU, most prominently Poland, where the ruling party meticulously followed Orban's steps and vowed to bring "Budapest to Warsaw", expressing admiration for Orban's self-proclaimed "illiberal democracy" (Adekoya 2015).

Vucic has repeatedly referred to Orban as one of the cleverest leaders in Europe and openly admired his governance. He brags about informally spending time with Hungarian Prime Minister and enjoying their friendships. On one occasion, he reiterated

Orban's support by quoting him on Serbian candidacy for the European Union. Upon meeting with him, Vucic said with a smile:

“Orban said publicly that EU needs Serbia more than Serbia needs EU. Who else would dare say something like this out loud? And then you want me to comment badly on his governance. Well, I will not.” (2020)

Both Orban and Vucic gained their popularity through skillful demagoguery — by pleasing an ordinary man. In 2012 Vucic, then a Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, claimed major political points by arresting the infamous tycoon Miroslav Miskovic (Bakic 2014). On the other hand, Orban, who was once considered a leader of the liberal intelligentsia in Hungary (Lendvai 2018), learned that the path to success would be faster if cemented with xenophobic and ethno-nationalistic policies. Both of them have built kleptocracies yet paradoxically enjoy popularity based on their "successful" fights against corruption (Komsic 2014).

Besides the uncanny similarities of their governments and the mutual respect between the leaders, Serbia and Hungary also share a wide margin of appreciation granted by the EU, Hungary as the illiberal member state and Serbia as the controversial candidate. However, during their three-decade-long political careers, the two leaders's paths have taken quite opposite directions. Upon recognizing the fastest route to success, Orban moved from an ambitious young liberal to a xenophobic autocrat (Lendvai 2018), while Vucic grew from a nationalist firebrand of the 90s to self-declared "Euro-realist" (Vasovic 2020).

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Considering that the contemporary wave of right-wing populism is assessed by many scholars as "contagious", meaning that populist and authoritarian leaders are both inspired and endorsed by each other, placing Serbia's populist leadership and contemporary political developments in the context of country's foreign policy and populism as a global phenomenon is salient for this research. This web of respect among anti-democratic leaders has expanded and fortified dangerous ideologies worldwide, yet it started on a much smaller scale — ordinary people turning into *real people* looking for respect (Temelkuran 2018). Serbian analyst Misa Brkic places Vucic as a member of the populist-autocratic quartet along with Putin, Erdogan and Orban, noting that the danger of this mutual fascination is that it can easily be equated with the supranational mafia solidarity (2020).

Geopolitical circumstances are not to be undermined when discussing nature and shifts in Serbia's foreign policy. Since the Cold War, Europe has been divided between the interests of the West and the East. In Europe, this division is mirrored between the West and Russia, placing Southeast Europe in the middle, susceptible both to benefitting from the position of leverage and serving as collateral damage. This geopolitical set-up is reflected in the political agendas of the countries, and therefore the decline in the quality of democracy in Southeast Europe has become an integral part of the complex crisis of democracy prompted mostly by populist movements that have gripped the EU in recent years (Varga 2018). Moreover, the current pandemic unmasked states' agendas across the globe and brought the vulnerabilities and true objectives to the foreground. As the European Union falls short of the expectations of its citizens and China emerges as the "world savior", the space opens for a "battle of narratives" between authoritarian China and Western democracies. Serbia, as a frontrunner for EU accession has proven to be of great interests to both sides, a unique position that its leader is eagerly exploiting. The next chapter will discuss Serbia's populist governance during the COVID-19 crisis and it will further the discussion on how the current position of the country could influence future developments in the region, and whether the coronavirus diplomacy could backfire (Ruge and Oertel 2020).

Part Three

Populist Governance and Media Manipulation and Limitation in a Time of Crisis: Serbia and the Coronavirus

The Western Balkans and the EU had been confronted with the crisis of values long before the COVID-19 pandemic crept in. However, the health crisis along with its economic and societal consequences has furthered pre-existing democratic gaps and created an unprecedented opportunity for autocratic leaders to misuse their power and manipulate restrictions on freedoms. Additionally, democratic norms in countries stuck in a hybrid status quo, such as Serbia, suffer significantly more in times of crisis (Velebit 2020). This chapter will examine populist governance and manipulative political and media discourse in Serbia related to the coronavirus crisis management and discuss the ways in which the current crisis has exposed the underlying authoritarian character of the government. Moreover, and in line with the previous section of the paper, this chapter will also provide an overview of the complicated EU-China contest over the pandemic management and why Serbia is a country of interest within it (Albert 2020).

As the global pandemic grew more serious each day and as such demanded more attention and action worldwide, Serbia was no exception. In addition, in a period of less than two weeks, the Serbian government together with a team of medical experts moved from referring to the novel coronavirus as "the funniest virus that exists only on Facebook" (press conference) to implementing one of the strictest set of measures in Europe, which led to severe restrictions on freedoms and human rights violations, to a complete lifting and irresponsible crisis management during the election period. Just in time to secure the voters in the upcoming elections, Vucic and his party seized the opportunity to regain popularity across the country, including among both his staunch supporters and passionate opposers, and squash the opposition with elaborate scapegoating techniques and the radical state of emergency measures (Bojovic 2020). Regardless of whether he is used as meme material on social media platforms, cursed at during evening press conferences by a myriad of citizens in front of their TVs, or blessed as the nation's savior in the holy house, he has— even more than before — been everywhere.

During the peak stage of the pandemic in Europe, Serbia was estimated by many as one of the states and economies to be the least impacted by the pandemic and was praised

for its timely reaction. However, it was also condemned for its draconian measures and, most notably, its oppression of journalists. The pandemic placed Serbia in the center of the contest between China and the EU, posing significant threats to its unconsolidated democracy and its Euro-integration endeavors (Ruge and Popescu 2020). Nevertheless, the big picture presented in the international sphere provides only a particle of the political and social climate in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this chapter aims to outline and discuss the circumstances that gave way to a highly populist management of the current health crisis.

3.1. Playing Politics With Public Health

"I love you. And I beg you to be disciplined."

— Aleksandar Vucic

As discussed earlier in this paper, the exceptionalism of Serbian populism comes to the foreground in situations of collective insecurity and fear. The President sporadically steps back from explicitly taking pride in his leadership and takes on a role of an "innocent martyr to be blamed", a role broadly familiar and close to the population in Serbia. The defeats and losses throughout history of the Serbian people have always been mythologized and characterized by heroism, a willingness to die for one's nation, and patriotic sacrifices of the individual for the sake of their people.

"I made a mistake, a terrible mistake, which if I haven't done, we wouldn't have 1/3 or 1/4 the problem. Because I couldn't, due to the Constitution, to not allow Serbian citizens to come back. I do not care if they are not comfortable, as long as we are saving their lives." (Vucic 2020)

The President not only emerged as a popular leader, but also as a "man of the people," a caring neighbor, and a compassionate friend who is at the same time the embodiment of the country. This populist approach is best captured through the use of sensational *sweet-talk* and the reliance of emotions like the President's pleadings or heroic statements like "I don't mind If I get infected as long as my people are healthy" upon visiting cities most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (2020).

He resorts to descending to *ordinary people's* way of life to save his nation, saying he will even "scheme and do illegal things" as long as it serves the honest purpose of saving lives, and he thus emphasizes that he has exposed himself to risk and scrutiny in order to provide the necessary medical equipment for COVID-19 treatment. This manipulation is typical of populist politics, whereby the masses who were systematically stripped of rights and comforts that a state is obliged to ensure in the first

place in times of need, especially in a crisis, are presented with acts of the leader's goodwill or sacrifice. Therefore, the President uses the term "gift" for equipping hospitals with respirators, frequently adding remarks about the lack of similar actions in the West and emphasizing that "our people" have always been in front of Western Europe when it comes to solidarity and hard work. The picture of the "one man coming to the rescue" resembles those from his past as a Prime Minister portrayed in the media while volunteering during the flood disasters in 2014 or making personal visits to children's hospitals ("Vucic: 51 stradao..." 2014).

In addition to his friends and foes, he finally succeeded in appealing to a sizable chunk of the population who were politically disinterested for years. Even those indifferent or not curious about the current affairs of their country turned on the national TV channel every evening and listened to the manufactured promises and poorly argued yet reassuring claims about the integrity of the nation and the strength of the country's system to overcome the crisis, which will indubitably disrupt even the most stable economies in the world. All citizens over 18 years old, that is all legal voters, were offered one-time monetary aid, an idea initiated by and largely presented as the goodwill of the President, which was to be distributed in the month of June only weeks prior to the elections. Both the monetary aid and the end of the state of emergency preceded the elections for a period long enough to conduct a more active political campaign conduct but not long enough to lose their performative impression.

Another significant element in his crisis management has been an almost explicit expression of *schadenfreude* when discussing the COVID-19 developments in other countries — countries that are presumably better than Serbia. Both the President and the Prime Minister repeatedly refer to the Italian and Spanish scenarios as "much more developed countries [that] could not deal with the crisis, but we did" or, in certain situations, even mockingly drawing comparison with other pandemic-stricken countries, as was the case of the President's visit to the Southwest region to personally deliver the medical equipment, saying that "New Yorkers would scream out of happiness if someone gifted them this many respirators" with a smirk. As another well-known and seemingly overused technique of Western Balkan politicians, he praises his work by undermining his predecessors and his counterparts in others parts of the region, and the world.

"Regarding economy, we will not decrease salaries and pensions, and you will see, other countries in the region will. The year of 2020 would be the most successful one in the Serbian history had not there been for the virus outbreak." ("Da nije bilo..." 2020)

Through claims like this, he implies that what he has done for Serbia during his mandates had never been done before, using the negative impact of the global crisis to his advantage and diverting the blame for not fulfilling the far-fetched promises he made in the past to the present crisis or the "opposition's attempts to undermine the governments' efforts" in mitigating the crisis.

Serbian leadership publicly criticized European institutions for the lack of solidarity as well as the exclusion of candidate states for financial support. However, the information that was withheld is the fact that the European Union allowed the use of 94 million euros in the fight against the pandemic for the Western Balkans ("Belgrade: EU allows..." 2020). Compared to the sensational headlines about Chinese support and its contribution in medical equipment, news about the EU assistance packages and continuous support were absent in the mainstream media and not discussed by officials in the daily press conferences dedicated to coronavirus crisis management. On the other hand, China became a center of Serbian foreign policy, and the friendship between the two countries engulfed all variants of mainstream media in the country, leading to the rollout of a billboard featuring an image of the Chinese president with "Thank you, brother Xi" (Walker 2020).

Referring to European solidarity as a "fairy tale that only exists on a paper" (Simic 2020) provoked a reaction from the international community, which condemned the Serbian coronavirus diplomacy that has been openly and exclusively leaning towards the East, neglecting the European integration agenda and compliance with European standards, and denouncing European cooperation on unfounded accusations ("Serbian coronavirus diplomacy..." 2020).

3.2. Elections Before Safety: Priorities *Unmasked*

"Dictators can always consolidate their tyranny by an appeal of patriotism."

— Aldous Huxley

Covid-19 crisis implications are manifold and multilayered, from a wide array of human rights violations and abuses through jeopardized democratic principles to questioning of the stability of systems as they are. One of, if not the most, fundamental elements of European democracies — the conduct of elections — is being challenged by the global pandemic. Both holding and postponing elections in times of a health crisis poses significant implications for human rights (Bojovic 2020). States have the duty to ensure the full realization of citizens' rights but also to prevent the pandemic from compromising public health. Many elections have been postponed or adapted to remote

voting techniques due to safety measures, but in Serbia, the incumbent party recognized the advantage of the momentary crisis and its effect on the citizens and, disregarding the safety consequences under the excuse of an untimely victory over the coronavirus, held the first elections on the national level since the pandemic outbreak in Europe (Brankovic and Tepavac 2020).

As the rights to life and health clash with the basic civil or political rights such as those of participation, assembly, and freedom of expression, democratic and fair elections — particularly in cases of developing democracies like Serbia — appear to be elusive. The ruling party has taken advantage of the current health crisis for an advanced political campaign, leaving little or no space for the opposition in the media and elsewhere. Disguised into the Coronavirus Crisis Task Force press conferences, volunteering actions, the President's personal delivery of medical equipment to municipalities, and nondescript counter-protests by citizens angered by years-long dictatorial rule, these events as part of an elaborate political campaign program are a manifestation by a *de facto* one-party system that has only intensified during the pandemic and turned into *de jure* as the masks fell and the ballot boxes were filled.

At first, the information available to the public was selective, partial, and of controversial content. By the time the crisis "became real" (as the president referred to it), the Serbian population had already adopted and been fed a mixed opinion about the Serbian leadership's response to the coronavirus crisis. Tellingly, Serbian citizens, especially those of younger age groups, decided to respond to the government's decisions and measures taken in addressing the crisis with a pinch of salt and plenty of criticism. The morning after the press conference that was watched on TVs in almost every house in the state announcing the state of emergency, the Internet was filled with the myriad of images, witty jokes, and offensive messages that ridiculed the government's response to the crisis (Kesic 2020).

The excessively repressive measures followed by a complete lifting created a mix that did not appeal to individual responsibility (Bieber 2020), which, as a result of the deliberate underreporting of the COVID-19 cases in the months leading to the elections exposed by the reputable Balkan Investigative Regional Network (BIRN), turned into uncontrollable civic anger (Jovanovic 2020). The "careless" period during which the public blindly believed the government's narrative about beating the virus, was encapsulated with the stage dive of Vice Prime Minister Rasim Ljaljic into the crowd at an election rally, election night celebrations followed by fireworks, street festivities, and the grand party organized to honor the unprecedented victory of the

ruling party attended by a number of officials who, prior to that day, reported to have tested positive for COVID-19. In Novi Pazar, city in Southwest Serbia, the health system was on the verge of collapse within days after the elections, and since the national media refused to broadcast news about it and the government, in cahoots with the head of the local ruling party SDP and an aide to President Vucic, Vice PM Ljaljic, ignored the appeals for medical support and successfully silenced medical workers and local authorities, the citizens independently spread news and made videos of the hospital conditions, which went viral on social media within a couple of hours and which eventually fueled the disaffection and anger among citizens throughout the country.

3.3. Misuse of the Crisis for a Power Grab and Media Capture

"You've got a nice parliament, it's a pity you don't use it."

— Dwight D. Eisenhower⁹

The pandemic legitimized autocratic behavior and served as an excuse for long-standing non-democratic practices. The Parliament was dismissed within the first week of the pandemic due to alleged safety reasons, and considering the governance style of the incumbent President, rule by decree was passed by him behind the curtains while a democratic facade was provided to the public. Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, who upon her nomination in 2016 became the first female PM and representative of the LGBT community in the Serbian government, was considered by the international community as a leader who would embody and reflect the liberal values of the West and thus accelerate the process of democratization in the country, has actually proved to be a submissive member of the President's party and a marionette for an "imitation of democratic regime" (Velebit 2020).

Besides the idea of the boycott of the elections originally embraced by a number of opposition parties, there has been another form of defying the overall political atmosphere and oppression in the country as well as the draconian measures under state of emergency, including curfews and weekend lockdowns. Early in the state of emergency, citizens across the country protested by banging pans on their balconies, creating noise to symbolize discontent with the government. The initiative "Noise against the dictatorship" was endorsed by the majority of the opposition parties. Prime Minister Brnabic referred to the protesters as the "enemies of the state" and independent

⁹ Former American president Dwight Eisenhower addressed the leader of Communist Hungary. See the list of references (Pljiz 2020).

journalists as the "haters of their own nation" who attempt to destroy their country solely because they "hate the president" (2020). Shortly thereafter, violent counter-protests orchestrated by the ruling party followed, which was based on open fear-mongering and the further polarization of the society (Velebit 2020; "Citizens of Serbia..." 2020). As a reply to the whistles and pots from the citizens' balconies, hooligan groups with torches and fireworks forcefully entered the rooftops of the buildings in several cities and chanted offensive slogans targeting the opposition parties' leaders followed by "Long live president Vucic" exclains. The "smoke bombs against democracy" (Riha 2020) — illegal trespassing, fear-mongering, and the violation of the curfew — were not addressed by the police in spite of the numerous complaints from the inhabitants of the buildings. Moreover, despite the video shared by SNS MP Vladimir Đukanović lighting a torch himself and addressing the opposition leader "Djilas, thief!", the President denied that his party (SNS) had anything to do with these events, claiming it must have been "some youth association" (Dragojlo and Stojanovic 2020).

Accordingly, the addressing of the nation by the government's officials quickly transformed from pleading to dictatorial. Using the time of despair and fear, the government officials called for discipline and openly praised the response of authoritarian states such as China over Western democracies, emphasizing that a disciplined citizenry is the only way out of the crisis (Vucic 2020). Tellingly, journalists and whistle-blowers were arrested for fear-mongering and spreading lies, civil society was silenced, allegations regarding the weakening of the healthcare system were blatantly and repeatedly denied in spite of significant evidence brought by investigative reporters. and court proceedings for breachers of the state of the emergency law were additionally compromised with online trials (Stojanovic 2020; Bojovic 2020). The OSCE Representative on Freedom of Media deemed the journalists' arrests highly concerning in terms of democratic principles, upon which the PM half-heartedly promised to withdraw a new ruling penalizing anyone releasing information about the COVID-19 outbreak that she has not authorized (Stojanovic 2020).

Nevertheless, as the power was absolutized through Aleksandar Vucic's party (SNS) winning by a landslide, the pretense of democracy faded away. Belgrade streets in July marked the first major pandemic-related unrest in Europe, as protesters reacted with fury at the government's inconsistency in coronavirus management and the announcement of the weekend lockdown, which only furthered the long accumulated anger over the President's strongman leadership (Isakovic 2020). Despite the President's decision to give up on the lockdown proposal, the protests continued for 8 consecutive days, but so did the government's violent response with police brutality. Multiple

sources indicated the involvement of pro-government hooligan and right-wing groups with the aim of delegitimizing the demonstrations by inciting violence and hence spinning the narrative for the international community through painting a picture of the government "defending democracy from fascist and anti-European groups". More than 150 citizens were arrested, dozens brutally beaten up, and a number of independent journalists attacked (Jeremic, Stojanovic, and Dragojlo 2020; Kingsley 2020). As days passed by, more placards appeared calling out the government for its involvement in police brutality, such as "We're not you children" alluding to Vucic's electoral campaign "For our children." The government's response remained intact and was supported by the pro-government media headlines accusing "opposition parties, foreign mercenaries and pro-Russian hooligans" for the violent unrest and blaming dissidents for the irresponsible behavior amidst the pandemic crisis ("Protesti u Srbiji..." 2020).

The long-standing societal division between patriots and traitors endorsed by officials was further deepened during the pandemic. Not only does the PM identify the state with its President, but so does the President himself. As a part of his comment on the opposition's criticism of his crisis management and anti-dictatorship demonstrations, he repeatedly accused the "many who wish to see him and his government dead" and referred to the virus as an "ally of opposition parties," noting that he will "preserve the country from those who hate it" (Velebit 2020). This discourse is not unique, and division within Serbian society is not only based on the line of pro- and against-Vucic but also within the opposition, prompted and furthered by the work of tabloids and media controlled by the government during the crisis. While Serbia's COVID-19 management is inconsistent in many areas, one consistency remains unchallengeable — the self-imposed impunity for the manifold repercussions. In the case of the virus being defeated, the government takes the credit, and in the case of the virus defeating, it is due to the citizens' irresponsible behavior.

The pandemic indubitably shrunk the space for civil and political rights and freedoms, yet it is crucial to note that there is a continuity in the government's mistreatment of journalists, concentration of power, media capture, and erosion of democratic institutions. Given this, it is fair to state that the neither the present-day picture of Serbia nor the human rights restrictions and violations mere products or collateral damage of the COVID-19 crisis — the crisis has simply aided the government in maintaining this status quo and offered an excuse for the undemocratic behavior of the government.

In the wake of the pandemic, instrumentalization of media has become more evident, and thus more reflective of local, as well as global politics. Times of crisis create a

favorable ground for proliferation of fake news, moral panic and political misuse of media. Additionally, legacies of communism, authoritarianism, wars and conflicts, contribute to a much more complicated media-political-economic relationship in ex-Yu countries, notably in Serbia (Kleut 2020). Thereby, Serbia presents a unique case of an intense dependence between populist leaders and media manipulation, a notion which will be further discussed in the following section of this paper, both within the global frame of the contemporary media landscape, and specific roles of the media at regional level.

Part Four
The Role of the Media in Consolidating and Dismantling
Democracy

Throughout the last decade, downward trend in media freedoms has been detected across the globe, in authoritarian regimes and consolidated democracies alike (Ruddick 2017). Freedom of expression is threatened as a concerning number of reporters are facing prosecution, violence, severe censorship and financial rout in dozens of countries. Edward Snowden assesses that we are currently facing an unprecedented journalism crisis which could determine the fate of democracy (2020). According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Serbia has demonstrated a backward trend in recent years, dropping for 34 on the world ranking of media freedoms (from 59 in 2017 to 93 in 2020). Furthermore, assessment from the local investigating journalist networks and NGOs reflect the overall atmosphere of pressure and fear in that area of profession.

Media, as the most important factor in shaping public opinion and mobilizing the masses, presents a core pillar of a democratic system. However, as such it bears a great responsibility and can pose serious impediments to democratic values. This unique power of media is recognized by those *in power*, and thus it has always been subject to political manipulations and abuse. This part will provide an overview of the media landscape in Serbia, its role and how it transformed throughout recent history. It will discuss the pressing matter of the interrupted process of media privatization, lack of ownership transparency, and metamorphosis of the information of public interest into a megaphone of political leaders for their manipulative agendas. Additionally, it will discuss the human rights perspective and mechanisms for protection as enshrined in legal documents at both national and international level, within the frame of the right to freedom of expression.

Populism, by its definition, is based on popularizing the opinions and attitudes of the majority and ignoring those of minority groups. This notion applies to the populist character of the mainstream media that is reflected in content, style, topic selection, story shaping strategies, and language. However, the rise in populist media content and propaganda campaigns as political strategy did not happen overnight. On a global level, international media market was significantly affected by turbulent political and economic occurrences, leading to changes and novelties in media trends, most prominently populism and tabloidization. Therefore, in order to analyze the

contemporary phenomenon of the usurped media in Serbia, it must be contextualized taking historical developments, as well as the specifics of the market and societal dynamics into account.

4.1. The Function of Media in Serbia: a Revolutionary Rebel and/or an Aide to Populist Leader?

*"A nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood
in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people."*

— John F. Kennedy

Contemporary practice proves that the financial and political interests have become dominant driving forces in media business, and consequently the values of ethics and public interests are pushed back. Hyper-commercialization of media market and the rise of tabloid journalism, that have been dominating Serbia's media landscape for decades now, paved the way for sensational discourse, populism and incitement of antagonism (Dojcinovic 2020). As counter-efforts to these ominous emergences on the mass media scene, there are new forms of journalism practices, networks and associations of investigative journalists and independent media outlets aimed at opposing populism which dominates in the mainstream media. Nonetheless, due to the political control over media funding and high audience concentrations around radio and television broadcasts with national frequencies, these efforts are extremely limited (RSF 2020).

In Serbian context, mainstream media outlets rely on the content that is designed to emotionally appeal to Serbian audience. Therefore, with the constant surge in tabloid and various online news portals about the conspiracy theories, reminder of NATO aggression, malicious attempts and intents from the West, and the siding with mantra "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia", the mass is constantly alerted of its domestic and foreign enemies through ferocious propaganda campaigns (Cecen 2019).

Serbian propaganda tactics are broadly considered to be the brain of the operation during the Balkan wars. Milosevic's control over state media contributed to an elaborate mission of brainwashing the masses, spreading false and inflammatory messages in order to create an atmosphere of fear and instill antagonism among ex-Yugoslav nations based on *ethnos*. The propaganda campaign with an aim of spreading nationalist ideology mirrored the one of Nazi regime, based on legends of Kosovo and mythicized Serbian identity of mistreated victims of the history, fighting the "terrorist Albanians", "fundamentalist Jihadists" or "Ustashe hordes" (Armatta 2003). With the adoption of draconian media law in 1998, passed on by the incumbent President Vucic during his

mandate as a Minister of Information, Milosevic completed the process of media capture (Skrozza 2018). From brainwashing repetition, distortion, exaggeration and omission — contemporary media landscape in Serbia parallels the 1990s counterpart in most aspects, performing a role of the government's marionette instead of "citizens' right to know everything", as PBS RTS1 slogan purports.

After the democratic changes at the turn of the century and the arrival of international media conglomerates, Serbian media was presumably freed from decades-long political grip (Kleut 2020). Nevertheless, as old bonds between political and economic elite did not wither away, neither did the serfdom of national media. The process of privatization of media with an aim of ensuring independence from the state, backfired — advertising and indirect funding became most prominent channels of political influence. Nowadays, media worldwide are facing the unpleasant combination of populism rise and political and economic instabilities. With an accelerating popularity of online news portals and social media platforms, independent and credible media outlets lose the populistically-trained audience and thereby are forced to adapt their content to the "demand" (Cecen 2019). Particularly, in the case of Serbia where media freedoms are additionally compromised by controversial legislations, state pressure and limited funding sources, the ubiquity of populist content managed to blur the line between credible and fake news, as well as the information of public interest and those in government's interest.

The basic populist logic is directly incorporated in government-controlled media outlets, that despite the obvious fallacies, appeals to the hearts and minds of the general public, leaving the free press questioning for whom they work. Every argument brought by the opposition, civil society or international community is rebutted by attacking the character of the alleged state's adversary, and defending the stand of the purported majority. The President and the PM publicly repudiate claims made by the official reports of European Commission, OSCE Mission, or other international watchdog organizations, by simply asserting that "the people know and see the truth, regardless of what is written in some report" (Vucic 2020; Brnabic 2020). These methods of truth-spinning and scapegoating through using the voice of the "majority" — without the majority being aware of it — and diverting the blame to the invisible "elite" of chameleonic ability — from foreign mercenaries, through anti-fa movement terrorists, to fascists — is achieved and invigorated through mass media. Regardless of the absurdity behind conspiracy theories, or blatancy of lies offered in a certain piece of information, inflammatory news discourse serves the purpose to distract and discredit the rest of the information provided in a handful of unbiased and professional media outlets.

Besides the state's pressure and efforts to demonize dissenting voices, due to the insufficient income from subscriptions, local media in Serbia is additionally compelled to succumb to the populist methods — the uncritical transmission of political leaders' messages, spectacles, sensational language, fake news, spectacles and reality shows are only few of the elements that can guarantee ratings and financing. On the other hand, alternative independent media projects are marginalized, and considering the limited capacities, political intimidation, and the inability to *infotain* without populist content, the future of professional journalism in Serbia "looks grim", in the words of Slobodan Georgiev, investigating journalist and BIRN program coordinator from Belgrade (Martinoli 2020). Georgiev is one of the few who raised their voices about the oppression and the "lynching atmosphere" in the world of press, publicly claiming that "if anything happens to him, it will be by the hand of the President" (Popovic 2019).

4.2. Journalism, a Life-Risking Profession

"In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

— George Orwell

Being labeled as a "worrying state" by the most recent report from the RSF (2020), Serbia is among the countries where journalism is equalized with a dangerous lifestyle. Chief editor of investigative online portal *KRIK* (Crime and Corruption Reporting Network) said that he felt and was — both directly and indirectly — threatened numerous times, and that being an independent journalist in a country like Serbia bears more responsibility and danger than any other profession nowadays (Dojcinovic 2020). The collusion between media and politicians contributed to this sentiment and created an overall unsafe environment, since political leaders use tabloid campaigns and government-friendly media outlets to turn the public against the independent media outlets and away from any news content not approved or produced by the government itself. "When those who tell the truth become the enemies of the people, you know something's abysmally wrong", Dojcinovic adds in the interview for *Agelast* podcast (Nikicevic 2020).

In a weekly political talk show that has existed since 1991, but was temporarily shut down and changed its broadcasting homes more than a few times due to the shifts in governments and their media policies and restrictions on "dissident programs", called *Utisak Nedelje* (Impression of the Week), the controversial host Olja Beckovic, posed a thought-provoking question to her guests, chief editors of the independent media outlets

in Serbia, Veljko Lalic of *Nedeljnik* (Weekly) and Milan Culibrk of weekly newsmagazine *Nedeljne Informativne Novine - NIN* (Weekly Informational Newspaper):

“22 years ago, just months before his murder, Curuvija was sitting right where you’re sitting now and I asked him whether his practice of journalism was dangerous at the time. Are you afraid?” (Beckovic 2020)

Slavko Curuvija was an awarded Serbian journalist whose murder in 1999 provoked international attention and condemnation. Although the authorities have putatively been successful in resolving this case, the background motive was never investigated with the verdict that it was an unknown perpetrator. Furthermore, there are number of other pending investigations on attacks on journalists, that are either shelved or stalled (Stojanovic 2020). The widely considered reason for this is the clear collusion between the institutions and the government, creating an unsafe environment for media representatives, a model based on a mixture of the present-day autocratic regimes of Russia and Turkey, where security forces are openly targeting independent journalists (Dojcinovic 2020). The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the regional European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) have repeatedly voiced their concern for an alarming rise in attacks and threats against Serbian media in recent years, including a group of the ruling party supporters storming into the offices of N1 TV, a private broadcaster that has been facing a constant campaign of intimidation and pressure led by state officials (2019). By the end of the 2019, the Council of Europe (CoE) issued 21 active warnings for Serbia, while the government responded only to four of the six new cases reported in 2019 ("Threats and attacks..." 2020).

According to the CoE report issued in April “Hands off Press Freedom: Attacks on Media in Europe must not Become a new Normal”¹⁰, inflammatory rhetoric and harassment of journalists mostly come from the state officials and through pro-regime media (2020). The government officials in Serbia publicly endorse provocative rhetoric and fake news targeting investigative journalists, and thus spinning the efforts of independent press in providing the society with truthful and unbiased facts into an unpatriotic act betrayal, in the words of the President, "poor attempts to destroy their own country's stability". Similar statements of scapegoating the press are repeatedly by other state officials, including PM Brnabic tweeting "you're the dirt of this country that you claim to be fighting against" at *Danas* ("*Today*"), an independent daily newspaper of record. However, the oppressive attitude of the state towards the independent press is not limited to public insults. The examples include Vucic's associates breaking into the

¹⁰ For a full report, see: rm.coe.int/annual-report-en-final-23-april-2020/16809e39dd. Accessed 21 July 2020.

apartment of a *KRIK* journalists, *NOVA.rs* reporter 's arrest over the article about the poor hospital conditions during pandemic, and a number of direct and indirect threats made by the members of the ruling party (Djajic 2017; Stojanovic 2020)

The most recent report from RSF notes that Serbia fell behind on the media freedom index dramatically due to the atmosphere of fear created by the government's regime and propaganda in pro-regime media targeting the individuals like aforementioned journalists Dojcinovic or Georgiev. This environment contributes to quality decline in news content of all media outlets, including some of those which are theoretically independent, but pressurized into siding with the government for either safety or financial reasons. A small number of courageous journalists who continue to cover dangerous subjects such as crime and corruption, and hold leaders accountable, are often blocked by the tax authorities for suspected financial irregularities or taken in for questioning by Serbia's national intelligence agency BIA for various outlandish charges (Eror 2018). Tellingly, political attempts to capture media range from financial conditioning, through scapegoating, to restrictive laws and, not that seldom, verbal and physical attacks. Performing the role of a watchdog in a society that is relentlessly oppressing and diminishing professional journalism becomes an extremely risky and unrewarding path to follow.

4.3. Free Media, a Democracy's *Must Have*

“Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state.”

— Noam Chomsky

As democracy bases itself on the principle of checks and balances, it is not fallacious to refer to independent media as the main pillar of democratic society. Metaphorically presented, if democracy is a goal, the top of the mountain, independent media is the gear we use to climb up that mountain. Once it loses its integrity, that is, its independence, the society will inevitably — due to the inadequate support — fall behind. This is why freedom of expression stands as the fundamental pillar of a democratic society and at the core of the human rights system.

According to the Article 46 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, freedom of thought and expression entails freedom to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through speech, writing, art, or in some other manner". Any limitations and restrictions unless necessary for the protection of "morals of a democratic society, public health and national security" are therefore unlawful in theory. Tellingly, in

practice, the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of thought and expression in Serbia is explicitly granted to pro-regime voices.

Ideally, media keeps the citizens well informed about the society they live in and hence the decisions and choices they make about it, on the election days and otherwise, are founded on factual and unbiased information. In case when the media is saturated with political pressure, either voluntarily government-affiliated, or endangered and restricted due to poor institutional, normative and regulatory conditions for political and economic independence, citizens are stripped of their democratic right to be informed.

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (the Convention) guarantees everyone the right to freedom of expression, and within the Article 10 of the Convention this right includes freedom to hold opinions and to receive and convey information and ideas without interference by public authority. Additionally, Court's case law additionally expands the scope of the rights to freedom of expression to protection of news-gathering and investigative journalism, right of access to official documents, far-reaching protection of journalistic sources, and protection of whistle-blowers (Dimmich 2008; Voorhof 2017). Thereby, public broadcasting service, as an embodiment of the right of the public to be properly informed, has a special status at the level of European policy-making as a crucial element of European democratic culture (Dragičević Šešić 2019).

Despite the irrefutable evidence of a retrograde trend in media freedoms in Serbia, efforts in addressing the issue from both national and international actors have been limited to small-scale projects, regulations with no enforcements, and recommendations with no penalties. Considering the present-day status and the role of the media in Serbia discussed in the previous chapters, within the frame of the legal provisions regarding the scope of the protection of the freedom of expression under universal and domestic jurisdiction, it is clear that the government of Serbia is in breach of Article 10 of the Convention and Article 46 of the Constitution. Moreover, noting the contribution of media manipulation in democratic backslide and rise of authoritarianism in Serbia, it is crucial to note that the media as an indispensable actor in an effective democratic system, if manipulated, neutered or government-controlled, can also be democracy's demise.

Part Five
To Cure a Defect Democracy: Antidotes to Authoritarian
Populism

The main impediment in counter-populism movement, or forming any true opposition to the party in power and its autocratic policies, is the very popularity inherent to populists — the indisputable overlaps of the original notions of democracy and populism prevent the genuine resistance from succeeding. As entertaining as it is, populist politics when fought with mockery or attack, are only amplified since the core idea bases itself on sharp polarization of the society. Moreover, the common "hair of the dog" method used in politics backfires in attempts of withstanding demagogic leadership, since it eventually brings the same results. On the other side, trying to prove that the "voice of the people" is wrong is a naturally self-destructive political move. Hence, in order to prompt any change, the masses being manipulated need to be addressed from the perspective of their manipulator, but through a use of different techniques. As each society brings different susceptibilities to the phenomenon, it is crucial to consider them in efforts of preserving democratic values of the country in question. Therefore, this part will, through examining the alternatives to national populism and mechanisms on international and national level in preventing it from slipping into authoritarian regime, taking into consideration conclusions drawn previously in this paper, address the central question of the thesis: is freedom of the media a remedy to a defunct democracy?

5.1. Democracy Over Stability

"The formula 'Two and two make five' is not without its attractions."

—Fyodor Dostoevsky

Francis Fukuyama contends that legitimacy of a democracy is not in democratic institutions, but in qualifications to govern them properly (Fukuyama 2014). His thesis that "bad governance" is at the core of the ruins of democracy is supported by many scholars (Diamond 2015; Plattner 2015). Bad, corrupt governance leads to a backslide in domains of human rights standards, and a slowdown in economic growth due to high levels of cronyism and corruption at the top of the state, and consequently citizens in such countries lose trust in democracy. This phenomenon is more natural in transitional countries, and often results with "hybrid regime", as labeled by Freedom House (Varga 2012). Emeritus professor Leonardo Morlino broadly defines transitional regimes as

hybrid or mixed, half-consolidated democracies and autocracies, that are characterized by strong authoritarian tendencies and theatrically free elections (Morilno 2008). Tellingly, assessing the process of democratization according to democratic institutions and conduct of elections can be deceptive to a great extent.

Within the Balkan region, Serbia is one of the best rated in the field of organization of democratic elections and the right to civil association, but in spite of this, undemocratic practices persist and should not be concealed under the veil of shallow democratic coat on paper (Varga 2018). A regime of stabilitocracy is based on the premise of *simulating* democracy and enjoying external legitimacy by providing the supposed stability. For a transitional country to grow its democratic seeds, instead of solely focusing on maintaining peace and stability, it is essential to foster a steady development, both in democratic and economic domains.

Serbian political set-up was not a simple transition from communist to democratic regime — there was a tragic lag between Titoism and democratization, the infamous 90s or so called Milosevic era. The reason why this is crucial to take into account when reflecting on recent developments in Serbia, is to differentiate forced transitions from gradual, or natural ones. Serbian population was not disaffected or inspired to change so drastically and abruptly had not there been for the atrocities committed under Milosevic and his allies, and hence the transition was contrived rather than a natural sequence. That said, to cure a defect democracy, one must go back and examine the origin and the causes of its defectiveness. In the present case of Serbia, kleptocratic one-party regime did not simply occur with the Machiavellian characters who won the majority of votes in 2012. On contrary, their rule is a more successful continuance of their predecessors' undemocratic practices and the atmosphere of fear and political defeat among the citizenry is an long-lasting societal disease. One of the interviewees said that "there is no democracy, and there never will be — the only hope we have is if another Tito comes by" (Djulovic 2020). This communal feeling of Yuga-Nostalgia is a product of pessimism and distrust in the change and the failed promises of transition, especially after the assassination of PM Djindic in 2003. However, while this democratic apathy of the Serbian society derives from decades of despotism, deceit, and dishonesty, the indolence within international community's role in upholding democratic standards in the Western Balkans has been based on a short-sighted preference of stability over democracy.

5.2. The Role of International Community: *How To Get Away With Stabilitocracy*

"Never have so many been manipulated so much by so few."

— Aldous Huxley

The international community has a responsibility to not only establish and support democratic principles and practices in one country, but to closely monitor its development and impose checks and balances. Additionally, and reflecting on Levitsky's and Ziblatt's (2018) criticism of optimistic view on versatility of democracy as it is in its widely generalized form, for countries to undergo transition, endure and finally identify with democratic system, changes must be adapted to the contextual specificities. The area in which the international community failed when it comes to fostering democracy in Serbia, was the premature release from *democratic pressure* after the end of the 1990s — the almost exclusive focus on peacekeeping efforts in Balkan region and the disregard for the many shortcomings in domain of the rule of law and civil rights and liberties. While it is broadly understood that populists tend to give simple answers to complicated questions, to a certain extent, the West proves to take upon a similar role by turning on a blind eye to developing autocracies and selling the basic values of human rights and the rule of law for maintaining peace (Djajic 2017). According to the aims of the partnership of the EU and the UN, spelled out in Treaty Article 2(5), the Union vows to "uphold and promote its values" in the wider world, and conduct "strict observance and the development of international law". Moreover, according to the EU enlargement policy, besides using the prospect of membership as a stimulus for economic and democratic reforms, the Union is obliged to closely monitor and guide changes in the candidate countries, and ensure they are "in line with EU values, laws and standards". However, and in spite of a number of claims about anti-democratic behavior, violations of press freedom, voter intimidation and corruption during Vucic's time in office, EU officials have been looking the other way (Erer 2018). What's more, Vucic often enjoys praises by European leaders — German Chancellor Angela Merkel shared her admiration for "Serbia's success on its way to reform" ("Serbien ist und..." 2018), while Austria's Sebastian Kurz described Vucic as "an anchor of stability" ("The changeling" 2016). By supporting such a leadership and giving legitimacy to a stabilitocrat, the West damages its own credibility and creates antagonism towards itself (Djajic 2017).

Another lesson to be drawn from "democracies gone wrong", as demonstrated by recent political developments in Poland and Hungary, EU member states known as "illiberal democracies" (Friedman 2016), is that once a democracy does not equal always a

democracy. There is no guarantee in permanency of democratic consolidation, especially in countries with authoritarian past, such as post-communist Eastern European countries (Varga 2012). Weak and young democracies are more likely to become illiberal and slide into un-democratic regimes, particularly if given "a free pass" from the international community. In cases of Hungary and Poland, two member states which repeatedly and openly breach the EU law and threaten its integrity, the Union, besides the European Commission's efforts to impose sanctions for the countries under Article 7 of the Treaty, proves to be defenseless due to the self-inflicted limitations enshrined in the Charter and mutual support between the two countries making the necessary unanimity impossible (Gostyńska-Jakubowska 2020). In the case of Serbia, the EU's frontrunner candidate, tolerance of Vucic's democratic failings is widely considered to be a pragmatic move, since his domination in national politics guarantees that chauvinistic politicians like Milosevic's former deputy PM, convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Vojislav Seselj, remain marginalized. Besides, Vucic's cooperative attitude regarding normalization of Serbia-Pristina relations, works into the favor of the EU's top priority in the Balkans — eventual recognition of Kosovo's independence (Eror 2018). Regardless of possible turns in future developments of Serbia's candidacy and the EU's right to disassociate from the erosion of democratic values under Vucic's governance, by legitimizing his populist governance and strongman tactics, the EU is undermining its moral authority within the Union itself, and its credibility in efforts to counter leaders of his ilk within its member states, namely Hungary's Orban and Poland's Kaczynski.

Moreover, the justification behind the choice of stability over democracy in the Western Balkans arguably applies solely to Vucic's economic success, and is self-contradictory in other aspects, considering that he himself was an aide to war criminals Slobodan Milosevic and Ratko Mladic, and a significant contributor to propaganda war of the 1990s. Thus, however politically pragmatic Europe's tolerance of Vucic may be, it is also profoundly cynical. One of the principal advantages of democracy over authoritarian government is its flexibility and freedom in holding the leaders accountable for their sins and errors (Fukuyama 2018). In addition to internal EU crisis of values and possible shifts in geopolitical dynamics and world leadership due to the ongoing pandemic crisis, Europe cannot afford evasive candidacies, double standards and repetition of mistakes from the past. On contrary, as a supposed safe haven of democracy, Europe needs to impose stronger measures to stop the currents of authoritarian regimes, and identify and address the pressing issues that lead to democratic fallacies. Although not yet a member state, Serbia presents a strategic target

in the West-East struggle for domination, and considering China's increasing presence in the region and Serbia's influence the WB, its political developments in the near future path could mark a turning point for the global crisis of democracy and the Union's ambitions of being a global player (Davies 2020).

5.3. Media Freedom as an Antidote to Authoritarian Regime in Serbia and Elsewhere

"The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all."

— John F. Kennedy

Many studies and surveys indicate that education plays a great role in state's inclination or resistance to populist movements. According to the research conducted by the Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism in twenty European countries and the US, individuals with populist beliefs are mostly older and of lower income, or undereducated (Newman 2019). However, supposing that education is the root of the problem can be problematic considering that populism is almost omnipresent nowadays, the most developed democracies in the North and West and the developing Eastern countries alike. Moreover, although the premise can be applicable to Serbia considering a relatively high median age (42), lower incomes and education level compared to other countries in Europe, developing a counter-reaction to it is a long-term goal, and as such an implausible solution for the creeping authoritarianism behind the populist politics of today. Besides, the theory on the interdependence between education levels and populist tendencies, proves to be weak when placed in the global perspective, since the phenomenon of populism engulfed even the most developed Northern countries, proving to have a more inclusive appealing effect.

As discussed before in this paper, democracy, compared to populism, is not as attractive as populist rhetoric and demagoguery that bases itself on irrational and easy solutions in the name of *people*. On contrary, it's a delicate system that relies on regular and active civic participation and mutual trust between the institution and the citizens (Lutovac 2017). As media is the main link between the two, it is naturally the first and the most efficient tool to be maneuvered by conniving populist leaders towards their dictatorship goals. Since by nature, journalism is the supposed voice of the alternative, an embodiment of the right of the public to know, to criticize and to raise dissenting opinions (Temelekuran 2020), the necessary steps towards a more democratic society are providing room for media pluralism and ensuring safety for professional journalists

and their sources. Moreover, for a society to become media literate and politically educated, unbiased and pluralistic media landscape is the first prerequisite.

It is crucial to reflect on the processes and characteristics, as well as agents and factors involved, that have created favorable circumstances for the captured press. Looking at the recent history of the country, it is clear that the governments almost traditionally misused public broadcast services and other local media outlets with an aim to suppress dissenting voices and manipulate public opinion. Likewise, media has served as an effective tool in framing narratives about the history and national identity, and instilling fear and resentment that eventually culminated in bloodshed and final fall of Yugoslavia. Moreover, the intricate web of the state control over media landscape in Serbia, is elevated to an extent where regulatory and security bodies have become prominent actors of the scheme as well, leaving the press vulnerable and helpless when faced with the government's force, and contributing to a flawless democratic facade safeguarded by the autocrat himself.

Populist content is by far the most profitable on the political and media markets of today. Additionally, in transitional, underdeveloped democracies, such content has an adverse impact on quality of public speech and level of public discussion, resulting with a an accelerated democratic backslide (Cecen 2019). In light of these facts, credible and professional journalism is of even greater value and importance in countries like Serbia, nonetheless, harder.

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Tracing the origin of the practice of media manipulation in Serbia brings us to recognize the populist leader's dependency on media for materializing their autocratic aspirations. The true danger of the media capture in Serbia lies not only in the consequential failure of media to take upon a responsibility in consolidating an only relatively established democracy, but also in its potential role as the largest contributor to the demise of democratic values and principles. For example, framing the narratives around recent anti-government demonstrations and claiming that the protesters were "interrupting the social order", "inciting violence" and "threatening democratic institutions", allows the government to violate citizens' right to protest and justify police brutality. Similar patterns are applied to any aspect of the opportunist governance of the ruling party, *sugarcoating* their wrongdoings both in front of the nation, and the international actors.

As argued earlier in this paper, freedom of expression is a broad democratic concept, encompassing a spectrum of elements of the utmost importance to the process of

building a full-fledged democracy. The fact that the ECtHR found violations of the right to freedom of expression in hundreds of judgements demonstrates the momentousness of this particular right in a democratic society, and shows the added value that the Court created, especially in providing and upholding necessary standards and conditions for journalists and civil society members, encouraging them to fulfill their public watchdog function necessary in a democratic society (Voorhof 2017). The urgency of investing in and supporting free media in transitional democracies should go beyond the realm of recommendations and soft law provisions.

Serbian population is in a desperate need of the plurality of voices, restored political standards and finally a step forward in the disrupted process of democratization. Reflecting on the initial democratic fiasco of the 1990s and Milosevic regime, there are number of parallels to be drawn with the current societal and political malaise, most vocal and concerning one being the manipulation of media. Playing by the tested Serbian autocrat's rulebook, Vucic has been consistent throughout his 3-decades long political career to smother recusants through consistent and meticulous oppressive measures, limit the scope of information available to the citizens and thereby control and tailor public opinion to his own interests.

In an interview for Radio Free Europe in 2017, the president of the EFJ, Bjerragar, assessed Serbia as the nation with the worst violations of media freedom in the Balkans (Eror 2018). Notwithstanding such assessments and increasing decline in democratic rights and freedoms in recent years, the EU officials are still reluctant to point the finger to Balkan's strongman and openly condemn monolithic governance. However, in light of the recent developments, including the second peak of a years-long wave of anti-government protests, it proves almost impossible to ignore the instrumentalization of media as a primary factor behind the backsliding of unconsolidated democracy. Once the media loses its purpose in maintaining balance between the opposing voices through ensuring checks and balances, democratic principles are challenged and thereby the ground becomes favorable for opportunistic politics and government's abuse of power.

Conclusion

Regardless of how one defines it, national or right-wing populism that has contained dozens of countries across the globe, hides a strong potential to annihilate democratic roots and become the "fascism of our times" (Temelkuran 2020). It is a powerful combination of the remnants of the right-wing ideologies of the past, modern-day ubiquity of shamelessly sensational political discourse, an upsurge in fake news, and the contagious leadership complex for megalomaniac consolidation of power born from capitalism.

Populism as an inspiration, ideology or strategy, is at the center of the contemporary political landscape worldwide. The controversies and the contentious opinions around it contribute to difficulties in defining it, and hence insufficient efforts in countering it. Perceived and inspected from different perspectives, it can be viewed as both a pathological form of democracy — an autoimmune disease (Miller 2017), and a corrective of democratic anomalies (Lutovac 2020). However, this largely depends on the context, specifically the societal dynamics. In the case study of this paper, populism, its nationalistic origin, dependence on media manipulation, and its side effects on human rights and democratic institutions and standards, can be at best assessed as a "cry for help", an initiation of confronting with the loopholes of liberal democracy and recognizing the lingering threat of the authoritarian past in flawed democratic system of Serbia.

Throughout this paper it has proved as impossible to either confirm or refute with certainty the hypothesis that the research is based on. Nevertheless, according to multilayered political and social analysis of the object of the paper's research, combined with prominent democratic theories and respected legal instruments on international and national levels, there are certain conclusions to be made.

Failed by the promises of transition and indignant at being historically an object of abasement and condemnation, Serbian society is still in the process of recovering from the infamous 1990s. Despite the democratic changes which took place after the overturn of Milosevic, and the presence of necessary structures and institutions, purported stability and illusionary pluralism across political landscape, there is no genuine democratic culture in Serbia. The remains of nationalistic ideologies, authoritarian tendencies, and methods of propaganda with an aim of political domination have come to the foreground under Vucic's rule. As journalism worldwide is facing unprecedented

crisis, the state's oppression and pressure on media in Serbia has been historically normalized as an inevitable side effect of strong and steady leadership. Both commercial and public service media are subject to various forms of corruption, oppression and manipulation, posing major challenges to journalistic progression and realization of the role of the press as an objective intermediary between citizens and politicians.

Coronavirus crisis is broadly considered to serve as a wake-up call, bringing a spark of hope for the future of democracy and putting pressure on international community and world leaders to take upon themselves a responsibility not only to recover, but to "recover better", in the words of UN Secretary General Guterres (2020). However, while there is a hope that the global pandemic unmasked some of the most dangerous regimes of quasi-democracies and brought the urgency for building a more sustainable system of human rights protection to the foreground, it has also provided authoritarian leaders with fertile ground and an excuse to legitimize oppressive measure by claiming to protect public health, from border restriction so severe limitations of freedom of expression.

Although this paper does not provide sufficient evidence to make predictions in regard to potential future developments of Serbian politics, it is certain that the Western illusions about Serbia's strongman as a region's peacekeeper will face significant challenges as a result to recent destabilizers — pandemic crisis implications, undemocratic circumstances and outcomes of the parliamentary elections and mass anti-government demonstrations.

Positive outlook on the current political developments in Serbia is within the frames of the aforementioned premise based on the optimistic take on the future of democracy. The populist governance and the irresponsible management of the health crisis resulted with severe repercussions and the roaring response of the citizens still reverberating through the streets of Belgrade — bringing the much needed *exposé* of Vucic's autocratic regime and shaking his successful stabilitocracy. In addition, stagnating Belgrade-Pristina dialogue over Kosovo is inciting pressure from both inside and outside, and while recent shift in Serbia's foreign policy distances Russia as its loyal ally, Euro-integration putatively remains to be at the core of Vucic's agenda. Tellingly, with the erosion of the country's staged stability, Europe has no excuse to persist to keep on a blind eye before undemocratic practices for the sake of maintaining peace and stability. Although Serbia's soft autocracy cannot harm the Union's credibility to an extent that illiberalism of Poland and Hungary can, recent global developments and a

potential of great geopolitical shifts places Serbia and its candidacy in a critical position.

However, the fate of Serbian society has been in the hands of one leader for too long, and the echos from its past show that the overthrow of one man does not promise a betterment, nor a democratic path. Instead of focusing on a fragile hope that the array of contemporary crises will disclose the drawbacks and the defects of the systems as they are and thus provide room for changes, Serbia needs more determination on both levels, national and international. The efforts in mitigating and preventing the potential hazards of Serbian politics, as well as the whole region of Western Balkans, have been largely based on maintaining peace and stability in the region provided by economic security and strong leadership. However, as argued throughout this paper, at the heart of Serbia's undemocratic politics and nationalist, belligerent agendas, has always been media.

A better understanding of the three phenomena discussed in this paper, populism, media manipulation and rising authoritarianism, allows for a more comprehensive and effective approach in coping with their causes, and consequences they entail. The gap separating democratic ideas and their actual implementation in Serbian society is too wide to expect the corrective role of populism. The danger of leaders like Vucic or Orban is not solely in their ideologies or autocratic tendencies, but their ability to exploit public opinion (Nougayrede 2018). Thereby, the rise in populist politics in Serbia and elsewhere should be addressed with joint efforts in strengthening of democratic values, supporting media freedoms and providing the society with realistic alternatives to demagogic promises.

To conclude, this paper provides analyses from different political and sociological perspective to support the hypothesis that media manipulation is an irreplaceable driving force for authoritarian populism, and thereby, free and independent media can serve to counter the rampant rise of populist politics in Serbia and elsewhere. Furthermore, arguments based on democratic and human rights theories show that in certain cases, like transitional post-communist countries, institutional stability often masks the underlying societal and economic crises, and results with a deceitful regime of stabilitocracy. Considering that the current pandemic crisis unveiled autocratic agendas behind seemingly democratic governments like Serbia, demagogic leaders are left with no leverage before their nations and international community. Pointing out that populism is both a political and media phenomenon, the paper argues that determination and intervention on European, as well as global level, in addressing the unprecedented crisis of journalism are necessary in order to preserve democratic principles. Tellingly,

in the case of Serbia — a transitional country with tested ground for various political anomalies — such efforts are of even more urgency.

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