

Dejan Bursac¹

University of Belgrade, Serbia

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

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THE PHANTOM MENACE: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON RIGHT-WING PARTIES IN SERBIA

Abstract: This study offers a slightly different perspective on the right-wing parties in Serbia. Media outlets, politicians, and even some researchers frequently highlight the alleged threat to Serbia's political stability posed by far-right parties. Such narratives argue that the rise of these parties, driven by platforms of nationalist revisionism and pro-Russian foreign policy, could have detrimental consequences for regional stability, European integration, and minority rights. This paper examines the existence of that perceived threat, starting from the hypothesis that the far-right in Serbia in current context does not constitute a political project with significant medium-term potential. The arguments presented are supported by an analysis of the attitudes and demographics of potential right-wing voters, derived from a longitudinal examination of public opinion data, as well as an analysis of behavior and electoral performance of these parties. The argument is premised on the notion that traditional socio-economically dissatisfied groups, which would typically form the core constituency of the far-right, are in fact mobilized by the ruling populist party in Serbia. Employing the big tent approach, the ruling party occasionally resorts to radical rhetoric while implementing completely contrasting policies, both domestic and foreign. Additionally, the Serbian far-right is fragmented and often shows signs of co-optation by the hybrid regime, contributing to its inefficiency. If confirmed, these findings would lead to the conclusion that the threat from this side of political spectrum is overstated, and primarily comes from a communication strategy of the ruling party, utilizing it in order to mobilize domestic and international support (or relieve the pressure) during critical junctures.

Keywords: far-right, radical right, elections, fragmentation, hybrid regime

Fantomska pretnja: novi pogled na desnicu u Srbiji

Apstrakt: Ova studija predstavlja drugačiji pogled na stranke desnice u Srbiji. Mediji, političari, pa i pojedini istraživači neretko ističu navodnu pretnju političkoj

1 dejan.bursac@ifdt.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2998-3990>

stabilnosti Srbije koja dolazi od strane ekstremno desnih partija. Takvi narativi obično tvrde da uspon ovih političkih opcija na platformi nacionalističkog revizionizma i proruske spoljne politike može imati štetne posledice po regionalnu stabilnost, evropske integracije i prava manjina. Ovaj rad ispituje postojanje takve percipirane pretnje, polazeći od hipoteze da krajnja desnica u Srbiji u aktuelnom kontekstu ne predstavlja politički projekat sa značajnim srednjoročnim potencijalom. Argumenti autora su zasnovani na analizi vrednosnih stavova i sociodemografskih podataka o potencijalnim desnim biračima, izvedenih iz longitudinalnih istraživanja javnog mnjenja, kao i na analizi političkog ponašanja i izbornog učinka ovih stranaka. Ključni argument se zasniva na pretpostavci da tradicionalne socioekonomski nezadovoljne grupe, koje tipično čine jezgro biračkog tela ekstremne desnice, u Srbiji zapravo politički već mobilise vladajuća populistička stranka. Koristeći "big tent" pristup, ona ponekad pribegava radikalnoj retorici, dok istovremeno sprovodi potpuno suprotne politike, kako na unutrašnjoj, tako i na spoljoj političkoj ravni. Dodatno, srpska krajnja desnica je fragmentirana i često pokazuje simptome kooptacije od strane hibridnog režima, što doprinosi njenoj neefikasnosti. Potvrda ovih nalaza bi vodila ka zaključku da je pretnja sa desne strane političkog spektra preuveličana i da primarno proističe iz komunikacione strategije vladajuće partije, koja je stavlja u svrhu mobilizacije domaće ili međunarodne podrške, u zavisnosti od potrebe.

Ključne reči: krajnja desnica, radikalna desnica, izbori, fragmentacija, hibridni režim

Introduction:

A Perpetual Threat of the Far-Right Threat

In Serbia, especially during election periods, public discourse is laden by concerns over the rise of the radical right. This perceived threat is often emphasized by key political figures, including the President (Danas, 2022), numerous media outlets (for an overview, see: Stamenković & Radujko, 2023), and even by some researchers. In 2016, authors pointed to the electoral performance of the Serbian Radical Party (8.10%), warning of the resurgence of ethnonationalism, along with the potential for violent border changes in the region (Stojarová & Stojar, 2016). However, that party has not returned to parliament since. Others highlighted the rise of the Dveri movement (Jovanović, 2018), particularly their gaining of 7 MPs through a coalition arrangement. Some analysts framed the nationalist and pro-Russian right as a threat to Serbia's Western orientation, citing its rejection of the EU, NATO, and Western values in general (see: Grubješić, 2022). Whether articulated in media or academic discourse, such narratives also emphasize the destabilizing effects of right-wing ascendance on regional stability, European integration, or minority rights.

Even authors who acknowledge the limited political relevance of far-right parties (Džilić, 2023) tend to retain the narrative of threat to democracy in the region.

This perspective is, to some extent, understandable: arising from both the broader pattern of far-right surge across post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe and the lingering post-conflict sensitivities in the Western Balkans. However, the central claim of this paper is that in the Serbian context, this perceived threat of the radical right functions less as an empirical reality and more as a performative narrative. While the social and regional environment may appear conducive to radical right-wing mobilization, such parties have failed to achieve sustained political traction. Their occasional electoral breakthroughs remain isolated and ephemeral, with little capacity for long-term institutional presence or strategic consolidation. Thus, we argue that these actors, at least in the medium term and under current political conditions, do not represent an actual threat. This paper attributes that pattern to a combination of factors: the value orientations and sociodemographic characteristics of the electorate, excessive party fragmentation, and even processes of co-optation within the ambiguous relationship between radical actors and the Serbian regime.

This paper does not classify the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) – which, as of mid-2025, has governed Serbia for thirteen years – as a radical right party. This is despite its undeniably nationalist ideological roots, populist approach, and authoritarian style of governance (Spasojević, 2019). The SNS emerged in 2008 from a split with the far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS), adopting a more moderate and even pro-European stance (Stojić, 2018). This repositioning enabled it not only to win elections but also to secure continuous Western support for a regime that has since become a textbook case of stabilitocracy – an arrangement in which foreign policy alignment with the West is traded for the blind eye regarding the erosion of democratic norms and rule of law (see: Bursać & Vučićević, 2024).

In such a context, the far-right often serves as a tokenized threat, invoked to generate leverage in Serbia's relations with the West. The suggestion that the radical right could ascend to power functions as a geopolitical deterrent, reinforcing regime's nominal pro-European orientation and regional position as strategically valuable. In the early years of his political transformation, President Vučić frequently warned Western partners that nationalists could regain power if he were not supported (Karnitschnig, 2016), despite little evidence to suggest this was a credible scenario. The SNS approach to both democracy and foreign policy illustrates its evolution into a catch-all party that has repeatedly adapted its program-

matic orientation to the political moment. Scholars argue that the SNS's dominant electoral position has contributed to the blurring of ideological boundaries in Serbian politics (Tournois, 2021): nominally occupying a center to center-right space allows the SNS to shift as needed toward incumbent populism, or even deploy nationalist rhetoric for domestic voter mobilization. By projecting a pro-European image abroad while selectively deploying nationalist narratives at home, the regime has presented itself as the bulwark against a hypothetical return of the nationalists, while at the same time undercutting the far-right.

The next section will address the definition of far-right parties, with particular attention to the Serbian context. It will also review relevant theories concerning voter motivations, as well as the fragmentation and co-optation within hybrid regimes. These theoretical frameworks will provide the tools to explain the limited effectiveness of far-right in Serbia. Following this, the study's hypothetical and methodological framework will be outlined, before moving on to the analysis of findings and a discussion assessing whether far-right can indeed be considered a viable electoral threat.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Far-Right and Their Voters

We will examine far-right parties, extreme right parties, or, as sometimes termed in political science literature, populist radical right parties in Serbia. While these terms are not universally agreed upon, some scholars (Mudde, 2007) define them by a combination of political nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Depending on the context, nationalism is also central to far-right parties: in the Western European framework, it typically manifests as opposition to immigration, while in CEE it tends to remain predominantly ethnic in character, intertwined with unresolved national tensions, disputed borders, and fraught relations with neighboring states (Minkenberg, 2015; Rydgren, 2018; Bakić, 2019). Some authors identify additional traits of the contemporary radical right, including Islamophobia, opposition to European integration, Euroscepticism framed as sovereignty, and friendly ties with Russia (Krekó & Juhász, 2017; Vasilopoulou, 2018). A significant body of research also highlights the far-right's negative stance toward sexual minorities and gender issues more broadly (see: Blee, 2021).

Most of these far-right traits are observable in the Serbian context: ethnonationalism, opposition to immigration (although this issue is not

particularly salient in Serbia), resistance to European integration, a distinctly positive stance toward Russia, and opposition to the rights of sexual minorities. But the boundary between the far-right and the right or conservative center seems highly blurred in post-communist party systems (Minkenberg, 2015). Mainstream center-right parties often adopt nationalist agendas, populist styles, and authoritarian models of governance, resulting in certain fluidity along the spectrum. This issue is particularly significant when considering the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia and why it is not categorized as far-right in our study, despite its undeniably nationalist roots and populist approach. This distinction becomes clear when compared to similar regimes such as Fidesz in Hungary or Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, which are frequently labelled as radical right or, at minimum, right-wing populist. While their common emergence can be understood as an authoritarian response to the political and economic crises experienced by transitional political elites in the 2000s (see: Losoncz, 2022), Vučić's position is notably less stable. Whereas Kaczyński and Orbán initiated ideologically motivated ultra-conservative institutional reforms, Vučić, both due to a shift away from his previous hardline nationalist stance and as a strategic move to appeal to a broader electorate, embraced a more big-tent approach, combining often ideologically contradictory elements across policy areas.

This is further influenced by the complex international position of the Serbian regime, shaped by external constraints related to recent history, Western influence in the region, and a partial reliance on Russia due to foreign policy interests and energy dependence. As a result, Vučić can publicly rely on immigrant labor, occasionally concede to sexual minorities (including appointing a token LGBT prime minister), maintain coalitions with ethnic minorities within Serbia, nominally strive for regional stability, and sporadically express pro-European enthusiasm. Any detrimental effects on democratic institutions associated with this regime stem less from an ideological project, as might be the case in Poland or Hungary, and more from the authoritarian logic of regime survival. This categorization also simplifies the selection of far-right parties' sample.

There are several theoretical approaches that seek to explain patterns of electoral support for the far-right. Early theories emphasized programmatic alignment between voters and parties, beginning with the influential study by Inglehart & Klingemann (1976), which found that respondents' positions on the left-right scale were a reliable predictor of party identification. Subsequent debates questioned whether the individual's orientation truly correlates with party affiliation, or whether it reflects broader value orientations that may not be easily translated into party support. In other words, scholars began to explore whether there are mediating fac-

tors, including cultural or socioeconomic status (see: Freire, 2006), as well as broader structural conditions (Evans, 2017).

A sociological or sociodemographic model of party identification identifies group-based voting patterns and correlates them with a group's position in society rather than with the individual value orientations, focusing instead on collective social positioning (see: Lubbers, 2001). Western party systems themselves largely developed through the formation of parties as representatives of specific societal interests (class, religious affiliation, or rural communities), providing a basis for models of group-based voting. These models assume that social groups tend to share similar values and interests, and therefore exhibit certain regularities in their voting behavior, seeking to explain them through key sociodemographic indicators such as gender, age, education, economic status, and place of residence (Milošević, 1997).

A prominent theory concerns the relationship between socio-economic status and voters' political preferences (for an overview, see: Miller, 1997). For example, authors such as Leigh (2005), focusing primarily on Western demographics, identified ideological and electoral differences along three key societal divisions: young vs. old, rich vs. poor, and natives vs. foreign-born citizens. The transformative processes in post-socialist countries have contributed new insights, particularly regarding the differences in voting preferences among social groups based on their relative position during the transition. A key distinction has emerged between what could be termed the winners (typically younger, more educated, urban, and entrepreneurial populations) and the losers of transition (manual laborers, the less-educated, rural populations, the elderly, and pensioners) (see: Brainerd, 1998; Fidrmuc, 2000). Even these approaches are far from straightforward, as distinctions have emerged between several strands, which can broadly be categorized based on whether they focus on objective indicators of national economic indicators (Rico & Anduiza, 2017), individual-level economic status (Eatwell, 2003), subjective perceptions of one's socio-economic position (Mols & Jetten, 2017), or even anxieties about the potential loss of status (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). These distinctions reveal not only the complexity of the field but also the multifaceted nature of voter motivations and the various factors that may shape political preferences.

In this context, supply and demand models have also emerged to explain the relationship between voter attitudes and far-right preferences by emphasizing the existence of demand for such politics within the electorate. Drawing on the sociological group-based approach, they posit that certain social groups (typically the losers of modernization, globalization, or post-socialist transition) develop a specific demand for far-right poli-

cies at particular historical moments. Hence, the rise of radical right parties is driven primarily by shifts in public opinion (see: Mudde, 2007). In other words, when a strong public impulse emerges in favor of a certain type of politics, some political actor will eventually rise to occupy that space – and the right is often successful at doing so, given its communicative style and ability to simplify complex societal issues. Indeed, the very origin of the term populism, now associated with right-wing parties, is rooted in this understanding of politics in which the electorate shapes party supply, not the other way around.

Perceptions once again play a central role in this approach. External forces such as globalization, technological revolutions, and socio-economic transformations continue to produce increasingly complex and disorienting political, social, and economic structures in contemporary societies – often generating widespread insecurities about individuals' social positions (see: Bešić, 2020). Far-right parties then emerge as a response to these anxieties and frustrations, offering political narratives centered on the preservation of values, the protection of collective interests, and the exclusion of particular social groups. Such perceptions of threat frequently manifest collectively, along sociodemographic lines, and contribute to group-based voting for the far-right. For instance, in the context of the United States, Mutz (2018) identified a combination of economic and cultural threats to the collective social status of white, Christian males as key drivers of support for Donald Trump. Other scholars have also explained the rise of the radical right through the lens of subjective perceptions of declining social status (see: Gidron & Hall, 2017) or perceived threats to cultural identity (Kriesi et al., 2012).

Numerous studies have attempted to identify the drivers of voting patterns for populist and radical right parties across Europe, generally finding that such support comes from the so-called “losers of globalization”, particularly within advanced Western democracies: social groups occupying lower socio-economic positions (see: Lubbers, Gijsberts & Scheepers, 2002). These groups tend to generate demand for anti-immigration, anti-EU, and anti-elitist platforms (see: Santana, Zagórski & Rama, 2020). Sociodemographically, these are often defined as the unemployed or manual laborers, individuals with lower educational attainment, and younger or middle-aged men (Betz, 1993; Minkenberg & Perrineau, 2007). Norris (2005), by contrast, frames this constituency as the lower middle class – not necessarily underprivileged, but deeply anxious about their social status, particularly in times of crisis. For instance, Krekó & Juhász (2017) found that the typical voter for Hungary's ultra-far-right Jobbik is a younger, well-educated male who may even be economically better off than average, but exhibits a strong perception of threat to his

perceived status and way of life. With the exception of this outlier, the key dividing line in many studies is the level of education, with lower educational backgrounds consistently associated with a greater propensity to support far-right options (see: Ivarsflaten & Stubager, 2012).

Why is this relevant to our study? The underlying assumption is that even within a weakly institutionalized party system, there are detectable patterns of political support based on social groupings. These patterns are particularly observable when analyzing political preferences among sociodemographic populations commonly associated with the anxieties of potential losers of the transition processes, as well as when examining the mobilization of support for certain political options – especially populist, authoritarian, nationalist, or broadly right-wing parties. Given our research aims, one part of the explanation may be found in demographic patterns of support observed across recent electoral cycles.

Another explanatory factor lies in the high level of fragmentation within the right-wing spectrum in Serbia. While some scholars underscore the importance of broad right-wing social coalitions for the success of these parties (Heitmeyer, 2024), this has not materialized in practice. Fragmentation is often rooted in programmatic divisions (see: Cochrane, 2011), but it can also stem from structural conditions. In Serbia, this is particularly evident given the proportional electoral system with a single nationwide district, which tends to benefit small parties (including extremist ones) by enabling them to pool dispersed support from across the country. Low electoral threshold (3%) also incentivizes parties to run independently, as the number of votes required to enter parliament might seem easily achievable. This, of course, reflects a broader strategy of electoral rule manipulation designed to fragment the opposition, common for hybrid regimes. Furthermore, the regime's tactics toward these parties, which further reinforce fragmentation, might include co-optation strategies: the formal or informal collaboration with individual opposition actors. This is a well-documented phenomenon in hybrid regimes (Kavasoğlu, 2021; Arriola, Devaro & Meng, 2021), that significantly undermines the prospects of opposition parties regardless of their ideological profile.

Accordingly, we establish the hypothetical framework of our study. The central research question is whether far-right parties in Serbia represent a sustainable political platform – namely, whether they possess medium-term electoral potential that could result in growing support. Our main hypothesis is essentially negative: we posit that these parties do not pose a threat to the current party system. This overarching assumption will be tested through four specific hypotheses, each grounded in the theoretical perspectives previously outlined:

H1: The electoral performance of far-right parties in recent electoral cycles in Serbia does not indicate a significant upward trend in voter support;

H2: Far-right parties in Serbia do not successfully mobilize the sociodemographic groups typically associated with social discontent; instead, these groups are primarily absorbed by the ruling party within the framework of a hybrid regime;

H3: The far-right spectrum in Serbia is highly fragmented and lacks a coherent, unified political platform;

H4: Far-right parties in Serbia are occasionally subject to co-optation by the ruling regime, a dynamic that contributes to their inefficacy and erodes public trust in them.

Data and Methods

Our research focuses on political parties in Serbia that can be categorized as far-right, radical right, or populist right-wing parties. This categorization is inherently fluid (Perry, 2018) and requires making compromises. For example, it is debatable whether the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS), despite its clearly anti-European stance, should be considered far-right given its relatively moderate political style. Similarly, the Enough is Enough (*Dosta je bilo*), initially established as an anti-elitist movement with a liberal political foundation, shifted towards clearly alt-right positions and rebranded as the Sovereignists (*Suverenisti*) in the 2020 and 2022 elections, before later entering a coalition with the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska stranka*, SDS). Furthermore, the People's Party (*Narodna stranka*, NS) only adopted more radical right positions in the most recent electoral cycle.

To avoid difficulties stemming from the fluidity of party definitions, we adopt a cut-off principle based partly on the structure of the party system, labeling as far-right any party that positions itself to the right of the ruling SNS. While this approach may oversimplify the nuanced programmatic identities of individual parties, it reflects the reality of electoral competition, where the position of the main actor (SNS) is effectively pushing others more to the right. This classification is further justified by the shared stances of these parties on key issues typically associated with the radical right in Serbia.

The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative content analysis to address the four hypotheses outlined above. We analyze electoral results from recent election cycles (2016, 2020, 2022, 2023) to assess trends in voter support

(Republička izborna komisija, 2025). To examine voter support potential, we utilize data from longitudinal studies of public opinion conducted in multiple waves on a representative samples for Serbia.² The data were collected through face-to-face surveys in June 2022, August 2022, September 2022, December 2022, and February 2023. These are combined into a single dataset comprising 5 997 respondents. We justify this approach not only by the temporal proximity of the surveys but also by the need to leverage a shared sociodemographic sample, particularly given that some radical parties have limited support and the individual samples are relatively small. Separately, we analyze data from a face-to-face survey conducted in February 2025 with a sample of 1 494 respondents. This second dataset is treated independently because a critical juncture occurred between the two data collection periods — namely, mass student and civic protests in Serbia lasting over seven months at the time of writing, which likely influenced established patterns of political preferences and may indicate changes in the potential support for right-wing parties.

Findings and Discussion

We begin by analyzing the electoral performance of right-wing parties in the last four parliamentary election cycles (2016, 2020, 2022, and 2023), focusing on three dimensions: the absolute number of votes won by all right-wing lists, the percentage of votes, and the total number of seats secured (see: Table 1).

In the 2016 snap elections, a total of five lists can be classified as right-wing within the context of our research: Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS), coalition of Dveri and Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS), Oathkeepers (*Zavetnici*), list For the Renewal of Serbia (*Za preporod Srbije*), and the coalition In Spite – United for Serbia – People's Alliance (*U inat – Složno za Srbiju – Narodni savez*). The movement Enough is Enough (*Dosta je bilo*) cannot yet be considered a right-wing party in the context of this election.

In the following 2020 elections – significantly affected by the pandemic and marked by a widespread opposition boycott – the number of right-wing parties increased considerably. This surge was likely influenced by the open political space created by the boycott, as well as the incentivizing effect of lowering the electoral threshold from 5% to 3% just months be-

2 The author gratefully acknowledges Sprint Insight for granting permission to use the survey data in this research. The author was involved in all surveys subsequently employed in this study, which upheld overall scientific standards regarding data quality and representativeness.

fore the election, which many marginal actors perceived as an opportunity to gain representation. Nine right-wing lists participated in this election: SRS, Serbian Patriotic Alliance (*Srpski patriotski savez*, SPAS), Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (*Pokret obnove Kraljevine Srbije*, POKS), DSS, Healthy Serbia – Better Serbia – Together for Šumadija coalition (*Zdrava Srbija – Bolja Srbija – Zajedno za Šumadiju*), Oathkeepers (*Zavetnici*), People’s Bloc (*Narodni blok*) coalition, the Sovereignists (*Suverenisti*), and Leviathan – I live for Serbia (*Levijatan – Živim za Srbiju*) coalition.

In the 2022 snap parliamentary elections, six electoral lists can be labelled right-wing: SRS, DSS – POKS coalition, Oathkeepers (*Zavetnici*), Sovereignists (*Suverenisti*), Dveri, and Russian Minority Alliance – Leviathan coalition (*Ruski manjinski savez – Levijatan*). Finally, in the 2023 elections, the following right-wing lists participated: SRS, Dveri – Oathkeepers coalition, DSS – POKS coalition, People’s Party (*Narodna stranka*, NS), and the new populist movement We – The Voice of the People (*Mi – Glas iz naroda*).

Table 1. Electoral Performance of Right-Wing Parties
in Serbian Parliamentary Elections 2016-2023

	2016	2020	2022	2023
Total votes	555 060	531 222	668 430	564 596
Total vote %	14.68%	16.50%	18.10%	15.21%
Total seats	35	11	35	26

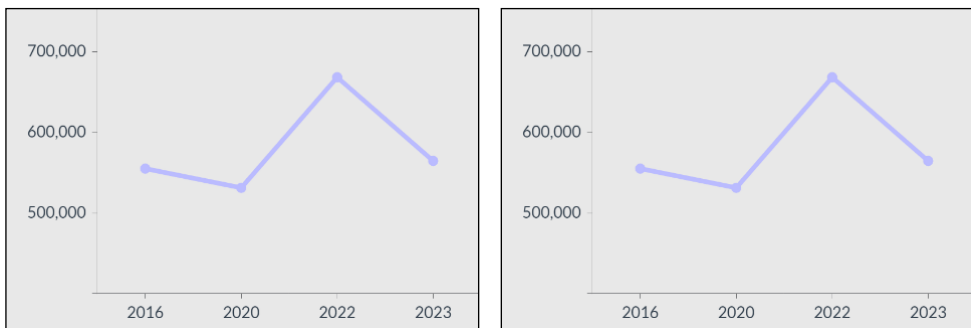
Across four electoral cycles, we see a generally stable number of votes for the right-wing, hovering around 550 000, with the exception of the 2022 elections, which saw an increase. Until that year, we also observe a gradual rise in the percentage of votes collectively won by the right-wing, while the number of seats does not correlate with the vote count. This is due to the fact that seats also depend on the ability of individual actors to pass the threshold, a topic we will discuss shortly.

While in the first cycle analyzed (2016), the majority of the right-wing’s success was attributable to the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which secured 8.10% of the votes riding the wave of its leader’s return from trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the accompanying perception of a recovery from the earlier split with the ruling SNS, this party never again surpassed the threshold. Instead, new actors assumed primacy on the right spectrum. However, even these newcomers failed to establish themselves, especially considering the relatively favorable socio-political context: the 2020 elections with a lower threshold than before (3%), boycotted by many opposition parties (which resulted in

lower turnout and fewer votes required for parliamentary entry), and held during a pandemic – which is generally considered favorable to right-wing platforms (Klačar & Đorić, 2021). This was reflected in the party supply, with as many as nine right-wing lists, but not in the electoral outcome, as only one of them managed to pass the threshold.

In the 2022 elections, a real increase in right-wing support is noticeable, along with a somewhat more structured offer, though still fragmented across six lists. Spasojević (2023) argues that, given the traditionally Russophile stance of the Serbian right and the indecisiveness of the ruling SNS regarding the potential imposition of sanctions on Russia, right-wing parties were able to surpass the 3% threshold on that issue. However, already a year and a half later, there was a new vote that brought another decline for the radical right. This is despite the elections being held under the influence of another issue potentially exploitable by the right: the armed incident in northern Kosovo.

Figure 1. Votes (absolute and %) for Right-Wing Parties in Serbian Parliamentary Elections 2016-2023



Overall, the total support for right-wing parties has remained relatively consistent across the four analyzed cycles (see: Figure 1). However, in a comparative context, none of these actors can be said to have firmly established themselves, as they remain highly volatile and frequently fail to enter parliament. This is especially apparent when comparing Serbia's far-right with similar party systems in the region, where competition also exists with a dominant party occupying right of center. For example, the Hungarian Jobbik independently secured over 20% of the vote in the 2014 and 2018 elections, similar to the coalition centered around the Homeland Movement (*Domovinski pokret*) in Croatia, which maintained stable support of around 10% across two consecutive cycles (2020, 2024), or even compared to Romania, where the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians

(AUR) represents the country's second-largest political force. In comparison, the performance of Serbian right-wing is far more modest and unstable, particularly when considering the decrease in votes and seats observed in 2023. This decline is partly due to diminished trust in some of the previously parliamentary right-wing parties, partly due to the emergence of a new actor (*Mi – Glas iz naroda*), and also due to renewed fragmentation, with more than one-third of right-wing votes failing to surpass the threshold.

The second part of our analysis focuses on surveyed patterns of voter support and serves to assess the potential of right-wing parties in terms of the sociodemographic characteristics of their electorate. As mentioned above, the data is derived from a cumulative total of five nationwide public opinion surveys, with an overall sample size of 5 997 respondents. Among them, based on expressed voting preferences, 773 voters for right-wing parties in the 2020, 2022, and 2023 elections were identified, constituting 12.89% of the sample. According to the sample, right-wing voters are predominantly male (60.93%) and mostly belong to younger cohorts compared to the average voter (30.14% are aged between 18 and 30 years, 36.22% between 31 and 45 years, while only 9.31% are over 60 years old). They are above average in terms of education: 38.29% possess some form of higher education, while only 3.23% have completed primary education or less. The majority (62.1%) lives in urban areas and generally identify as middle or slightly above middle subjective social status. Most are employed in the private sector (45.27%), while pensioners constitute only 6.08%, and students 11.77% among voters of far-right.³

Compared primarily to voters of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which occupies a central position on the party spectrum, right-wing voters tend to be younger, more urban, better educated, and belong to a higher social class. We can establish that in terms of voter identification, the situation resembles the Hungarian case. Specifically, it is not the transitional losers or globalization losers who are mobilized by far-right parties, since those groups (pensioners, older, less educated, rural population) have largely been rallied by the populist ruling party (being Fidesz or SNS). In this sense, the right-wing's electorate is composed of a somewhat better-off social stratum, which nonetheless shares social anxieties regarding their status. Similar to their counterparts Jobbik (or, in recent years, their splinter party Our Homeland) in Hungary, that voter base is limited and cannot easily expand to include the traditional electorate of the ruling populists.

3 All group comparisons throughout this study were conducted using independent samples t-tests or z-tests, consistently demonstrating high statistical significance ($p < .01$).

Regarding values and political attitudes, there are also notable differences: right-wing voters believe the country is headed in the wrong direction (a total of 67.2%), reflecting their opposition to the current SNS regime. Compared to SNS voters, they express a pronounced anti-European orientation (while SNS voters are evenly split, as many as 81.63% of right-wing voters would vote negatively in a hypothetical EU referendum). Despite differing sociodemographic contexts, radical right voters in Serbia share some typical features of CEE right-wing electorates: besides anti-European attitudes, they exhibit pronounced pro-Russian foreign policy support (72.25%). Furthermore, they display weak commitment to democracy as a system of governance (32.25%), high concern about migrants (73.46%), and, in terms of salience, are particularly worried about the status of Kosovo (83.4%).

A separate survey conducted in February 2025 on a sample of 1 494 respondents initially indicates a further collapse of the right-wing, following the outbreak of mass student protests that affected support patterns across the spectrum. Within this sample, only 70 respondents identified a right-wing party as their political preference, accounting for merely 4.69% at that moment. However, the sociodemographic patterns observed remain similar to those in earlier panels: the group is predominantly male (65.71%), from urban areas (60%), mostly under 30 years of age (44.29%), above average in education (41.42% hold some form of higher education), and mainly employed in the private sector (62.86%). Opposition to the EU and strong emotions regarding Kosovo remain prominent political positions. Additionally, 94.29% of this group opposes the current regime in Serbia, marking a significant divergence between the base of these parties and their potential to draw voters from the SNS electorate.

The third part of analysis concerns the fragmentation on the right-wing spectrum, which causes a large number of lists with very similar programmatic offers to compete for a limited and highly volatile electorate. This results in many of these failing to surpass even the modest 3% threshold, which further impacts the political, mobilizational, and organizational capacities of the right-wing (see: Table 2). Examined data includes the number of lists participating in the elections and represented in parliament (excluding lists representing ethnic minorities, as these are subject to different electoral rules and moreover limited to a specific electorate), the percentage of votes for right-wing lists that fell below the threshold, as well as a modified effective number of electoral parties index, applied exclusively to right-wing and their performance (based on: Laakso & Taagepera, 1979).

Table 2. Fragmentation of the Right-Wing (2016–2023)

	2016	2020	2022	2023
Total number of lists (excluding ethnic minorities)	12	17	12	11
Number of right-wing lists	5	9	6	5
Number of right-wing lists winning seats	2	1	3	2
Right-wing vote below the 3% threshold	1.54%	12.67%	4.82%	5.23%
Modified effective number of electoral parties	2.35	6.81	4.61	3.80

It is evident that roughly half of the electoral offer in each cycle consists of right-wing parties, even though they compete for a voter base limited to around 15% of the electorate. This fact alone indicates a high level of fragmentation and a very low electoral success rate, which is also reflected in the number of lists surpassing the electoral threshold, as well as the percentage of votes that are effectively wasted. Comparing the number of lists that actually enter parliament with the modified effective number of electoral parties reveals the extent to which excessive fragmentation contributes to the failure of the right-wing. This reversed correlation is reinforced by the number of votes remaining below the threshold in each election. The greater the difference between the effective number of parties and the number of lists entering parliament, the larger the number of wasted votes, logically. Despite that and despite sharing a largely similar voter base, these parties have consistently failed to run jointly in elections: prior to the 2023 vote, they even negotiated common appearance, but failed to unite (Danas, 2023).

This brings us to the fourth factor under very brief consideration: co-optation policies by the regime regarding right-wing parties. Although previous studies lack developed models for examining co-optation beyond individual case analyses, certain behavioral patterns can be identified among Serbian right-wing. For instance, some of the parties analyzed, after running independently in elections, later allied with the SNS (e.g. SPAS in 2020, which merged with SNS), or their leaders joined the government despite failing to cross the electoral threshold (e.g. Oathkeepers in 2023). Others formed local coalitions with the SNS (Oathkeepers after 2023, People’s Party after 2023, Serbian Radical Party at various time points, and Democratic Party of Serbia at some points before 2020). Additionally, there have been media accusations that the ruling party collects candidacy signatures on behalf of certain right-wing parties before the elections (see: Nova, 2020). This very brief overview leads to the conclusion that a significant number of right-wing parties are, to some extent, susceptible to cooperation with the regime, which further affects their effectiveness, unity, and voter trust. Notably, this occurs despite their voter base being, as we have seen, strongly oppositional in their attitudes.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine does the far-right in Serbia represent a significant political threat, or is its influence overstated. For that purpose, we analyzed electoral performance, voter demographics, fragmentation, and regime interactions of right-wing parties over four recent electoral cycles. We confirmed that these parties demonstrate a relatively stable level of support around 15% across four cycles, with high intra-group volatility and without sustained growth or breakthrough for any of them (H1). Furthermore, we also found that, unlike in many other countries, far-right parties in Serbia mostly attract younger, urban, and relatively well-educated voters, while large groups of economically marginalized and older voters predominantly support the ruling populists (H2). This divergence significantly limits the far-right's potential base. Our hypothesis (H3) that far-right in Serbia demonstrates high levels of fragmentation is also strongly supported. Across all elections analyzed, a high number of ideologically similar actors competed for the limited electorate, leading to a high percentage of wasted votes and chronic electoral underperformance. Finally, we found that far-right parties in Serbia repeatedly engage in various examples of cooperation with the regime (H4).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the perceived threat from the far-right spectrum is overstated. Rather than representing an independent and growing political force, these parties function more as instruments in the ruling party's communication strategy – used to galvanize domestic support for the regime or deflect international scrutiny at critical junctures.

This study faces certain limitations. The analysis relies heavily on aggregated survey data and electoral results, which constrain our ability to examine cross-attitudinal variation or deeper ideological alignment. The absence of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, limits insight into voters' motivations. Additionally, predictive modeling was beyond the scope of this study – yet could prove essential in forecasting future shifts, particularly given recent signs of party system change. Assessing co-optation also lacked systematic frameworks and empirical data, as most insights regarding this matter currently rely on anecdotal evidence or case-specific observations.

Despite these constraints, the findings open several important avenues for future research. As the Serbian political landscape enters a period of flux, renewed attention should be given to voter behavior, both in terms of demand and the potential for new party supply. While current far-right parties appear weak and fragmented, the electorate is not without anxie-

ties. Should the ruling party's grip weaken, or should a more strategically capable actor emerge, voters could reorient themselves rapidly.

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