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### **Democratic Parties with Undemocratic Practices: Assessing Foreign Assistance to Political Parties in Serbia Before and After Regime Change**

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Marlene Spoerri is a PhD candidate with the Universiteit van Amsterdam. Her doctoral research explores the effects of foreign assistance to political parties in Serbia in the run-up to and aftermath of regime change. She pays specific attention to how such assistance may contribute to or detract from processes of democratisation. Marlene holds a Master's degree in political science.

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## Abstract

Political parties have long been regarded as a staple of pluralist politics without which modern democracy is virtually inconceivable. Nevertheless, while the importance of political parties to modern-day democracy is widely acknowledged, the utility of internal party democracy remains bitterly contested. Despite this controversy, Western governments have made support for intra-party democracy a core component of foreign assistance to political parties in new democracies. This paper examines the effectiveness of external efforts to support intra-party democracy in Serbia. Among the questions posed are the following: have external efforts to support internal party democracy in Serbia borne results? In which instances and under what circumstances can we speak of success? Should external efforts to promote internal party democracy in Serbia be continued in the future and, if so, how might they be adapted to contemporary circumstances? As shall be argued, internal party democracy has not risen significantly since the advent of foreign assistance to political parties. On the contrary, Robert Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy' appears all too relevant in a Serbian context. However, the lack of intra-party democracy in ostensibly pro-democratic political parties is troubling, not least because foreign governments – the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom included – continue to support political party assistance projects in Serbia in much the same fashion that they did some ten years ago. Given the numerous obstacles threatening Serbia's transition, such funds might very well be better invested elsewhere. The bulk of my findings are based on party statutes, domestic media coverage and personal interviews party members. Given the fact that party aid is offered solely to members of the Serbia's so-called 'democratic bloc', I concentrate on just five parties: the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party of Serbia, the G17 Plus, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Serbian Renewal Movement.

## 1. Introduction

Political parties have long been regarded as a staple of pluralist politics without which modern democracy is virtually inconceivable.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, while the importance of political parties to modern-day democracy is widely acknowledged, the utility of internal party democracy remains bitterly contested.<sup>2</sup> Where scholars such as Susan Scarrow maintain that it augments the participatory dimensions of representative democracy, others including Giovanni Sartori argue that internal party democracy is ultimately undesirable. Despite this controversy, Western governments have made support for intra-party democracy a core component of foreign assistance to political parties in new democracies. This paper examines the effectiveness of such assistance in one new democracy, that of Serbia.

As shall be demonstrated, Serbia's political parties suffer from democratic deficits that are emblematic of post-communist parties. They are often dominated by charismatic leaders who take little note of the rank-and-file, are largely intolerant of internal dissent and boast decision-making processes which lack transparency. By almost any measure, they provide further credence to Robert Michels's iron law of oligarchy.<sup>3</sup> However, these very same parties have been the recipients of considerable foreign assistance aimed at bolstering their democratic credentials. For over a decade, their members sat through lectures and training courses aimed at democratising their organisational practices. In some cases, they even accepted material assistance. But are Serbia's political parties today more internally democratic as a result? Or do persistent failings suggest that such aid is better directed elsewhere? To answer these questions, a comparative analysis is employed in which the state of intra-party democracy before and after the onset of foreign assistance is contrasted. As shall be shown, clear instances of success are few and far between.

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1 See for example: Ingrid van Biezen: *How Political Parties Shape Democracy*, in: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2004 (Vol. 4), No. 16.

2 The terms 'internal party democracy' and 'intra-party democracy' are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

3 According to which all organisations, parties included, are prone to oligarchic tendencies. Robert Michels: *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, New York: The Free Press, 1962.

In many respects, Serbia's parties are no more democratic today – a full decade after the onset of foreign assistance – than they were some two decades ago.

To substantiate these claims, the following pages proceed by offering an overview of the foreign assistance effort to political parties in Serbia. This is followed with an in-depth analysis of how party structures have evolved since the onset of multiparty politics in 1990. The paper concludes with a general assessment of the utility of foreign assistance. First, however, we will begin with an overview of the arguments for and against intra-party democracy.

## 2. Intra-party Democracy

Intra-party democracy refers to those methods and mechanisms whereby parties' governance processes become more inclusive and more representative of the party membership in its entirety.<sup>4</sup> Amidst their efforts to spread democracy abroad, governments in North America and Western Europe support projects which seek to bolster parties' democratic attributes. This means, among other things, helping the governance processes of political parties in new democracies to become more inclusive, less centralised and further institutionalised. Efforts targeting intra-party democracy form just one instrument of what is a larger tool kit known as political party assistance (henceforth, PPA). However, according to Thomas Carothers, bolstering intra-party democracy is arguably 'the single most common objective party aid groups talk about when they discuss their work'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there seems to be wide consensus amongst donors that intra-party democracy is both a desirable and feasible objective.

This consensus is surprising in the light of the intense controversy which surrounds intra-party democracy in the academic world. Critiques of intra-party democracy are so numerous, in fact, that three different variants can be distinguished: the argument that it is impossible to achieve, the belief that it is undesirable and the conviction that it is ultimately harmful.<sup>6</sup> However, donors appear to take no heed of such arguments. They are convinced that the benefits of intra-party democracy extend not only to parties themselves but also to the larger democratic process. Their means of defence is thus at once both normative and instrumental. With regards to the former, assisters argue that in drawing their members into the folds of decision making, the distance between the elector and the elected is narrowed, and the democratic process thereby enhanced.<sup>7</sup> But they also believe that intra-party democracy can potentially provide political parties a competitive edge. Susan Scarrow writes that '...parties using internally democratic procedures are likely to select more capable and appealing leaders, to have more responsive policies, and, as a result, to enjoy greater electoral success.'<sup>8</sup> It is for these reasons that foreign governments support efforts to democratise parties' governance processes.

There is surprisingly little variation with respect to the methods by which intra-party democracy is supported. Thus party aid providers will seek to: 1) lecture party leaders on the benefits of intra-party democracy; 2) provide expertise on the subject; 3) train rank-and-file members on internal party communication; 4) train top party brass on how to implement and interpret intra-party opinion polls; 5) support events (including party congresses, conferences, etc.) during which the subject of intra-party democracy may be

4 Susan Scarrow: *Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Implementing Intra-Party Democracy*, in: National Democracy Institute for International Affairs, 2005, here p. 6.

5 Thomas Carothers: *Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, here p. 95.

6 To this first group belong Robert Michels and Petr Ostrogorski. The second group includes Giovanni Sartori and Elmer E. Schattschneider. Maurice Duverger and John May belong, among others, to the third group.

7 Augustine Titani Magolowondo: *Internal Party Democracy: The State of Affairs and the Road Ahead*, in: Netherlands Institute of Multiparty Politics, 2007, here p. 2.

8 Susan Scarrow: *Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Implementing Intra-Party Democracy*, in: National Democracy Institute for International Affairs, 2005, here p. 3.

debated by party members, and 6) have party representatives from other new democracies share their own party's successes. The following section examines how these tools have been employed in Serbia.

### 3. Political Party Assistance in Serbia

Multiple actors are engaged in the provision of external support to political parties in Serbia. Certainly the highest profile actors, as well as those with the greatest budgets at their disposal, are the American party institutes: the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute of International Affairs (NDI). Somewhat less well endowed bodies are the five German foundations – the *Stiftungen* – of which the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) are the most active in the field of party work.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the UK's Westminster Foundation for Democracy provides support to political parties in Serbia, as do – on a far smaller scale – numerous sister parties throughout Western Europe.

In most instances, donors have been working in Serbia for just over a decade, having set up shop in the immediate aftermath of the Zajedno demonstrations. For four months, from November 1996 to February 1997, Serbia's democratic opposition launched daily protests against the Milosevic regime. It was the magnitude and longevity of these demonstrations that placed Serbia on the radar of the world's promoters of democracy. Convinced that a democratic dawn was upon them, donors set their sights on Serbia's democratic parties.

The earliest efforts concentrated on the larger members of Serbia's democratic opposition, including the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and the Democratic Party (DS), but were soon expanded to include smaller parties such as the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). In the aftermath of regime change, aid providers would add to that list some of Serbia's youngest parties, among them the G17 Plus and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). All the while, however, pro-establishment parties like the Serbian Radical Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia were excluded from foreign support with the justification that they harboured anti-democratic sentiments.<sup>10</sup> As such, only the aforementioned five parties – the DS, DSS, G17 Plus, LDP, and SPO – will be the focus of this paper.

The initial wave of foreign assistance was little more than of a token of what was to come. In some cases (the German *Stiftungen* for example), donors relied exclusively on one or two local operatives working from their homes. In others (the IRI and NDI), donors hired foreign resident directors who were charged with opening offices and scouting out potential partners. The first projects donors supported were similarly modest. Having come on the heels of oppositional victories in former Milosevic-strongholds like Kragujevac, Nis, Cacak and Novi Sad, aid providers began by focusing on the mechanics of party organisation. Given that most parties in Serbia either lacked local branches and/or were terribly under-resourced outside of Belgrade, most of the first training courses were simple capacity-building measures based on the transfer of basic skills. According to Ellen Yount, IRI's first resident director in Serbia, '[t]he purpose of aid funding [at this period] was to bring more transparency to the political process. Milosevic had an overwhelming advantage in terms of resources, monopoly of media, etc. We helped parties to try to understand the tools and techniques they needed to stay on a level playing field.'<sup>11</sup> As time passed, donors branched out into further areas, shifting from activities that were solely focused on local party offices to national headquarters.

By 1999, the war in Kosovo had broken out and the removal of Milosevic topped the international agenda. Levels of foreign assistance to Serbia's democratic opposition rose considerably during this period.<sup>12</sup> At-

9 Of the six German *Stiftungen*, only the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung is not active in Serbia.

10 Throughout my interview with party aid providers, the SRS and SPS were labeled 'anti-democratic'. Western donors have largely held off from working with such parties. See for example: USAID Political Party Assistance Policy, Washington: United States Agency for International Development, 2003.

11 Interview with Ellen Yount in Washington, DC, on April 14, 2008.

12 See for example: Thomas Carothers: Ousting Foreign Strongmen: Lessons Learned from Serbia, in: Carnegie Endowment

tention shifted to those efforts that donors' believed would most rapidly result in regime change. Perhaps understandably, intra-party democracy was not amongst these efforts. Only after Milosevic was ousted in October 2000 did intra-party democracy become a chief concern for foreign donors. Indeed, aid provider reports and promotional literature continue to list intra-party democracy as one of just a handful of critical goals to be accomplished in Serbia. To this end, Serbia's parties have been the target of a transatlantic effort to strengthen internal democratic practices. Thus, the IRI has helped parties conduct internal public opinion polls so that the will of the membership might be clearly assessed. The German *Stiftungen* have provided support for party conferences in which internal party democracy was a subject of discussion. At the same time, the NDI, which arguably has placed the greatest emphasis on intra-party democracy, has provided training and material support for intranet-based communication systems and has also offered expertise on how to implement more inclusive selection methods, particularly those based on a US-like primary system.

The following pages assess the effects of such efforts by examining the range of choices Serbia's political parties have made with respect to intra-party democracy. In so doing, this paper relies not only on party statutes, but also on interviews with party members and domestic media reports, both of which help to elucidate the state of intra-party democracy in practice.

## 4. The Evolution of Intra-Party Democracy in Serbia

By general consensus, Serbia's parties leave much to be desired when it comes to internal democracy.<sup>13</sup> Like most parties in post-communist Europe, they are dominated by strong leaders, intolerant of internal dissent and poorly institutionalised.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, when parties were first formed in the early 1990s their democratic deficits were abundant. Vesna Pesic, a former party president herself, explains it thus: the lack of intra-party democracy in Serbia '...was understandable when the only goal was bringing down the Milosevic regime. It was not necessary to develop wider forms of internal democracy...'<sup>15</sup> But are there indications that Serbia's parties are gradually becoming more democratic? Is there reason to believe that foreign assistance is working in this regard? To answer these questions, this section examines the evolution of four key aspects of intra-party organisation: the prerogatives assigned to party presidents, the methods of leader election, the means of candidate selection and the rules regarding internal dissent.

### 4.1. Presidential Prerogatives

Historically, Serbia's party presidents have played a central role in their parties' decision-making processes. In most cases, they oversaw the founding of their parties. In some instances, party presidents have even come to define them.<sup>16</sup> Oddly, however, considering their infamous reputations in the 1990s, Serbia's party presidents have actually grown more, rather than less, powerful with the passing of time. Despite the calls from those giving assistance for greater inclusivity in the decision-making process, the growing concentration of power in party leaders' hands suggests that parties have steadily become more exclusive and less democratic as a result.

Serbia's first party statutes awarded surprisingly limited powers to the top party brass. The DS statute of 1990, for example, claimed its president's sole prerogative was that of calling the main board into session.<sup>17</sup> The powers of the DSS president were portrayed as similarly meagre in the party's first statute

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for International Peace, 2001, No. 5.

13 See for example: Vladimir Goati: *Partijske borbe u Srbiji u postoktobarskom razdoblju*, Belgrade: Freiderich Ebert Stiftung, 2006.

14 This is confirmed in the work of Ingrid van Biezen, Petr Kopecky, and Paul G. Lewis, among others.

15 Vesna Pesic: (De)Blokiranje tranzicije I unutarstranacka demokratija, in Zoran Lutovac, ed.: *Demokratija u Politickim Strankama Srbije*, Belgrade: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2006, here p. 23.

16 This is certainly the case for the SPO and DSS, neither of which has experienced a change in leadership.

17 DS Statute 1990, Art. 14.

issued in 1992. Over the course of the following decade, however, party statutes awarded an ever greater array of powers to the position of the party president. Thus, by 1998, the DSS president formally had the right to coordinate party work, to propose candidates for the executive board and vice presidents, as well as to compose an electoral list of MPs. By 2001, he or she was also awarded the power to initiate dismissal procedures for the party presidium, council and electoral board. Today, presidents' powers are even more impressive.

Thus, amongst other prerogatives, the LDP president can: lead the work of the presidium; propose candidates for the presidium, party secretary and presidium secretary; propose candidates for main party functionaries on the national level; nominate the party spokesperson, and recommend an unlimited number of members to be co-opted to the main board.<sup>18</sup> The G17 Plus party president is somewhat weaker, but also has the right to propose a large number – up to 60 – permanent members on the main board.<sup>19</sup> For the DSS, the prerogatives of the president stretch even further: he or she is charged with nominating all the members of the presidium (including all the party's vice presidents), up to 24 members of the main board, three members of the party's monitoring board, as well as all members of the party's disciplinary commission.<sup>20</sup> According to the DS's latest statute, the party president may select candidates for deputy president, vice president, members of the presidium, president of the executive board, secretary and director of the party, secretary of the presidium and members of the political council.<sup>21</sup>

The increasing institutionalisation of power in the hands of party leaders has occurred progressively and shows little sign of abating. While it does not necessarily indicate that party presidents have grown more powerful *per se* (party statutes having been poorly elaborated in the 1990s), it certainly indicates that PPA has done little to stem the tide of top-down party politics.

## 4.2. Leader Election

Given their considerable powers, the means by which party leaders are elected is of considerable importance. For advocates of intra-party democracy, aid providers included, it is arguably the most important aspect of a party's organisational life. In Serbia, the process of selecting leaders has historically been and in most cases remains a tightly controlled affair. As has been the case for almost two decades, party statutes dictate that leaders are elected at party congresses, a body which includes hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of members. Throughout the 1990s, electoral processes were largely uncompetitive and under-institutionalised. The DSS's president, for example, ran unopposed for the entire decade. Moreover, party statutes were silent with regards to the details of the electoral process. It was unclear, for example, how potential competitors might be nominated. If we measure levels of leadership turnover, we see that of the three parties under review which were operational in the period between 1990–1997 (DS, DSS, and SPO), just one experienced a change in leadership: the DS.

There is no systemic evidence that internal electoral processes have become any less problematic since the onset of PPA. While electoral processes have certainly been further elucidated in party documents,<sup>22</sup> these rules and regulations are rarely upheld in practice. A prime example is the rule of the secret ballot. In 2004, the DS's congress caused considerable stir when the president of the DS's Electoral Committee alleged that prior to their submission the ballots of assembly delegates from local municipalities were screened by municipal presidents.<sup>23</sup> Two years later suspicions were further aroused when in the days preceding the assembly meeting documents were uncovered revealing the precise outcome of the congress'

18 LDP Statute 2007, Art. 24.

19 G17 Plus State 2006, Art. 31.

20 DSS Statute 2007, Art. 22, Art. 16, Art. 86, Art. 15.

21 DS Statute 2006, Art. 39.

22 Party documents currently provide greater insight into nomination procedures, for example.

23 Jovana Gligorijevic: Skupstina Demokratske Stranke: Kontrolisani Glasovi, in: Vreme, No. 790, 23 February 2006: <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=444128>. This phenomenon was also confirmed during my interviews with former DS members.

decisions. Although the DS affair was certainly the highest profile case of fraud, there is little reason to suspect that it occurred in isolation.

Arguably, however, some good did come of the DS's debacles. In 2006, the DS unveiled a dramatic step towards greater intra-party democracy: the introduction of the primary system. Beginning in 2010, DS presidents will be elected by *all* party members through a secret ballot system. This represents a major departure from standard practice and could, quite possibly, set a precedent for the rest of Serbia's parties to follow.

Unfortunately, the DS's decision is the exception, not the rule. Electoral processes are largely closed affairs and have improved little with respect to competition. Indeed, since the onset of assistance, just two of the five parties reviewed here have experienced a change in leadership: the DS and G17 Plus. In the case of the DS, it was in fact only the assassination of the party leader which prompted the transition. Such evidence suggests that, on the whole, we can only speak of limited improvement in electoral practices.

### 4.3. Candidate Selection

Candidate selection is also important for proponents of intra-party democracy. In any representative democracy, one of political parties' most important functions is that of recruiting individuals (i.e. candidates) who will run for office in their name.<sup>24</sup> Over the course of the past two decades, the selection of candidates has been and indeed remains an inordinately centralised and exclusive procedure. Unlike the election of candidates, there is virtually no indication that such processes have become any more democratic since the onset of PPA.

In the 1990s, party statutes maintained that party presidents and presidencies played the central role in candidate selection by determining the potential pool of party MPs. It was thus this small party elite (in some cases, an individual) which composed the list of MPs. Although it was ultimately up to the main board to approve that list, they often did so with little deliberation.

This process remains virtually identical today, with the only exception being that the statutes of the DS and DSS now explicitly state that party presidents should take the wishes of municipal boards into consideration.

### 4.4. Tolerance of Internal Dissent

One of the basic principles of intra-party democracy concerns the right of party members to voice their opinions openly and without fear of reprisal. Ideally, it also means that members have the right to act or organise on the basis of those opinions, and even to form factions if they so desire. As shall be shown, the evolution of party tolerance in Serbia is somewhat contradictory in this respect.

The parties' inability to accommodate internal dissent was legendary throughout the 1990s. Then, as today, no party permitted internal factions; nor did they in practice allow members to organise on the basis of such differences. One product of their intolerance was a spin-off effect, whereby minority groups would splinter off to form their own rival organisations. During this period, the DS alone was directly responsible for having spawned three separate parties.<sup>25</sup> These parties, in turn, became a source of further off-shoots. Thus, in 1997 disgruntled DSS members went on to form the Christian Democratic Party of Serbia. In 1995, members were put off by Vuk Draskovic's authoritarian tendencies and left the SPO to form the Assembly National Party. In the past few years, the number of parties formed as off-shoots has dropped considerably. The most recent examples are the creation of the LDP (an offshoot of the DS) and the formation of the Serbian Democratic Renewal Movement (formerly of the SPO). This would seem to indicate that parties have become more accommodating to competing perspectives.

24 See for example: Ingrid van Biezen: How Political Parties Shape Democracy, in: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2004 (Vol. 4), No. 16.

25 These were: the DSS, the Serbian Liberal Party, and Democratic Center.

However, there is equally powerful evidence that political parties have become even more intolerant, a prime example of which is Serbia's new constitution which effectively places MPs' mandates at their parties' disposal.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the 1990s, Serbia's parties thus currently have the right to revoke their MPs' mandates at any time and place someone of their own choosing. In practical terms, this means that MPs are no longer free to vote as their conscience dictates but must abide by the party line. This unprecedented ruling effectively represents the further institutionalisation of the party's power over individual party members. It is in fact a major step *away* from the further democratisation of Serbia's political parties.

## 5. Conclusion: A Slim Record of Achievement?

The story sketched above is troubling for many reasons. Political apathy runs high throughout Serbia and a lack of intra-party democracy does little to deter it. My own interviews with current and former party members exposed significant disillusionment with the state of internal party politics. Hence the commonness of statements like 'Ceda is an autocrat'<sup>27</sup> or 'we are not yet ready for internal party democracy'.<sup>28</sup> Few party members admitted to being part of the decision-making process. Many expressed frustration at their own inability to bring about change and the top-down manner in which decisions were made. As a consequence, quite a few of those with whom I spoke had either abandoned their positions within their parties or opted to withdraw from party life at the time of writing. The parties' habit of ostracising their most competent members only hampers the larger political process and arguably threatens the longevity of democracy in Serbia.

It is for reasons such as these that donors have sought to support the democratisation of Serbia's political parties. In many respects, it seems they have failed. Apart from a few scattered victories (of which the DS's future use of the primary voting system ranks highest), they can point to few overarching successes. This is a verdict all too familiar for practitioners on the ground, but one which donors have yet to accept. In my discussions with party trainers working in Serbia, many expressed frustration with the mission they had been given. In the words of one practitioner, 'internal democracy is not realistic. I can't afford, as a professional, to have some set goals that are not achievable'.<sup>29</sup> According to another – a former resident director of NDI – in fact, 'internal party democracy means nothing'.<sup>30</sup> But if practitioners themselves are so sceptical, why do they bother? Quite simply, because intra-party democracy sells – at least amongst the assistance community. Regardless of the ample criticisms which have been lodged against the endeavour, donors are convinced of its normative value and are willing to devote resources accordingly.

The issue here is not that donors have identified intra-party democracy as desirable. The problem lies in their assumption that they have the means to bring it about. However, there is scant evidence that democracy promoters can succeed in this regards.<sup>31</sup> Although they can certainly lead by example, there is little reason to suspect that internal party democracy can be fostered by actors outside the political process itself. This does not imply that donors give up the endeavour entirely, but that they are more modest in their goals and more explicit with regards to what is feasible. Helping parties change themselves might very well require the lowering of donors' expectations.

26 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), Art. 102: [http://www.parlament.sr.gov.yu/content/eng/akta/ustav/ustav\\_ceo.asp](http://www.parlament.sr.gov.yu/content/eng/akta/ustav/ustav_ceo.asp).

27 Ceda refers to the name of LDP's president, Cedomir Jovanovic. Interview with LDP party member, Belgrade, 26 June 2007.

28 Interview with a DSS party member, Strausbourg, 3 July 2007.

29 Interview with a former NDI party trainer, 9 March 2007, Belgrade.

30 Interview with a former NDI resident director, 20 April 2007, located undisclosed.

31 See for example: Krishna Kumar: Reflections on International Political Party Assistance, in: Democratization 2005 (Vol. 12), No. 4, 505–527.