



**Back to Competitive Authoritarianism? Democratic Backsliding in Vučić's Serbia**

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## Back to Competitive Authoritarianism? Democratic Backsliding in Vučić's Serbia

### Abstract

Despite growing concerns expressed by ~~think tanks and~~ international organisations about the deterioration of democracy in *Vučić's* Serbia, this country has been neglected by the **emerging** literature on the 'crisis of democracy'. Thanks to a quali-quantitative research strategy for detecting changes in regime types, including various V-DEM measures and the over three-dozen indicators provided by the competitive authoritarian framework, the analysis confirms the recent regression of *Vučić's* Serbia to competitive authoritarianism. The peculiar features of this case, which went through a double transition to and from democracy in less than two decades, appear to strengthen a pessimistic outlook for the future of democracy. ~~Is the current situation proving that Serbia went through an auto-cratization process or it just represents a further deterioration of the Serbian democracy? What is the theoretical contribution of this case to the debate on the 'crisis of democracy'? The analysis highlights the re-emergence of a competitive authoritarian regime in *Vučić's* Serbia, making this case part of a broader trend of global authoritarian retreat triggered by elected leaders.~~

### Key Words:

Democratic Backsliding, Autocratization, Competitive Authoritarianism, Serbia, Vučić.

### Introduction

Since Diamond's article *on Foreign Affairs* (2008), which for the first time diagnosed a 'democratic rollback,' a fervent debate on the 'Crisis of Democracy' (CoD) has emerged, with cases of democratic backsliding and autocratization detected in new and established democracies (i.e. Hungary, Turkey, Bolivia, USA, etc.) (Merkel 2010; Plattner 2014; Diamond 2015; Levitsky and Way 2015; Bermeo 2016).

Despite growing concerns expressed by think tanks, NGOs and international organisations, Serbia has been neglected by this academic literature. Transitioned from *Milošević's* Competitive Authoritarianism (CA) to a defective democracy in 2000, Serbia started to ~~receive~~ register serious warnings about a possible democratic backsliding in correspondence with *Aleksandar Vučić's* rise to power. Starting from 2014, the Nation in Transit (NIT) Democracy Index detected a declining trend, reaching 3.96 in 2018 (NIT 2018), dangerously close to the

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3 ‘transitional governments or hybrid regimes’ category (4.00-4.99). Particularly worrying were the violations of  
4 media freedom: the Freedom of the Press (FoP) index dropped ~~of~~by 14 points in five years (49 in 2017; 0=most  
5 free, 100=least free) (FoP 2012-2017), with the IREX’s Media Sustainability Index (2012–20198) and Reporter  
6 Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index (2012–20198) confirming this trend. Since the 2014 elections, the  
7 OSCE/ODIHR reports have highlighted important shortcomings regarding the fairness of elections, and an  
8 increasingly tilted playing field (OSCE/ODIHR 2014, 2016, 2017). In 2016, a report drafted for the European  
9 Commission stated that ‘[...], the last four years could be characterised by increasing authoritarian tendencies, and  
10 worsening democratic governance, [...]’ (Fraczek et al. 2016).

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18 ~~However, it is~~It is, ~~however~~, not clear if these warnings highlight a further decline of ~~the~~ Serbian  
19 democratic quality or an actual change of regime type. Hence, has Serbia recently undergone a process of  
20 democratic backsliding? Has this process triggered a regime change towards some form of electoral autocracy?  
21 What is the theoretical contribution of the Serbian case to the academic debate on the CoD? I claim that the changes  
22 imposed by Vučić have pushed Serbia towards sa moderate ~~and unconsolidated~~ CA, adding a new and theoretically  
23 relevant case to the broad trend of global authoritarian retreat triggered by elected leaders. Such a development is  
24 puzzling in a country that, in ~~accord~~ing to Levitsky and Way (L&W)’ ~~terms~~ (2010), should be an unlikely candidate  
25 to autocratiszation, since it shows a high level of linkage to the west (EU candidate status) and western leverage  
26 (EU conditionality).

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Several factors justify this case selection. First, Serbia could provide crucial information ~~to~~for the debate  
on the CoD: for example, it is a case of new democratiszation that in less than two decades may have gone through  
a double transition from a mild form of autocracy to a defective democracy and then back to a moderate electoral  
autocracy; moreover, this double transition could, for instance, ~~highlights~~point to the role played by previous  
regime legacies; finally, the peculiar features of the Serbian case may strengthen a pessimistic perspective about  
the future of democracy (Castaldo and Pinna 2019). Second, being under the EU pre-accession conditionality—  
more effective with respect to the post-accession conditionality oriented towards EU member states—the Serbian  
autocratiszation may challenge L&W’s theory and, more generally, the role played by the international dimension  
in democratiszation processes (Levitsky and Way 2010). Third, Serbia is intrinsically relevant because of its  
strategic role for the stability of the Balkans (European Commission, EC, 2016). Finally, despite ~~the just~~  
~~mentioned~~all these factors and the growing concerns expressed by non-academic institutions, no research in the  
literature deals directly with my research questions.

## Regime Change, Democratic Backsliding and the Serbian Case: An Overview of the Literature ~~Review and Methodological Approach~~

The main goal of this research is to assess a possible change of regime type in Serbia and its implication for the CoD debate. The concept of regime change has always been contested in the literature. This label was traditionally associated with a transformation in the formal and informal institutions that regulate ~~the assignment~~how to assign and exercise of political authority in a country (Eckstein and Gurr 1975). Following a similar line of reasoning, Bogaards defined regime change as an ‘alternation of norms and principles of the political organisation of the state’ (2010, p. 477). In his interpretation, a regime type constitutes a specific conformation of such norms and principles. However, the fervent debate over the conceptualiszation and measurement of regime types, particularly democracy, hindered the elaboration of more specific definitions of regime change, which had a crucial impact on the ways to identify and measure this phenomenon.

A major divide in the democratiszation literature can be detected among qualitative and quantitative ways to ~~intend-consider~~ and measure the concept of democracy. Most of those ~~who adopt the~~adopting a qualitative approach conceive democracy as a binary, dichotomous concept in which a regime is either democratic or autocratic: hence, adopting the Sartorian categorical approach a regime is ~~coded~~classified as democratic only if it fulfils a set of necessary conditions (Sartori 1987). According to this perspective, regime change is intended as a fundamental, large-scale alteration in the institutional system that regulates ~~how to assign~~the assignment and exercise of political authority. Lueders and Lust (2018) define this type of regime change as ‘rupture.’

The quantitative approach identifies a cut-off point on a continuous ordinal measure of democracy, which distinguishes among autocratic and democratic regimes both in binary terms, ~~hence~~ whether they are above or below the identified threshold, and in terms of degree, with regimes exhibiting democratic features to a greater or lesser extent (Diamond 1999). The most common way ~~adopted~~used by this scholarship to measure regime change has been through ~~an~~-alteration of scores or categories ~~on~~-in ordinal indexes of democracy (i.e. Freedom House, Polity) (Bogaards 2010). In this perspective, regime change is more often related to fine-grained changes regarding specific institutions or individual political and civil rights, which do not always imply a complete mutation of the system: ‘reform’ is the label adopted by Lueders and Lust (2018) to identify this type of change.

Recently, conceptualiszing and measuring (changes in) regime types has become even more disputed. First, the growing diffusion of hybrid regimes (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010) has ~~ve~~ complicated the identification of changes among closer regime types and the elaboration of widely accepted regime typologies. Second, Lueders and Lust’ *reforms* have recently become dominant (Bermeo 2016), making it more complex both

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3 to avoid false positive and false negative cases of regime change due to thinner institutional modifications required  
4 to pass from one regime type to the other, and to identify one specific year of transformation since it seems more  
5 ~~appropriate~~adequate to interpret many of them as multi-year processes of change. Third, ~~while~~ regime change has  
6 been traditionally associated with ~~the~~ physical alteration of ~~the~~ leadership, ~~while~~ it is increasingly common to  
7 ~~see~~have changes in regime types under the same leaders. ~~Finally, Fourth, - the literature has increasingly stressed~~  
8 ~~several weaknesses of~~ the major ~~indexes of~~ democracy ~~indexes~~ (Freedom House, Polity, etc.) ~~which have, to a~~  
9 ~~large extent, jeopardised their actual reliability~~have been increasingly criticised for their poor reliability and the  
10 ~~lack of justification and arbitrariness of the thresholds they set to separate regime types~~ (Bogaards 2009, 2010,  
11 2012). To deal with these issues, a specific research strategy will be presented ~~below~~in the next section.

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20 In the last decade, this dispute on how to conceptualise and measure regime change has been inextricably  
21 connected with the CoD debate and the related discussion on the reverse wave hypothesis, which ~~has~~ve become  
22 one of the hottest topics in the democratisation literature. In this debate, two conclusions are widely shared: on  
23 ~~the~~ one hand, ‘there is no denying that the third wave clearly has lost momentum’ (Plattner 2014, p. 13); on the  
24 other, we are still not facing a ‘third reverse wave’ (Diamond 2015, p. 153). Within these ample boundaries, a  
25 pessimistic perspective about the future of democracy has emerged. Diamond (2015), for example, stresses four  
26 particularly alarming factors: a) ~~increased~~ democratic breakdowns ~~increased~~; b) ~~the declining~~ democratic quality  
27 of key emerging market ~~economies countries declined~~; c) ~~deepening~~ authoritarianism in autocracies ~~deepened~~; d)  
28 ~~lower~~ established democracies’ performance ~~decreased~~. ~~Despite not expressing strong pessimism, Lührmann and~~  
29 ~~Lindberg (2019) recently provided empirical evidence confirming that a third reverse wave is indeed unfolding.~~  
30 L&W (2015) support a more optimistic perspective, stressing how few democracies actually broke down in the  
31 2000s and highlighting the resilience of democratic regimes in such difficult times. Bermeo (2016), ~~which who~~  
32 proposes a slightly different version of this viewpoint, focuses on ‘how’ democratic backsliding occurs,  
33 ~~highlighting noting~~ how the most radical forms of backsliding (~~c~~Coups d’état, executive coups by elected leaders,  
34 election-day vote fraud) have declined while more subtle varieties of democratic backsliding ~~are on the rise such~~  
35 as promissory coups, executive aggrandisement, and strategic election manipulation ~~are on the rise~~. ~~Promissory~~  
36 ~~coups refer to the ousting of elected governments with the intent to defend democracy and the promise to organise~~  
37 ~~new elections and restore democratic institutions. These last two modes of backsliding seem relevant for the~~  
38 ~~Serbian case.~~ Executive aggrandisement ~~implies~~highlights a slow process through which elected executives adopt  
39 legal institutional changes ~~with the aim of~~aimed at weakening checks on their power and hindering the  
40 oppositions’~~s~~ capacity to represent a realistic challenge. Strategic election manipulation ~~regards refers to~~ a set  
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3 series of actions taken long before ~~the~~-polling day that aims at tilting the electoral playing field in favour of  
4 incumbents, like harassment of journalists and civil and opposition activists, abuse of state funds for electoral  
5 campaigns, etc. Despite evaluating the negative consequences of these new forms of backsliding, Bermeo  
6 concludes that there are relevant reasons for hope. In fact, these emerging varieties of backsliding should lead to  
7 more moderate autocracies, which are easier to re-democratise since democratic legacies (i.e. elections, parties,  
8 and legislatures) usually persist and can restore democracy when changes intervene in the incentive structure  
9 responsible for the backsliding.  
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Despite the relevance of this new phenomenon, the debate on the CoD is still at an embryonic stage (Cassani and Tomini 2018; Castaldo 2018b), and much-needed in-depth single case studies and small-N and large-N comparisons are still lacking in sufficient number. Currently, the major divide in the CoD literature appears to be still among ‘demo-optimists’ who stress the resilience of many democracies in such diffieult-precarious times and tend to downplay the CoD thesis, and ‘demo-pessimists’, which-who interpret factors as-like the less ‘friendly’ international environment, the increase in democratic breakdowns, etc. as evidences of a bleak future for democracy, and a ‘third reverse wave’ not too distant or unlikely.

Is the Serbian experience supporting demo-optimists or demo-pessimists theses? Is this case able to challenge or specify Bermeo’ optimistic conclusions thanks to the possible double transition to and from democracy? Can Serbia challenge L&W’s theory about the role of structural international factors in democratiszation processes, given that a possible autocratiszation is taking place despite the Serbian EU candidate status?

This academic literature has neglected the recent developments in Serbia. A fair amount of researches has been dedicated to the ousting of *Milošević* (Zakošek 2008; Ramet 2011; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Dolenc 2013). During the 2000s, much of the literature focused on Serbia’s-the-issues-of-the Serbian Europeaniszation process, explaining ~~the~~-poor compliance with EU requirements through its stateness problems (Börzel 2011), or highlighting the role played by identity issues, which led the EU to exert a ‘perverted conditionality’ (Stahl 2011), or reaching the conclusion that Serbia at the end of the 2000s was stuck in a ‘stalled Europeaniszation’ (Subotić 2010).

The few studies evaluating Serbian democracy in the 2000s reached similar conclusions. Zakošek (2008) attributed the lack of democratic consolidation to the persistence of semi-legal and illegal anti-democratic structures of the old regime. According to both Edmunds (2009) and Dolenc (2013), if electoral politics has been

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3 firmly established in Serbia, liberalism has not, due to the survival of illiberal interests, actors, networks and  
4 practices that flourished during the Milošević regime. Džihic and Segert (2012) classified Serbia as a ‘mere  
5 electoral democracy.’  
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9 ~~The~~ Serbian democratiszation during the 2010s has been almost completely neglected. Several studies  
10 have focused on the decreasing level of media freedom under *Vučić*, underlying the limitations of the EU  
11 conditionality (Fraczek et al. 2016; Huszka 2018) and the presence of a de-Europeaniszation process (Castaldo  
12 and Pinna 2018). However, by focusing only on one policy area, these studies cannot provide a complete  
13 ~~assessmentevaluation~~ of ~~the~~ Serbian democracy. Günay and Džihic (2016) deal with the recent democratic  
14 regression in both the Balkans and Turkey, ~~focusingconcentrating~~, however, almost completely on the latter.  
15 Opposite opinions on the state of democracy in Serbia can be found in the recent literature. For example, Bieber  
16 (2018) evaluates the Balkan country as a CA since 2012, while according to Börzel and Grimm (2018) Serbia has  
17 actually locked in its democratic change. However, these studies examined different research questions and do not  
18 provide empirical evidence to support those claims; but they clearly underline the confusion that is still present in  
19 the literature about the state of democracy in Serbia and the need to answer the research questions that have driven  
20 this study.  
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### 34 Research Design and Methods

35 To deal with my research questions, I adopt a structured and focused case study analysis (George and Bennett  
36 2005), including a within-case diachronic comparison and a two-stage~~two-steps~~ research strategy, ~~which aims to~~  
37 ~~overcomeovercoming~~ the aforementioned issues of conceptualiszing and measuring regime change is among the  
38 goals of this methodological choice. Since both qualitative and quantitative ways to detect regime change# are not  
39 exempt from criticisms, I claim that a combination of both strategies and the selection of well-justified tools in  
40 each of them represents the best way to reach a higher level of reliability in the detection of thinner processes of  
41 regime change.  
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49 First, I assess the evolution of the Serbian regime through various ~~V-DEM~~ measures of democracy.  
50 There are several well-known democracy indexes available, such as the ones elaborated by Freedom House, Polity  
51 IV, the Bertelsmann research group, etc. However, most of them have been increasingly criticised for their poor  
52 reliability and the lack of justification and arbitrariness of the thresholds they set to separate regime types  
53 (Bogaards 2009, 2010, 2012). Hence, the V-DEM dataset, which addresses most of these issues, is selected for  
54 conducting a deeper analysis of the Serbian democratic evolution. For example, the~~The~~ Regime of the World  
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(RoW) Index ~~is among the most reliable measures of democracy since it~~ combines specific quantitative indexes with well-justified cut-off points, with more qualitative necessary conditions, all of ~~them which~~ selected through a rigorous process of concept building (Lührmann et al. 2018). In fact, RoW is based on a fourfold regime typology increasingly accepted by the literature (Diamond 2002; Bogaards 2009; Cassani and Tomini 2018), which lies along a democracy-autocracy continuum that includes liberal and electoral democracies, and electoral and closed autocracies; there are six upper and lower bound regime categories ~~are elaborated~~ to account for ambiguous cases close to specific thresholds (Figure 1) (Lührmann et al. 2018). This special attention to uncertain cases is also evident in other V-DEM indexes, which provide confidence intervals around point estimates that allow the researcher to determine the degree of certainty each index has in a given country-year. The quali-quant strategy and the tools ~~elaborated-used~~ to deal with uncertain cases ~~help~~ considerably help to mitigate ~~the~~ criticisms ~~directed~~ oriented towards ordinal indexes of democracy.

Despite the strength of the V-DEM indexes, these tools alone cannot provide more than a rough picture of the empirical reality. So, in the ~~The~~ second step of my research strategy I will perform is centred on a qualitative in-depth analysis based on the L&W's CA framework (2010), which focuses, in Goertz' terms (2006), on three second-level dimensions (elections, civil liberties, and the playing field) and over three dozen third-level indicators. The Authors evaluate CAs along three dimensions: elections, civil liberties, and the playing field. In the former, major opposition candidates are rarely excluded, opposition parties can campaign publicly, and there is no massive electoral fraud. However, manipulation of voter lists, falsification of results and intimidation of oppositions are not unusual. CAs formally guarantee and partially respect civil liberties. However, all government critics may be harassed through surveillance and blackmail, 'legal' persecution for defamation or corruption, and occasional arrest or exile. Finally, CAs show an uneven playing field. Incumbents politicise state institutions (i.e. judiciary, security forces) and deploy them against opponents. The government' abuses of state institutions generates a resource disparity so severe as to hinder the opposition's capacity to compete on equal footing. CAs also control the media to limit oppositions' access to voters and weaken their political campaigns.

I ~~select~~ this model is selected for the following reasons: the detailed set of indicators it provides will help in the collection and interpretation of data; the coherence of this model with the V-DEM electoral autocracy type, which is also based ~~also~~ on L&W's theoretical contribution (Lührmann et al. 2018); their dimensions are coherent with Bermeo' new modes of backsliding; the reliability of my analysis on the Vučić regime will be enhanced through ~~thanks to~~ a diachronic comparison with the *Milošević* CA.

A final note on this model regard L&W's core finding. According to them, a high level of western linkage, which captures a diffuse set of ties between a given country and the West, constitutes the major factor explaining democratization in CA regimes. This makes Serbia a puzzling case since its high western linkage (EU candidate status) should have prevented any autoeratzation process.

#### A brief note on the historical evolution of the Serbian regime

Slobodan Milošević dominated Serbian politics during the 1990s. Two main factors explain the rise of CA: the Socialist Party of Serbia's (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) strength, which inherited personnel and infrastructures of the Serbian League of Communists in 1990, and substituted the communist ideology with Serbian nationalism (Thomas 1999); ~~the~~ little Western pressure, due to *Milošević's* perceived utility in solving the Balkan wars during the first half of the 1990s (Levitsky and Way 2010).

The 2000 elections triggered a democratic transition. The ~~decline decrease~~ of the *Milošević* regime's legitimacy, ~~favoredfavoured~~ by the terrible economic situation, boosted the chances of the opposition, which was persuaded by Western actors to merge into the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS). As a result, DOS won the 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections with its most representative leaders becoming President of the Republic (*Vojislav Koštunica*, leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia, *Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DPS) and Prime Minister (*Zoran Đinđić*, leader of the Democratic Party, *Demokratska stranka*, DP) (Castaldo and Pinna 2019).

During the 2000s, several governments composed by former components of the DOS coalition ~~struggled only to create were able to establish only~~ a defective democracy in Serbia. This fragile political system survived under the constant threat of *Šešelj's* far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRP), which managed to establish itself as the largest party in Serbia. After his defeat in the 2008 presidential elections, the new SRP leader, *Tomislav Nikolić*, left the party and founded a more moderate and pro-EU political group, the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) (Stojić 2017). Thanks also to this change, and to a populist electoral campaign ~~eenteredcentred~~ on the failure of previous governments to tackle corruption and improve the economy, *Nikolić* won the 2012 presidential elections and *Vučić*, the new SNS leader, became vice-prime minister through a post-electoral coalition with the former ally of the 1990s, the SPS. Snap elections called in 2014 recorded the definitive collapse of former ruling parties (i.e. DP, DPS) and the extreme fragmentation of the opposition, ~~gavegiving~~ the SNS-SPS coalition the ~~biggestlargest~~ parliamentary majority (80%) in Serbian history, ~~exponentially strengthening exponentially~~ *Vučić's* capacity to concentrate power in his hands (NIT 2015).

He became prime minister, also winning also the 2016 elections and becoming President of the Republic in 2017 (NIT 2018).

### Evaluating Serbia's democratic performance through various democracy indexes: the V-DEM Indexes (1990-2018)

A declining trend in the Serbian democratic level is evident in most of the major indexes of democracy. For example, the Freedom in the World index (0=least free, 100=most free) plummeted from 88 in 2014 to 67 in 2019, leading to a change of category in the last year from 'free' to 'partly free' (Freedom in the World 2014-2019). The NIT Democracy Index, which focuses specifically on Eastern European countries, shows the same picture, highlighting a declining trend since 2014 and almost reaching the 4.00 'transitional governments or hybrid regimes' threshold in 2018 (3.96) (NIT 2018). The same trend emerges from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2014-2018), which in its 2014 report declasses Serbia from 'democracy in consolidation' to 'defective democracy' and highlights further deterioration of the Serbian democratic quality in both its 2016 and 2018 reports.

Deepening the analysis through the V-DEM indexes, several conclusions emerge, for example, from the Regime of the World (RoW) Index (Figure 1). Firstly, a moderate backsliding from an electoral democracy upper bound (7) to a pure electoral democracy (6) begins in 2010: this 'change of degree', which lasted until 2013, was not so intense as to trigger an actual transformation in the 'type of regime.' Secondly, Vučić's rise to premiership in 2014 appears to intensify both speed and magnitude of change, leading Serbia to regress to an electoral democracy lower bound (5) in that same year and cross the electoral autocracy threshold (upper bound, 4) in 2015. Hence, in just two years the changes imposed by Vučić led to an actual autocratisation of Serbia. Finally, in one more year (2016), his regime reached the level of pure electoral autocracy (3), similar to that established by Milošević during the 1990s. Serbia backslid in correspondence with Vučić's rise to power in 2014, passing from a pure electoral democracy (6) to the lower bound of this category (5). Secondly, this 'change of degree' became so intense as to push Serbia through the electoral autocracy threshold, which identifies an actual transformation in the 'type of regime.' Finally, the Vučić regime reached the level of electoral autocracy upper bound (4), hence more moderate respect to Milošević's pure electoral autocracy (3).

(FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE)

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3 These conclusions can be further specified (Figure 2). The Liberal Democracy Index falls below the 0.5  
4 threshold in 2012, when *Vučić* enters into a government coalition as vice-prime minister and leader of the largest  
5 party in the executive. The Electoral Democracy Index, ~~which is~~ presented with lower and upper bounds of the  
6 confidence interval, provides an even clearer picture since the lower bound falls below the 0.5 threshold already  
7 in 2014 while the upper bound ~~crosses that threshold~~~~reaches that point~~ in 2017. ~~I~~ in a nutshell, the less benevolent  
8 country experts consider the *Vučić* regime as an already consolidating electoral autocracy while ~~even those~~~~the~~  
9 more optimistic ~~of them~~ acknowledge a very recent autocratiszation.  
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22 ~~To conclude~~~~In conclusion~~, ~~despite providing crucial information, the ambiguous nature of the Serbian~~  
23 ~~case and the type and magnitude of changes occurred recently~~ ~~occurred~~ ~~does not allow to~~ these indexes to provide  
24 ~~more than a rough picture of the Serbian regime's evolution during the last decade.~~ In fact, while all indexes  
25 ~~confirm a democratic backsliding during the Vučić era, there is no agreement on whether and when an actual~~  
26 ~~autocratiszation process took place in Serbia. Hence, a more fine-grained qualitative analysis based on the CA~~  
27 ~~framework, which includes a diachronic comparison between the Milošević and Vučić regimes, is needed to reach~~  
28 ~~more reliable findings.~~ the V-DEM indexes stress a democratic backsliding and a recent and moderate (close to the  
29 ~~democracy threshold) autoeratization process~~ ~~during the Vučić era.~~ To check these findings I will perform a more  
30 ~~fine-grained qualitative analysis based on the CA framework, which includes a diachronic comparison with the~~  
31 ~~Milošević regime.~~  
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### 43 **Applying the Competitive Authoritarian Framework to Serbia: from *Milošević* to *Vučić***

44 ~~L&W identify three second-level dimensions of CAs: elections, civil liberties and the playing field. In the~~  
45 ~~first, major opposition candidates are rarely excluded, opposition parties can campaign publicly, and there is no~~  
46 ~~massive electoral fraud. However, manipulation of voter lists, falsification of results and intimidation of~~  
47 ~~oppositions are not unusual. CAs formally guarantee and partially respect civil liberties. However, all government~~  
48 ~~critics may be harassed through surveillance and blackmail, 'legal' persecution for defamation or corruption, and~~  
49 ~~occasional arrest or exile. Finally, CAs show an uneven playing field. Incumbents politicise state institutions (i.e.~~  
50 ~~judiciary, security forces) and deploy them against opponents. The government's abuse of state institutions~~  
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generates a resource disparity so severe as to hinder the opposition's capacity to compete on equal footing. CAs also control the media to limit the opposition's access to voters and weaken their political campaigns.

In the following sections, I apply this framework, using the over three dozen third-level indicators provided in the methodological appendix of L&W's book (2010), to three periods of the recent Serbian history: the 1990s (Milošević's CA), the 2000s (electoral/defective democracy), the 2010s (Vučić's era).

### ***From Milošević Competitive Authoritarianism to electoral Democracy***

*Milošević's* Serbia corresponded to the CA model (Levitsky and Way 2010). Elections were free but unfair (NIT 1998). Before every competition, electoral rules were changed to favour the regime (Goati 2001), and electoral manipulations were committed whenever an SPS victory was uncertain (Nedović 2000): for example, in the 2000 presidential elections fraud was estimated to be about 10-15% (Levitsky and Way 2010). In case of defeat, the regime even nullified elections (Thomas 1999).

Civil-Violations of civil liberties violations increased exponentially during the 1990s. Independent media existed but registration of private media was difficult, TV and radio stations received limited frequencies and the press experienced had printing and distribution problems. *Milošević* barely tolerated them and a stronger control was exercised in crucial moments such as the Yugoslav wars (NIT 1998). During the 1998-1999 *Kosovo* crisis, the then minister of information and current president *Vučić* adopted a media law improving the government's repressive capacity, which led to the closure of numerous dissident media (Goati 2001). Moreover, journalists were routinely harassed and intimidated. NGOs financed by international donors were depicted as 'western mercenaries' (NIT 1999-2000, p. 726). In 1998-2000, 1,700 members of the major civic opposition movement 'Otpor!' were arrested (Dolenec 2013). Political oppositions were frequently harassed. The Serbian Renewal Movement (*Srpski pokret obnove*, SRM) leader *Drašković* suffered police abuse and survived two attempted assassinations (Bideleux and Jeffries 2007), while the former Serbian President *Stambolić* was assassinated by Serbia's secret services (Pribičević 2004). Opposition leaders as *Drašković* and *Zoran Đinđić* (Democratic Party, DP) were harassed through criminal investigations (NIT 1998).

The playing field was tilted in *Milošević's* favour. The state politicization was so ample that there was no distinction between a state career and serving *Milošević* (Gallagher 2003). State-owned media, public companies, the judiciary, secret services and the police worked effectively to protect the CA (Thomas 1999; Edmunds 2008). *Milošević's* regime enjoyed a privileged access to resources. During the 1990s, important officials of the regime were also directors of state enterprises so that two-thirds of Serbia's economic elite was linked to

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3 the CA (Dolenec 2013). As a result, *Milošević* monopolised private and public resources, leaving the opposition  
4 in dire economic conditions (Levitsky and Way 2010). Media access was clearly unbalanced (Gallagher 2003).  
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6 The most influential media were state-owned (*Radio-Televizija Srbije*, RTS) or government-oriented  
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8 ~~entities~~~~organs~~ (i.e. the newspapers *Politika* and *Borba*). Opposition parties were denied access to public media  
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10 (NIT 1998), which acted as *Milošević*' mouthpieces (Goati 2001). During the 1990s, the SPS and its smaller sister  
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12 party Yugoslav Left (*Jugoslovenska Levica*) had 1.5 to 10 times more airtime than the oppositions (Dolenec 2013).  
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14 During the 2000 elections, several local newspapers were taken over by *Milošević*'s allies and state-owned media  
15  
16 obscured oppositions (Goati 2001).  
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18 The 2000 elections triggered a democratic transition. However, despite the evident improvements in  
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20 relation~~respect~~ to the *Milošević* era (Figure 1 and 2), during the 2000s only an electoral or defective democracy  
21  
22 emerged in Serbia.  
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24 Since 2000, elections became free and fair (OSCE/ODIHR 2001, 2004, 2008, 2012) and several peaceful  
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26 transfers of power were achieved in 2003, 2008, and 2012. However, some shortcomings were still present in the  
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28 regulation of party campaign financing, ~~the~~ transparency of voter registration and ~~the~~ excessive powers of parties,  
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30 which could select parliamentarians without respecting the order of the electoral list, removing and replacing them  
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32 at will (OSCE/ODIHR 2001, 2004, 2008, 2012).  
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34 The protection of civil liberties improved considerably respect-in comparison to the 1990s. After the  
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36 initial years characterised by animosity between President *Koštunica* and Prime Minister *Dinđić* (Pribičević 2004),  
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38 the harassment of opposition leaders, parties, and NGOs dropped significantly. Plurality of information was  
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40 guaranteed (NIT 2013), and censorship was abolished by *Dinđić*, who also rescinded the infamous 1998 Law on  
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42 Public Information. Harassment and physical attacks on journalists decreased considerably respect-in relation to  
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44 the 1990s. However, political interference ~~ion~~ media freedom persisted as a concerning issue (FoP 2010).  
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46 Moderate progresses ~~wasere~~ experienced-registered in the playing field dimension. The public  
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48 administration made slow improvements. However, the spoils system of the 1990s was largely retained, which  
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50 favoured an unjustified political influence over the state administration (Dolenec 2013). Despite numerous  
51  
52 reforms, undue political interferences in~~ever~~ the judiciary ~~wasere~~ present (Bideleux and Jeffries 2007; Dolenec  
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54 2013). Media abuse was reduced, and state-run television became more balanced: in 2006, RTS was transformed  
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56 in a public service (NIT 2005, 2006, 2007; OSCE/ODIHR 2004). However, privatization of public media was not  
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58 implemented (NIT 2006), media ownership remained opaque, and ~~an~~ excessive political influence persisted (EC  
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60 2011; FoP 2007, 2011). Respect-Compared to the past, ~~the~~ access to resources became more balanced among the

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3 major parties. However, serious issues persisted: each party dominated its ministries, influencing appointments  
4 across the national and local civil services and the connected public sectors (Pešić 2007).  
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### 8 ***From electoral Democracy back to a Moderate Competitive Authoritarianism***

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10 Since 2012, the ~~Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS)~~ used its electoral strength to dominate  
11 political institutions and exploit state resources to hinder the opposition's chances of winning elections. While  
12 falling short of outright repression, these measures ~~have~~ tilted the playing field against oppositions, thereby  
13 allowing Vučić to stay in power without ~~the need~~ing to resort to massive electoral frauds. In what follows, the in-  
14 depth analysis of the three CA dimensions will demonstrate that Vučić's Serbia corresponds more to a CA than to  
15 an electoral or defective democracy.  
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#### 24 *Elections*

25 According to L&W (2010), elections are unfair when 1) at least one major candidate is barred for political reasons,  
26 2) centrally coordinated and tolerated electoral abuse is asserted by credible independent sources, 3) significant  
27 formal or informal impediments prevent the opposition from campaigning on equal footing, and 4) the electoral  
28 playing field is uneven.  
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33 To start with, no major candidate has been barred for political reasons under Vučić. Neither is there  
34 sufficient evidence showing the presence of centrally coordinated and tolerated electoral abuse. However, the  
35 electoral process has recently raised serious concerns (OSCE/ODIHR 2014, 2016, 2017). The OSCE/ODIHR  
36 electoral monitoring missions underlined the increasing relevance of phenomena similar to those observed during  
37 ~~the Milošević's~~ regime, ~~such~~ as voter intimidation, pressures on public sector employees, undue advantage of  
38 incumbency ~~that blurred~~ing the distinction between state and party activities, etc. (OSCE/ODIHR 2016). For  
39 example, in the 2016 election the OSCE/ODIHR and the Serbian NGO ~~Center~~Centre for Research, Transparency  
40 and Accountability (CTRA) reported serious irregularities in 4% of the polling stations, which could have  
41 influenced the final result since two party lists were around the 5% threshold (OSCE/ODIHR 2016; CTRA 2016).  
42 Moreover, despite an SNS landslide victory in 2016 local elections, even where the opposition won ruling parties  
43 allegedly adopted fraudulent behaviours inherited ~~from~~by the Milošević regime: in *Bela Palanka*, the opposition  
44 victory was annulled on illegal grounds, allowing the SNS to win the following elections (CTRA 2016). The 2017  
45 presidential elections exacerbated this type of violations, leading OSCE/ODIHR to conclude that 'unbalanced  
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3 media coverage and credible allegations of pressure on voters and employees of state-affiliated structures and a  
4 misuse of administrative resources tilted the playing field' in *Vučić's* favour.' (OSCE/ODIHR 2017, p. 1).

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7 In conclusion, in the 2010s electoral manipulations were similar but not as intense as those implemented  
8 by *Milošević*. Actually, elections in *Vučić's* Serbia were the least affected CA dimension. However, the absence  
9 of manifestly rigged elections does not mean that elections are fair: the uneven playing field, which will be  
10 discussed below, ~~has~~ contributed to *Vučić's* electoral victories, limiting the need to resort to massive electoral  
11 frauds.  
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### 16 17 18 *Civil Liberties*

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20 L&W (2010) evaluate civil liberties through four groups of indicators that focus on the harassment of both  
21 independent media, ~~which~~ stimulating a 'chilling effect' on their activities and encourageing self-censorship, and  
22 civil and political opposition ~~forcess~~ (Levitsky and Way 2010).  
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27 Violations of media freedom increased dramatically in *Vučić's* Serbia, as reflected by the declining trend  
28 of the NIT Independent Media Index, which places Serbia firmly in the 'Transitional or Hybrid Regime' category  
29 since 2015 (Figure 3). The Freedom of the Press score highlighted the same conclusion, ~~passing~~ shifting from 35  
30 in 2012 to 49 in 2017 (FoP 2012, 2017). The EU has repeatedly stressed this negative trend in its progress reports,  
31 ~~evaluating~~ assessing the overall environment as not conducive to the full exercise of freedom of expression (EC  
32 2014, 2015, 2016).  
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40 (FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE)  
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44 *Vučić's* pressures on media have become stronger over time, through strategies and tools similar, yet more  
45 moderate, to those adopted by *Milošević* (i.e. intimidation, harassment, soft-censorship, the use of state resources  
46 to build a friendly media system). Government pressures to fire journalists and cancel programs have recently  
47 become significant. ~~According to the Independent Journalist Association of Serbia, in 2013 the radio show *Mental*~~  
48 ~~*Exercises* was taken off the air because the host had discussed *Vučić's* private life (NIT 2014). In 2014, *Olja*~~  
49 ~~*Bečković*, the host of the nation's most popular political talk show *Utišak Nedelje*, claimed that her program was~~  
50 ~~cancelled because *Vučić* was angered by his opponents' frequent appearances on the show (NIT 2015; FoP~~  
51 ~~2015). *Olja Bečković*, the host of the then-nation's most popular political talk show *Utišak Nedelje*, represents a~~  
52 ~~striking example: in 2014, she claimed that her program was cancelled because *Vučić* was angered by his~~  
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3 ~~opponents' frequent appearances on the show (NIT 2015; FoP 2015)~~. The political purge conducted on *Radio-*  
4 *Television Vojvodina* (RTV) after the SNS victory in the 2016 local elections constitutes another worrying example  
5 since *Vojvodina* was the last relevant stronghold of the oppositions and because RTV had represented a shelter for  
6 journalists fired for political ~~contrasts-divergence~~ with the SNS (NIT 2017; FoP 2017).  
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11 Examples of censorship and harassment of journalists and independent media outlets multiplied in this  
12 period. In 2014, after the devastating summer floods, *Vučić* introduced a state of emergency, which allowed  
13 authorities to detain people for spreading panic over social media: three journalists were detained and 20 more  
14 were invited for questioning. Relevant websites and blogs (i.e. *Peščanik*, *BKTV News*, *Teleprompter*) were  
15 blocked, and the online edition of the newspaper *Blic* had to remove some critical contents (FoP 2015; Huszka  
16 2018). When the OSCE representative on media freedom, *Dunja Mijatović*, expressed concerns about these events,  
17 *Vučić* reacted accusing her of trying to smear him and his government (NIT 2015). In 2015, the former director of  
18 the daily *Kurir* accused *Vučić* and the owner of the pro-government *Informer* of asking him to make false allegation  
19 about the *Kurir's* owner (NIT 2016). ~~Moreover, the Adria media group's owner, Aleksandar Rodić, claimed he~~  
20 ~~had to disseminate biased news due to Vučić' threats to damage his company (FoP 2016). Although~~  
21 ~~Despite~~  
22 defamation ~~washas been~~ decriminalised in 2012 (NIT 2013), newspapers and journalists continue to be sued for  
23 insult, which remains a criminal offence: ~~although it is while~~ not punishable with imprisonment, jail time is still  
24 possible if the fine is not paid.  
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36 Media outlets specialised in investigative journalism, ~~such~~ as the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*  
37 (BIRN), the ~~Serbian~~ *Centre* *Centre* for Investigative Journalism (CINS) and the *Network for Investigating Crime*  
38 *and Corruption* (KRIK), have been harshly criticised by *Vučić*, prominent SNS politicians and pro-government  
39 media (i.e. *Informer*, *Srpski Telegraf*, *TV Pink*). ~~In 2014, after publishing a report that uncovered the misconduct~~  
40 ~~in a business deal involving the Air Serbia airline, Vučić accused BIRN of being inaccurate and financed by a~~  
41 ~~businessman facing corruption charges (FoP 2015), while pro-government media depicted BIRN and CINS~~  
42 ~~journalists as 'spies' backed by the EU (FoP 2015). In 2015, Vučić reacted to the publication of a BIRN report on~~  
43 ~~the suspicious contract for the reconstruction of the Tamnava mine calling the journalists liars who acted with EU~~  
44 ~~support (FoP 2016). In November 2015, the pro-government Informer and TV Pink attacked BIRN, CINS, and~~  
45 ~~KRIK accusing them of being funded by the EU as part of a plot to bring down Vučić (FoP 2016). In 2016, the~~  
46 ~~Informer accused KRIK director Stevan Dojčinović of being a 'French spy,' publishing details that could only be~~  
47 ~~obtained through illegal surveillance by security services (NIT 2017). In July 2016, the government hosted an~~  
48 ~~exhibition entitled 'Uncensored Lies,' in which media outlets that had criticised Vučić were depicted as liars~~  
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(Huszka 2018; NIT 2017). For example, in 2015 Vučić reacted to the publication of a BIRN report on the suspicious contract for the reconstruction of the Tamnava mine calling the journalists liars who acted by EU support (FoP 2016). In November 2015, the *Informer* and *TV Pink* attacked BIRN, CINS, and KRIK accusing them of being funded by the EU as part of a project to bring Vučić down (FoP 2016). In 2016, the *Informer* accused KRIK director Stevan Dojčinović of being a 'French spy,' publishing details that could only be obtained through illegal surveillance by security services (NIT 2017).

Threats and physical attacks on journalists intensified during this period, ~~passing~~ shifting from 13 in 2011 to 34 in 2015 (FoP 2016). According to the EC (2015), the rarity of criminal charges and final convictions in such cases creates a climate of impunity (EC 2015).

The discretionary use of public subsidies contributed to an improper political influence over the media. Due to the economic crisis and the overcrowded media environment, state funds have become crucial, representing up to 40% of an already insufficient advertising market (FoP 2016). A new Law on Advertising explicitly declared that it would not apply to public entities leaving government subsidies unregulated (Huszka 2018). ~~Moreover, poorly regulated state grant competitions for coverages that served the public interest left ample room for undue political influence (FoP 2015). In fact, according to BIRN only 20% of these funds were competitively allocated (EC 2014; FoP 2016). Furthermore, it has been reported that pro-government media have seen their tax debts rescheduled (FoP 2016). In conclusion, widespread self-censorship of journalists and soft-censorship of editors became dominant, since critical articles could have determined the loss of crucial state funds (EC 2014; FoP 2015, 2016; NIT 2017). as a result, self-censorship of journalists and soft-censorship of editors became widespread, since critical articles could have determined the loss of crucial state funds (EC 2014; FoP 2016; NIT 2017).~~

Attempts to suppress criticisms of civil and political oppositions ~~forces~~, and of independent public institutions, increased under *Vučić*. The reported cases of harassment against BIRN, CINS, and KRIK represent just few striking examples. According to the EC, 'civil society organisations and human rights defenders [...] continued to operate in a public and media environment often hostile to criticism' (EC 2016, p. 8). Let's consider '*Ne(da)vimo Beograd*,' a grassroots movement opposed to the residential project 'Belgrade Waterfront.' *Vučić*, senior SNS officials and pro-government media labelled the protesters as 'foreign mercenaries,' funded by outside powers to undermine the government. Moreover, in 2015 the police arrested activists handing out a newspaper produced by the group and confiscated a boat of the movement during the Belgrade Boat carnival, obstructing legitimate protests by illegitimate means (NIT 2016, 2017). Furthermore, in 2016 thugs demolished several buildings standing in the way of the Belgrade Waterfront project with the police remaining inactive. *Ne(da)vimo*

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3 *Beograd* staged a rally uncovering the SNS' clientelistic networks and the violent practices it had applied to enforce  
4 the economic interest of its allies (Günay and Dzihic 2016).

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7 In 2015, the ombudsman *Janković* received threats and intimidations due to his investigations into illegal  
8 military surveillance against oppositions. Instead of being supported by the government, pro-SNS media and the  
9 defence minister *Gašić* started a smear campaign against *Janković*, underlining the tendency to weaken independent  
10 institutions (NIT 2016; EC 2015).

### 16 *The Playing Field*

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18 L&W (2010) identify three major indicators of an uneven playing field: politicised state institutions, unbalanced  
19 media access, and uneven access to resources.

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22 *Politicization of State Institutions.* The blurred distinctions between state and party activities under *Vučić*  
23 led to a considerable politicization of state institutions. As discussed below, the SNS abused official public  
24 events to promote its political message during recent elections (OSCE/ODIHR 2014, 2016, 2017). State  
25 institutions and resources were frequently abused by incumbents: for example, in the 2016 elections public  
26 premises and vehicles were used in Novi Pazar and Zemun for campaign events, in Prokuplje the municipal  
27 administration purchased a billboard to advertise the SNS administration's achievements, and in Kragujevac  
28 settlements of unpaid salaries in the public sector and reimbursement of kindergarten fees were used to promote  
29 the SNS campaign. ~~for example, in 2016 elections public premises and vehicles, as well as settlements of unpaid~~  
30 ~~salaries in the public sector and reimbursement of kindergarten fees, were used in Novi Pazar, Zemun, Prokuplje~~  
31 ~~and Kragujevac to promote the SNS campaign~~ (OSCE/ODIHR 2016). Independent institutions often showed the  
32 tendency to favour the incumbent. For example, in 2017 elections the Anti-Corruption Agency adopted a  
33 superficial approach in checking private donations, leaving ample room for illicit campaign financing  
34 (OSCE/ODIHR 2017).

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36  
37 Since its rise to power, the SNS has constituted ~~both nationally and locally~~ the key channel for access to  
38 public sector jobs both nationally and locally (Günay and Dzihic 2016), ~~which~~ favoured unfair pressures on  
39 public employees. For instance, in the 2017 elections employees of state and state-affiliated institutions were  
40 pushed to support *Vučić* and to persuade subordinate employees, family members, and friends to do the same: they  
41 had even to provide pictures of completed ballots as evidences (OSCE/ODIHR 2017).

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44 *Uneven Access to the Media.* In the last day of the 2017 presidential campaign, seven out of the nine  
45 major dailies published the same front page with the *Vučić* logo (Nenadovic 2017), demonstrating the uneven  
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3 media access consolidated by Vučić and the pro-government media bloc he had built (Table 1). This outcome was  
4 favoured by the 2015 privatization of state-owned media: out of 73 public media, 34 were privatised, with 14 of  
5 them being bought by pro-SNS entrepreneurs, which recouped the costs through grants provided by SNS-  
6 controlled local authorities (OSCE/ODIHR 2016; NIT 2016). Hence, an EU-sponsored reform meant to increase  
7 the independence of these media ended up decreasing it: for example, the new management of *Radio-Television*  
8 *Pančevo* told employees that to keep their jobs they had to join the SNS (NIT 2017).  
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16 (TABLE 1 NEAR HERE)  
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20 With regard to the public sector, RTS overrepresented governing parties with respect to the oppositions,  
21 critical commentators and independent journalists (EC 2015). Table 2 confirms this bias for the 2014 elections. In  
22 the 2016 campaign, the SNS received three times more primetime in news programs than any other party  
23 (Istinomer 2016). Aggregated data for the 2017 elections are is astonishing: Vučić had ten times more airtime on  
24 national broadcasters than all other candidates combined (Reporter Without Border and BIRN 2017). This is also  
25 a consequence of the recent reforms on the financing of public TV stations, which left them underfunded and  
26 vulnerable to political influence (EC 2016).  
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34 Private media are even more biased (Table 2). In 2016 elections, the coverage in favour of the SNS went  
35 from 32% (*B92*) to 65% (*TV Kopernikus*) (Istinomer 2016). In general, all private national TV stations expressed  
36 a positive view of the SNS in their news programs, and even more so in the non-news programs outside of the  
37 news: *B92*, *Pink* and *Prva* each allocated to the government some 90% of their coverage to the government  
38 (OSCE/ODIHR 2016). In the 2017 elections ‘the activities of Mr. Vučić in his official capacity as the prime  
39 minister dominated the coverage on all national channels and leading dailies, with a notable exception of cable N1  
40 and daily *Danas*’ (OSCE/ODIHR 2017, p. 12).  
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49 (TABLE 2 NEAR HERE)  
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53 *Uneven Access to Resources.* Since Vučić’s rise to power, an unbalanced access to public and private  
54 resources contributed to skew the playing field in its favour. However, due to several issues (i.e. lack of  
55 transparency in campaign financing), I can provide evidences that highlights the presence of a problem but without  
56 detecting its magnitude and actual impact.  
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3 With regard to public resources, OSCE/ODIHR reports on recent elections documented that *Vučić's*  
4 campaign appearances were often combined with official events to legitimise the use of public funds for their  
5 financing. For example, in the 2016 campaign *Vučić* inaugurated factories, roads and even refurbished school  
6 toilettes which were broadcasted in prime-time news programs as events unrelated to the campaign (Istinomer  
7 2016). Moreover, the Interior, Defence and Foreign Ministers also campaigned during official visits to Kragujevac  
8 and Vranje (OSCE/ODIHR 2016). ~~Moreover, Furthermore,~~ as underlined above, numerous allegations were ~~also~~  
9 reported about the misuse of state and public resources by ruling parties (Istinomer 2016), which were also  
10 documented in all the recent electoral campaigns (OSCE/ODIHR 2014, 2017). In term of financial resources for  
11 electoral campaigns, the following example allows us to guess the magnitude of the gap between the SNS and  
12 other parties: in the 2016 campaign (OSCE/ODIHR 2016) the SNS-led coalition gained 43% of all public funds,  
13 reaching 53% if the junior partner in government, the SPS-led Coalition, is considered, while the DP, which ruled  
14 Serbia for most of the 2000s and then became the major opposition party, received just ~~the~~ 6%.

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16 With regard to private financial resources for electoral campaigns, anecdotal evidences suggests a greater  
17 capacity of incumbents to collect unfair donations from private actors. For example, in 2017 elections several  
18 NGOs contested the Anti-Corruption Agency decision to verify only the actual existence of private donors. A  
19 deeper analysis would have uncovered situations like that emerged in *Niš*, where poor people were enrolled as  
20 donors to 'launder' money from unknown sources (OSCE/ODIHR 2017). This example ~~illustrates~~ ~~give us the idea~~  
21 ~~of~~ how ruling parties may have received unfair support from close economic interests, presumably in exchange  
22 for the re-distribution of resources through public tenders and 'friendly' policies. The residential project 'Belgrade  
23 Waterfront' represents a striking example. The tendering and contracting of the project faced massive criticisms  
24 since it was awarded without public consultation. According to Günay and Džihic (2016), this project was crucial  
25 in re-distributing public resources to pro-SNS business networks, and highlighted how personal proximity and  
26 loyalty to *Vučić* was essential for participating in the big business game.

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28 This uneven access to resources may have contributed to skew the playing field in *Vučić's* favour if we  
29 consider that in the 2016 elections the lack of financial resources limited the oppositions' ~~s~~ ability to purchase  
30 campaign advertising on billboards, ~~and~~ in the pressprint and electronic media, while the SNS could afford to be  
31 ubiquitous on all kinds of media (OSCE/ODIHR 2016).

## 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 **Conclusion** 58 59 60

As demonstrated by ~~both the various democracy indexes (V-DEM in particular), Serbia under Vučić experienced a process of democratic backsliding; most of these indexes also confirm a regression to some form of electoral autocracy. The quantitative data provided by V-DEM indexes and the~~ qualitative analysis based on the CA framework ~~provided the definitive confirmation of these findings, specifying that Serbia has recently re-established a CA regime. Vučić's Serbia has recently undergone a process of autocratization toward a moderate CA.~~

The peculiar features of this case appear to strengthen the pessimistic side of the CoD debate: if we are not yet witnessing a third reverse wave, the recent Serbian autocratization constitutes a small but significant step in that direction. Firstly, this case supports Diamond's (2015) pessimistic thesis, since it represents yet another democratic breakdown. ~~H:~~ hence, Serbia deserves to be added to the broad trend of global authoritarian retreat triggered by elected leaders, which includes cases like Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Senegal, Ukraine, Thailand, Mozambique, but also EU candidate countries (Turkey) (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; Castaldo 2018a) and, to a lesser extent, EU member states (Poland and Hungary).

Secondly, Serbia confirms only in part Bermeo's conclusions (2016), adding a new perspective ~~due~~ thanks to the double transition to and from democracy and ~~to~~ the diachronic comparison with the *Milošević* CA regime. The qualitative analysis identifies clear evidences of both Bermeo's executive aggrandisement and strategic election manipulations in *Vučić's* Serbia, which, as claimed by Bermeo, led to the establishment of a more moderate form of CA. *Milošević*, for example, exerted ~~a~~ greater control over the electoral process, if we consider that in ~~the~~ 2016 elections irregularities were reported in only 4% of the polling stations while in ~~the~~ 2000s elections this figure reached 15% (OSCE/ODIHR 2016; Levitsky and Way 2010). Moreover, nothing comparable to the assassination attempts suffered by *Drašković* (Bideleux and Jeffries 2007) or the harassment of the *Otpor* movement *Otpor* (Dolenec 2013) emerged during the 2010s. ~~Despite/Although~~ media freedom was the sector most violated by *Vučić* (Castaldo and Pinna 2018), the harshness of the 1998 Information Law was never reached. ~~At the same time, the new regime is not consolidated. The descent into CA is very recent, the unwillingness to resort to massive electoral fraud and repression makes the regime more dependent on a genuine electoral support respect to the 1990s, and the progresses in the EU accession process may limit further violations.~~

However, Serbia does not seem to support Bermeo's optimism, which is based on the idea that the persistence of democratic legacies makes these more moderate autocracies easier to re-democratise once changes in the incentive structure that triggered the backsliding intervene. Thanks to the double transition to and from democracy, the Serbian case demonstrates the existence of a second path in stark contrast ~~with/to~~ Bermeo's optimism: democratic transitions from moderate autocracies will likely allow authoritarian legacies to persist and

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3 favour a democratic backsliding when new changes intervene in the given incentive structure. During the 1990s,  
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5 *Milošević* installed a CA where democratic norms and institutions were present (Levitsky and Way 2010). The  
6  
7 hybrid nature of this regime favoured a continuous transition to democracy where the survival of authoritarian  
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9 legacies ~~enabled~~ allowed the establishment of only a defective democracy (Castaldo and Pinna 2019; Dolenc  
10  
11 2013). A change in the incentive structure that favoured the 2000 transition (i.e. economic crisis, weakening of the  
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13 active role of international actors, etc.) is probably among the most relevant factors explaining the 2010s Serbian  
14  
15 autocratization. Hence, Bermeo is correct when she claims that moderate autocracies are more prone to  
16  
17 democratization, but fails to consider that, as in Serbia, the most likely outcome of this process is a fragile and  
18  
19 unconsolidated democracy, which, in turn, constitutes the perfect candidate for a new democratic backsliding.

20  
21 Thirdly, the incentive structure seems indeed to have changed, leading the Serbian case to challenge the  
22  
23 role of the international dimension in democratization processes. In L&W's terms (~~Levitsky and Way~~ 2010),  
24  
25 democratization in post-cold war CAs is explained by a high linkage to the west: hence, autocratization should  
26  
27 be unlikely in cases that present this feature. In Serbia, the international dimension was crucial in favouring the  
28  
29 ousting of *Milošević* (Castaldo 2016), and played an important role in keeping Serbia above the democratic  
30  
31 threshold in the 2000s (Castaldo and Pinna 2019). In the 2010s, thanks to the acquired EU candidate status, the  
32  
33 level of linkage to the west even increased and, despite that, Serbia under Vučić went back to CA. What emerges  
34  
35 from the Serbian experience, which strengthens a pessimistic perspective about the future of democracy, is a likely  
36  
37 shift in the policy preferences of international democracy promoters, which are increasingly ~~prioritising~~ privileging  
38  
39 security issues (i.e. stability of the Balkans, contrast to the growing Russian influence) ~~respect to~~ over  
40  
41 democratization. In fact, ~~o~~ in several occasions the EU has recently demonstrated that ~~it~~ could be unwilling to  
42  
43 push too hard on democratic improvements in Serbia. For example, despite the presence of serious concerns  
44  
45 regarding media freedom in numerous EU progress reports, in February 2015 the EU Commissioner for European  
46  
47 Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement *Johannes Hahn* questioned the validity of claims about self-censorship  
48  
49 and demanded ~~more~~ focus ~~more~~ on real evidences than ~~on~~ rumours (Fraczek et al. 2016). Despite *Vučić* directly  
50  
51 and repeatedly ~~having~~ accused the EU of plotting against him to undermine his government (FoP 2015, 2016),  
52  
53 European institutions still seems to support the Serbian president. This conclusion is consistent with Börzel's  
54  
55 (2015) finding according to which international democracy promoters can unwittingly enhance autocracy by  
56  
57 stabilizing illiberal incumbent regimes.

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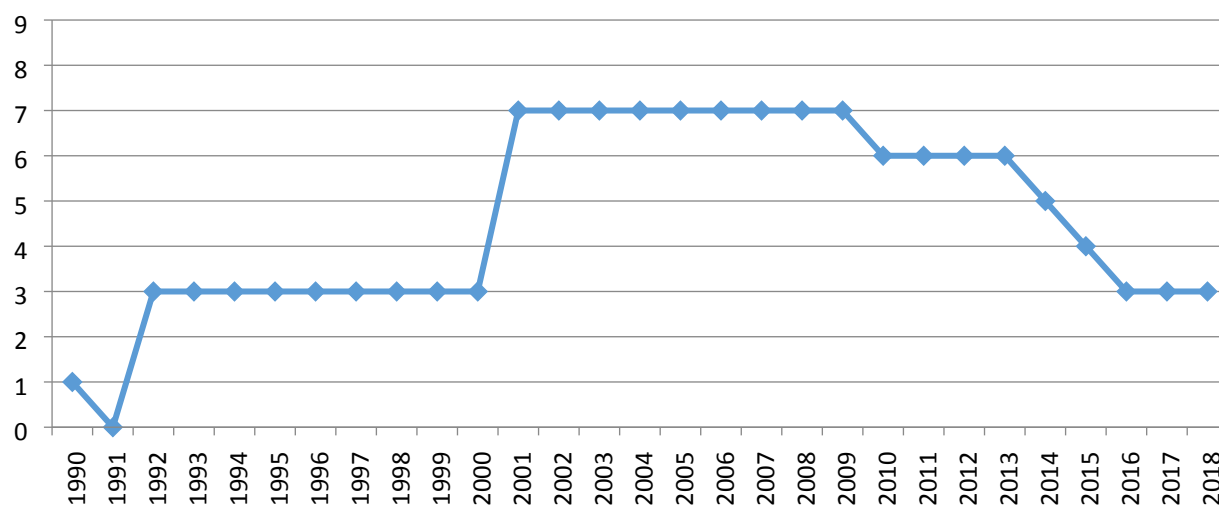
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Figure 1. V-DEM Regime of the World (RoW) Index, with lower and upper bound categories. Serbia 1990-2018<sup>87</sup>

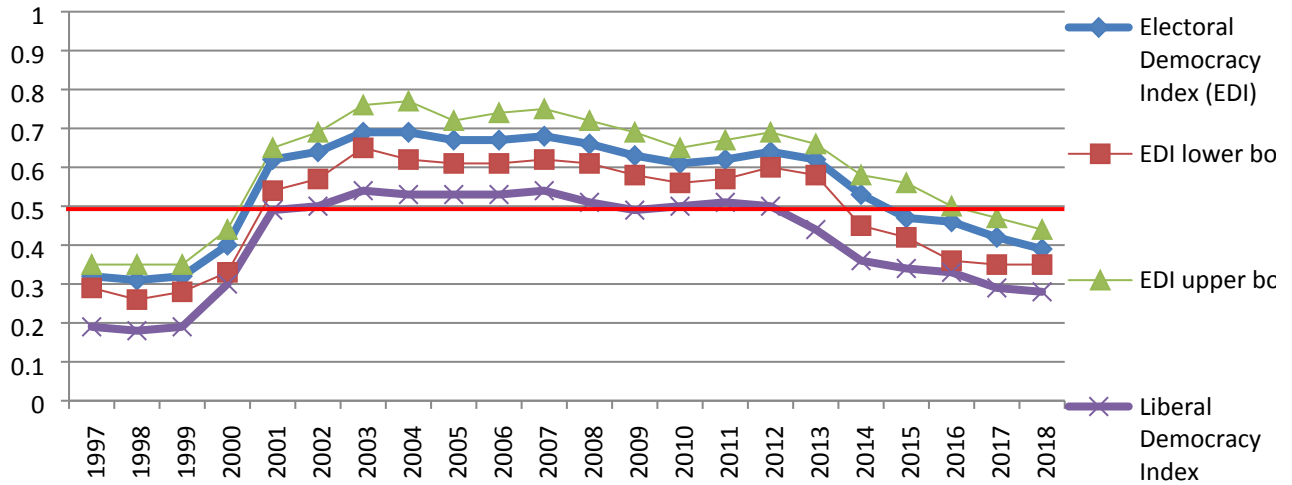


Source: [www.v-dem.net/](http://www.v-dem.net/), dataset Version 9.

Note: closed autocracy (0); closed autocracy upper bound (1); electoral autocracy lower bound (2); electoral autocracy (3); electoral autocracy upper bound (4); electoral democracy lower bound (5); electoral democracy (6); electoral democracy upper bound (7); liberal democracy lower bound (8); liberal democracy (9).

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Figure 2. V-DEM Electoral and Liberal Democracy Indexes, Serbia 1997-2018

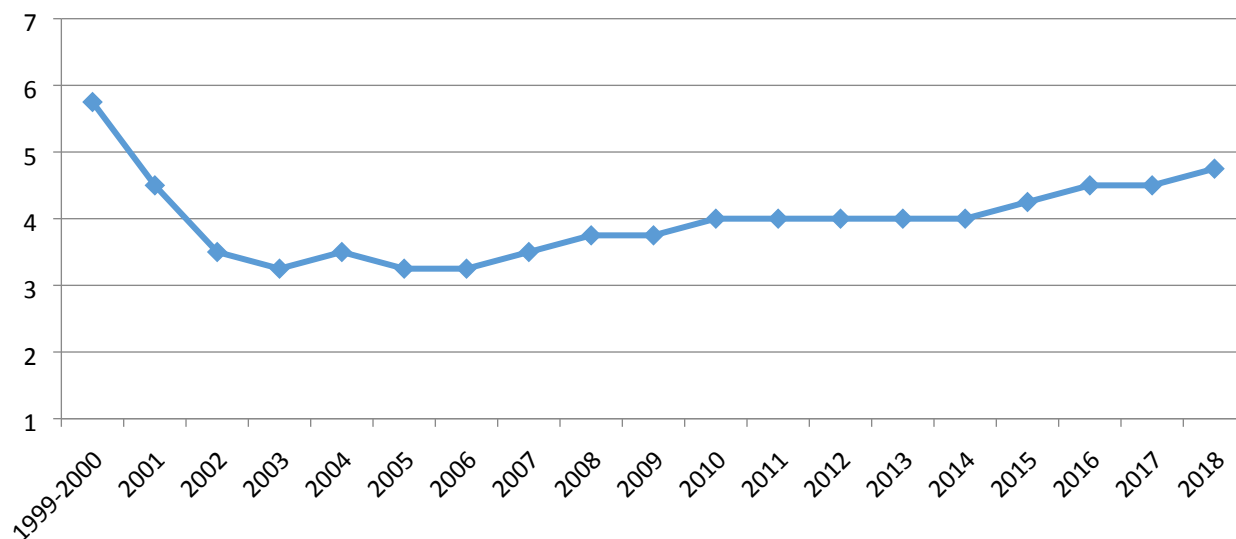


Source: [www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net), dataset Version 9.-

Note: 0.5 constitutes the minimum threshold for both electoral and liberal democracies.

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Figure 3. Nation in Transit (NIT) Independent Media Index, Serbia 1999-2018



Source: NIT (1999-2018).

Note: The NIT index runs from 1 (most democratic) to 7 (least democratic). The ratings most relevant in this case are those in the middle: Semi-Consolidated Democracies (3.00-3.99) and Transitional or Hybrid Regimes (4.00-4.99).

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Table 1. Magnitude and composition of the pro-SNS media bloc

	Audience share (%)	Composition
Televisions	40.21	Public TVs (RTS1, RTS2, RTV1: 23.17 percent); Pink Media Group (Pink, Pink2, Pink 3: 16.44 percent); Maxim Media Group (Studio B: 0.60 percent)
Radio	42.6	S Media (Radio S and Radio S2: 19.6 percent); Maxim Media (Hit FM, TDI: 11.90 percent); Public Radios (Radio Belgrade 1 and Radio 202: 9.40 percent); Pink Media Group (Pink Radio: 1.7 percent)
Newspapers	50.73	Insajder Tim (Informer: 12.74 percent); Adria Media Group (Kurir and Newsweek: 13.8 percent); Medijska Mreza (Srpski Telegraf: 3.82 percent); etc.

Note: Reporter Without Borders and BIRN (2017)

Table 2. 2014 parliamentary elections, political and election-related news coverage (%).

	SNS	SPS	DP	LDP	Minor Parties
Public TVs	27	16	10	5	42
Private TVs	40	15	7	6	32
Private print media	34	16	13	6	31

Note: OSCE/ODIHR (2014).

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