

## **U.S. POLICY TOWARDS ULTRANATIONALIST POLITICAL PARTIES IN SERBIA: THE POLICY OF NON-ENGAGEMENT EXAMINED**

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*gauge the extent to which such goals are being met. This is accomplished by examining current US policy towards ultranationalist political parties in the Republic of Serbia.*

### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

*In Serbia, as in much of the Western Balkans, established democracies face both a moral and political dilemma: to acknowledge ultranationalist parties' democratic legitimacy as popularly elected actors or to isolate them as symbols of the region's authoritarian past. In Serbia, the US has opted for the latter, erecting a cordon sanitaire similar to those employed domestically against ultranationalist parties in Western Europe. This article seeks to identify the goals underlying isolationist policies and in so doing, to*

### **Introduction**

With the process of democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans now under way, the question of whether and how the governments of Western Europe and North America should approach the most conspicuous vestige of post-communist politics—the prominence of ultra-nationalist political parties—is becoming increasingly poignant. Policies aimed at isolating such groups by banning diplomatic, financial and other forms of contact have failed to deny them their popular appeal; to the contrary, ultranationalist forces are making electoral gains precisely where foreign opposition to their existence is most severe. Thus, despite a decade of intense international pressure, citizens in Bosnia-Herzegovina continue to vote along ethnic lines for parties that espouse intolerant rhetoric. While in Serbia, the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party could very well be on the verge of forming a coalition government. Having failed to abolish support for ultranationalist forces in these countries, the time has come to review such policies.

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This article takes an initial step in this direction. In addition to identifying the

goals underlying isolationist policies in the Western Balkans, it gauges the extent to which such goals are being met. It does so by examining current US policy towards ultranationalist political parties in the Republic of Serbia.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of interviews conducted with local politicians, US diplomats and aid-providers, the article concludes that the policy's impact is limited and is thus in need of revision. This argument is developed in three stages. First, the reader is presented with an overview of the current policy of non-engagement, along with an introduction to the ultranationalist parties in question: the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Next, the goals of the policy are identified. Finally, these goals are examined in light of recent events in Serbia and conclusions regarding their effectiveness are drawn.

### **The *cordon sanitaire*: A policy of non-engagement**

Since the fall of the Milosevic regime in October 2000, Serbia's ultranationalist parties have been met with markedly different fortunes. Long chastised for its anti-reformist and anti-democratic

sentiments, the SRS is the only party in Serbia to have enjoyed a solid base of support since the pro-reformist coalition centered on the Democratic Party (DS) left government in early 2004. For over four years, support for the party has hovered at 30 percent, making the SRS "the most popular party in Serbia by a significant margin."<sup>3</sup> The SPS, by contrast, has witnessed little but setback following its heyday at the helm of Serbian politics in the 1990s. Following the extraditions of its former President, Slobodan Milosevic, to The Hague in mid 2001, its popularity has dwindled to the single digits. Whatever its losses, however, the SPS is one of just ten parties in Serbian parliament, occupying a total of 16 seats.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, ultranationalist parties currently make up just under 40 percent of Serbia's 250-seat parliament. Although Serbia's ultranationalist parties have failed to form a governing coalition since reformist parties assumed power in October 2000, fear that they will do so in the future continue to challenge the longevity of Serbia's liberal trajectory.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>While this article focuses on US policy, it should be noted that the European Union also employs a *cordon sanitaire*. Given that the EU does not have a joint foreign policy, however, the implementation of the ban is not always run smoothly, a prime example being the divergent steps taken following SRS Deputy Nikolic's appointment as Speaker of Parliament. Notably however, none of the major European political party institutes target ultranationalist parties in their programs.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Woehrel, "Serbia and Montenegro: Current Situation and US Policy", *CRS Report for Congress* (June 21, 2006), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Four of the ten parties in Serbia's parliament are minority parties, each of which boasts no more than one to three seats in parliament.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, Serbia's ultranationalist forces were in coalition talks with the Democratic Party of Serbia. It remained unclear as to whether such a coalition would actually be forged. Should these parties succeed, they would represent the first ultranationalist coalition government since Milosevic's ouster in 2000.

The parties’ “quasi-fascist, populist program[s]”<sup>6</sup> combined with their refusal to renounce their roles in wartime atrocities have made both the SPS and SRS the bane of Serbia’s pro-European majority. In Serbia, as in much of the Western Balkans, established democracies face both a moral and political dilemma: to acknowledge ultranationalist parties’ democratic legitimacy as popularly elected actors or to isolate them as symbols of the region’s authoritarian past. In Serbia, the US has opted for the latter, erecting a *cordon sanitaire* similar to those employed domestically against ultranationalist parties in Western Europe. *Cordon sanitaire*, literally ‘quarantine line’, refers to a policy of non-engagement through which extremist parties are politically isolated with the aim of circumventing their proliferation. Ultranationalist parties, here defined as organizations which advocate a brand of nationalism so severe that it calls a state’s international interests and cross-border cooperation into question, often fall within this category.

Little has been written regarding the effectiveness of non-engagement but its record appears to be mixed. In Serbia, where a US policy of non-engagement with the SRS and the SPS has been the

norm since 2000, the impact appears negligible: the SRS has more support today than it did when the policy was first implemented. Although the policy is reported to be ‘unofficial’ insofar as the origins of its mandate remain unclear and a paper-trail is lacking, interviews with US officials reveal that it is rigorously adhered to.<sup>7</sup> US diplomats and donors are not permitted to engage with representatives of ultranationalist parties or to support projects in which SRS officials partake. As one representative of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)—a US organization specialized in the provision of political party assistance—explained, “I can have no contact with the SRS, not even to send a letter.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, none of the instruments typically employed to reform parties in new or struggling democracies—including diplomatic contacts and democracy assistance—are applied in connection with Serbia’s ultranationalist parties. The following section examines these instruments in greater depth.

### Strategies of engagement

Until recently, it was common practice to conceive of political transformation as an exclusively domestic affair. Only after the onset of the third wave of

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<sup>6</sup> This quote was made in reference to the SRS. See: Judy Batt, “The Question of Serbia”, *Institute for Security Studies* 81 (August 2005), 8. Likewise, Balkans expert Sabrina Ramet labels the SRS “neo-fascist” in her article, “The Denial Syndrome and its Consequences: Serbian Political Culture Since 2000”, *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 40 (2007), 41-58, 48.

<sup>7</sup> I collected a total of 80 interviews in Serbia (March and June/July 2007) and the US (April 2007). Interviews were conducted with US diplomats and donors, Serbian politicians, academics, and journalists.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, National Democratic Institute, Interview conducted in Belgrade, Serbia, on March 9, 2007.

democratization in the late 1970s did exogenous factors receive systematic attention. To this end, established democracies have increasingly sought to support, and in some cases, impose, democracy in foreign contexts, a practice referred to as ‘democracy promotion’. This article examines a subset of this field pertaining to political parties. It seeks to understand why and to what effect Western actors may opt *not* to work with select parties in new democracies.

In spite of their current malaise, political parties continue to fulfill unique functions which civil society cannot adequately perform.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in their quest to bolster democracy abroad, democracy promoters seek to strengthen political parties’ democratic attributes, including their representative capacities, their legislative competence, and their ability to function cooperatively with their opponents. The US party institutes work to enable select parties to engage directly with the domestic electorate so that they may become more receptive to their voters’ preferences. Western Europeans, by contrast, take pride in helping parties develop more ideologically coherent

programs.<sup>10</sup> Whatever their differences, the ultimate goal of all democracy promoters is clear: “To help strengthen or reform parties in new or struggling democracies all around the globe.”<sup>11</sup>

There are a number of ways to work with parties. A combination of diplomacy and political party assistance forms the backbone of US efforts to promote the democratic development of Serbia’s political parties and party system. While diplomacy aims to encourage, assistance aims to enable parties to implement the codes of conduct conducive to a democratic political party system. Each year, the US devotes over 60 million dollars to political party assistance.<sup>12</sup> Such assistance is meant to bolster parties’ organizational structures, teach modern campaign techniques, and enable legislative competencies with the ultimate goal of facilitating the democratic process in newly democratizing countries<sup>13</sup> To meet these objectives donors’ possess a toolkit

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<sup>10</sup> The six German political party foundations, the *parteiengesellschaften*, are trendsetters in this regard. They seek out ideological sister parties abroad in an effort to assist platform building in manner more in line with the classically left-right ideological spectrum witnessed in Europe.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Carothers, *Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment International Peace, 2006), 77.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Carothers estimates the total figure spent in 2005 to stand at \$68 million. See: Thomas Carothers, (2006): 85.

<sup>13</sup> “USAID Political Party Development Assistance”, *United States Agency for International Development* (Washington DC, 1999).

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the functions unique to parties include, though are not limited to: the aggregation and representation of citizens’ interests, the provision of a structured vehicle of political participation, and the translation of policy preferences into public policies. For more on this see: Ivan Doherty, “Democracy Out of Balance: Civil Society Can’t Replace Political Parties”, *Policy Review* (April/May 2001), 25-35.

consisting of consultancy, commodity assistance, trainings, seminars, workshops, and study tours.<sup>14</sup> In the US such activities are implemented by the two US political party institutes: the International Republican Institute (IRI) and NDI, both of which receive their primary support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy.

How the US government chooses to employ diplomatic relations and political party assistance characterizes the strategy of engagement to which it adheres. For parties to which the US provides diplomatic support in combination with the full gamut of political party assistance, we can speak of *full engagement*. Where the US opts to exclude one or more of these tools and/or to employ them to different degrees, a policy of *limited-engagement* exists. The advantage of a policy of limited-engagement is that it allows one to straddle the line between cooperation and support. When carefully crafted, diplomacy and political party assistance may be employed in such a manner as to qualify as cooperation, rather than support, thereby thwarting accusations that the US is sanctioning a given party's policies. In rare instances, the US will employ a policy of *non-engagement*, which entails denying a party all forms of diplomatic support or contact and political party assistance.

Figure 1 provides an overview of what I term the 'engagement continuum'.

Serbian law prohibits political parties from accepting material and/or financial assistance from foreign states, foreign legal entities, and humanitarian organizations.<sup>15</sup> As such, most parties in Serbia enjoy a form of limited engagement which includes various degrees of diplomatic contact and an array of assistance programs focusing on capacity building, platform development, and voter outreach. In keeping with the *cordon sanitaire*, Serbia's ultranationalist parties—the SRS and the SPS—are denied even the most limited forms of cooperation. Given that diplomacy and assistance aim to *reform* political parties in new democracies, why are the SRS and SPS not included in US programs? To answer this question the following section examines each of these parties in greater depth.

## The Serbian Radical Party

The SRS was founded in February 1991 as a union of two small, quasi-oppositional parties; the National Radical Party and the Serbian Chetnik Party. At outset, the SRS distinguished itself from Serbia's democratic opposition by appeasing Serbia's President, Slobodan Milosevic. While its program was ostensibly one of anti-Communism, the party consistently

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<sup>14</sup> Krishna Kumar, "Reflections on International Party Assistance", *Democratization*, 12 (August 2005) 4, 505-527.

<sup>15</sup> See Article 6 of the "Law on Financing of Political Parties" (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 72/2003, 18 July and No. 75/2003, 25 July 2003).

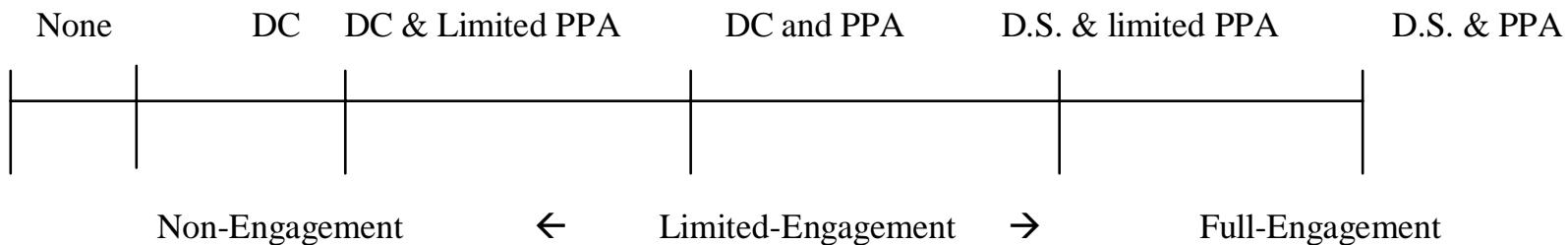
supported the violent expansionist policies lead by Milosevic's SPS. The party's pro-regime sentiments, combined with its leader's manipulation of domestic sympathy for the Serb minority living abroad, ensured that by 1992 the SRS had won 73 of Serbia's 250 parliamentary seats.<sup>16</sup> The party's rapid rise to prominence owed much to the charisma of its leader, Vojislav

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<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Goati, *Partije i Partijski Sistem u Srbiji* (Belgrade: OGI Centar, 2004), 250.

### Figure 1: The Engagement Continuum

*(Tool employed)*



*(Type of Engagement)*

D.C. = Diplomatic Cooperation, D.S. = Diplomatic Support, PPA. = Political Party Assistance

Table 1: SRS Results from Republican Parliamentary Elections 1992 - 2007<sup>17</sup>

Elections	No. of MPs	% of total MPs
December 1992	73	29.2
December 1993	39	15.6
September 1997	82	32.8
December 2000	23	9.2
December 2003	82	32,8
January 2007	81 <sup>18</sup>	32,4
May 2008	77	29,4

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 250. Data after 2004 is drawn from the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CESID), at <http://www.cesid.org/>

<sup>18</sup> Although the SRS actually increased its share of the national vote by 1% from 2003 to 2007, legislative reforms lowering the electoral threshold required for minority parties to enter parliament meant that there were fewer seats to divvy up amongst the non-minority parties. Thus, despite increasing its share of the vote, the SRS actually lost one seat in parliament.

Seselj, whose affinity for nationalist rhetoric and populist tactics struck a chord throughout Serbia. By the late-1990s the SRS was the party of choice for many of those who questioned Milosevic's nationalist credentials in the aftermath of the Dayton Accords. Strong parliamentary results in September 1997 (see table 1) brought the party executive powers: the SRS formed a coalition government with Milosevic's SPS and Yugoslav Left; a party lead by Milosevic's wife, Mirjana Markovic.

The SRS's grip on power was short-lived. Domestic and international dissatisfaction with the Milosevic regime culminated in October 2000, when Milosevic was forced to step down from the federal Presidency. Pro-establishment parties met a similar fate in the parliamentary elections of December 2000, with the SRS taking in just nine percent of the popular vote. In February 2003 Seselj was indicted for crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war by the ICTY.<sup>1</sup> The charges referred to two sets of activities: Seselj's close relationship to the paramilitary group, the *Seseljevci*, and his role as a verbal instigator of war crimes. Despite Seselj's indictment, the SRS refused to distance itself from its leader, opting instead to capitalize on public antipathy toward the ICTY by toting Seselj as a

victim of an anti-Serb agenda. With support for DOS coalition parties waning, the SRS achieved what the US government referred to as a "spectacular victory, becoming by far the largest party in the Serbian parliament"<sup>2</sup>, taking in almost 28 percent of the vote in the republican Parliamentary elections of December 2003.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of its success however, the SRS was unable to assemble the parliamentary majority necessary to form a governing coalition. An alliance between several of Serbia's centrist parties ensured that the SRS would remain in the opposition. History repeated itself in January 2007, with the party taking in 29 percent of the vote, once again proving unable to form a governing coalition. Despite the party's repeated failure to obtain executive powers, Vojislav Seselj remains the formal president of the SRS.

Seselj's leadership is not the only source of continuity within the party. On each of the most pressing political issues the party's views remain identical to those it held over a decade ago. In fact, the SRS party program—issued in 1996—remains virtually unaltered to this day. Thus, the party is (officially) opposed to transatlantic integration<sup>22</sup>, insists that Kosovo

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<sup>20</sup> Woehrel (2006), 4.

<sup>21</sup> The party's greatest competitor at the time, Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica's DSS, received just 18 percent of the vote.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that the SRS has wavered in its opposition to transatlantic integration, in particular its stance towards EU membership. (See for example: Jovan Komsic, "Politische

<sup>19</sup> To see the initial ICTY Indictment against Seselj, go to: <http://www.un.org/icty/indictment/english/sesi030115e.htm>.

remain an integral part of Serbian territory, denounces the ambitions of the ICTY, denies Serbia's complicity in the atrocities of the Yugoslav wars, and maintains territorial ambitions beyond Serbia's recognized borders<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, as Sabrina Ramet notes, the fact that "the neo-fascist" SRS remains "the most popular party in Serbia" continues to shed doubt on the direction of Serbia's democratic trajectory<sup>24</sup>.

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stranke u Srbiji i evropske vrednosti – programi i praksa" in: Zoran Lutovac, *Politische Stranke u Srbiji I Evropska Unija* (Belgrade:Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2007), 9-49.) In 2003, SRS Deputy Tomislav Nikolic stated that he fully supported EU membership. Again, in March 2007 he proclaimed himself *not* to be opposed to EU membership. In May 2007 Nikolic reversed his stance on the issue, expressing his transformation from a mere "Euro-skeptic" to a full-scale "EU opponent". See: "Nikolic: State of Emergency Could Put off Elections", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 10 May 2007, available at: [http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Bilteni/Engleski/b100507\\_e.html#N2](http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Bilteni/Engleski/b100507_e.html#N2). In recent months, the party's position has proven inconsistent, to say the least. During the run-up to Presidential elections in 2008, Nikolic campaigned on a moderately pro-EU platform, stating that Serbia's relationship with Russia need not preclude EU membership. Throughout the campaign, however, he was adamant that Serbia's interests in Kosovo would prohibit EU accession; should the EU accept Kosovo's independence, Serbia would refuse EU membership. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008, the SRS leadership was a vocal critic of select EU member states' decision to recognize the declaration. It is worth noting that a similar position was also taken by Serbia's Prime Minister, Vojislav Kostunica, president of the Democratic Party of Serbia.

<sup>23</sup> These views were reiterated in Seselj's political testament, released in late 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Sabrina Ramet, "The Denial Syndrome and its Consequences: Serbian Political Culture Since 2000", *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 40 (2007), 41-58, 48.

## Socialist Party of Serbia

The founding of the SPS predates that of its ultranationalist counterpart. In the summer of 1990, the League of Communists of Serbia merged with the small, left-leaning Socialist Alliance of Working People in Serbia to form the Socialist Party of Serbia. Whereas the political successors of communist regimes had generally fared poorly against their pro-democratic opponents throughout Central and Eastern Europe (with the notable exceptions of Bulgaria and Romania), in Serbia the collapse of the communist party was in name only. The SPS proved victorious in Serbia's first-ever post-communist elections, winning 77.6 percent of seats in parliament (see table 2). Although it failed to attain a majority of votes' caste, the party's lead was decisive: its nearest opponent, the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), received 16 percent of the vote or 8 percent of seats in parliament.

The SPS's electoral success stemmed from its origins in the communist party. The monopoly on state institutions and national infrastructure that had once belonged to the League of Communists of Serbia was simply transferred to the SPS. Slobodan Milosevic, the party's charismatic leader, exploited this advantage to its fullest. It was largely in this manner that the SPS sustained its predominant position in parliament throughout the 1990s.

**Table 2: SPS Results from Republican Elections 1990 - 2007<sup>25</sup>**

<b>Elections</b>	<b>No. of MPs</b>	<b>% of total MPs</b>
December 1990	194	77.6
December 1992	101	40.4
December 1993	123	49.2
September 1997 <sup>26</sup>	110	44.0
December 2000	37	14.8
December 2003	22	8.8
January 2007	16	6.4
May 2008 <sup>27</sup>	20	7.6

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<sup>25</sup> Goati (2004), 250. All data after 2004 were drawn from [www.cesid.org](http://www.cesid.org).

<sup>26</sup> The SPS ran for office in coalition with JUL and New Democracy.

<sup>27</sup> The SPS ran for office in coalition with United Serbia and United Pensioners Party.

The relationship between the SRS—the embodiment of Serb nationalism—and the SPS—the successor of the communist party—is something of a paradox. Though not always symbiotic (in late 1994 Milosevic even had Seselj imprisoned), the two parties found common ground on Serbia’s so-called ‘national question’. Writes Ognjen Pribicevic, “...although ideologically almost poles apart, Milosevic and Seselj shared very similar, sometimes identical, approaches to most of the problems related to the breakdown of the Socialist Federated Republic of Yugoslavia...”<sup>28</sup> More often than not, Seselj provided the mouthpiece for policies supported by Milosevic. By virtue of its association with its founder and President, the SPS should therefore not be considered any less nationalistic than its right-wing counterpart. Indeed, the party’s ultranationalist sentiments were on display when in May 1999 the ICTY launched what would be the first of three indictments against Milosevic for war crimes committed throughout the territories of the former Yugoslavia. Like the SRS, the SPS refused to break ties with its leader, despite his extradition to The Hague in June 2001. It was only after Milosevic’s passing in March 2006 that the party elected a new president, Ivica Dacic. Perhaps not surprisingly, the party chose to commemorate Milosevic as a “hero”,

whose aims were those of “defending the Serbian people.”<sup>29</sup>

Like the SRS, the policies of the SPS have exhibited remarkable continuity since October 2000. Although the party introduced new programs in 2002 and 2006, its positions on the most pressing political issues, including the so-called national question and cooperation with the ICTY remain substantively unaltered.<sup>30</sup> During the run-up to Presidential elections in January 2008, the SPS candidate, Milutin Mrkonjic publicly stating that armed intervention in Kosovo was a legitimate means of defending state sovereignty. In his words, “We will defend every citizen of Kosovo by arms.”<sup>31</sup> In the aftermath of Kosovo’s declaration of independence, the party’s president, Ivica Dacic, went so far as to propose national legislation explicitly forbidding domestic organizations, political parties included, from recognizing the territory’s claims.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, whatever the party’s

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<sup>29</sup> “Dacic Takes over Socialist Party”, *B-92 Radio and Television*, 4 December 2006, available at: [http://194.109.152.234/eng/news/comments.php?nav\\_id=38375](http://194.109.152.234/eng/news/comments.php?nav_id=38375).

<sup>30</sup> See for example: “Programska Deklaracija Sedmog Kongresa SPS”, *Socialist Party of Serbia*, 2006, available at: <http://www.sps.org.yu/uploads/progdek17.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> As quoted in: “Mrkonjic: Branicemo gradjane Kosova”, *b92 Radio and Television*, January 15, 2008, available at: [http://xs4.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=01&dd=15&nav\\_id=280668](http://xs4.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=01&dd=15&nav_id=280668).

<sup>32</sup> “SPS Zabraniti one sto priznaju”, *B92 Radio and Television*, Febuary 18, 2008, available at: [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=18&nav\\_id=280670](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=18&nav_id=280670).

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<sup>28</sup> Ognjen Pribicevic, “Changing Fortunes of the Serbian Radical Right” in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, ed. Sabrina Ramet (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 193-212.

rhetorical moderation, the SPS's perspective on the Yugoslav wars and Serbia's conduct therein has changed little since October 2000. Only when the party's stances on such issues are upturned, will the label 'ultranationalist' lose its validity.

Considering these parties' past and current practices, it comes as little surprise that the established democracies hesitate to embrace them as potential harbingers of a peaceful, democratic Serbia. That the US goes so far as to employ a *cordon sanitaire* is more so in light of its overriding aim to support democratic transformation in Serbia. Why, after all, refuse contact with ultranationalist parties if doing so might possibly bring about pro-democratic reforms within the party? Why not attempt to make these parties 'safe' for democracy? The following section answers these questions by assessing the goals underlying US policy towards the SRS and SPS.

### **The goals of the *cordon sanitaire*: Is it working?**

US policy towards the Western Balkans is rooted in the desire to achieve peace and stability after a legacy of violent conflict and ethnic-strife<sup>33</sup>. Central to such aims are efforts to mitigate the power of ultranationalist forces (parties among them), bolster liberal democratic development, and finally, facilitate the

region's future within a united Europe. Bearing these overarching goals in mind, what purposes might the *cordon sanitaire* serve? The following list includes goals which were explicitly articulated during my discussions with US representatives working in Serbia, as well as those which logically stem from the broader context of US policy in the Western Balkans. Such goals include:

- *Decreasing popular support for ultranationalist parties:* To lessen the likelihood that either the SPS or SRS enter government, the US may seek to ensure that public support for the parties decreases or, at the very least, does not increase. By erecting the *cordon sanitaire* the US sends a very clear message to Serbian voters that an SRS/SPS-lead government would leave Serbia politically isolated.
- *Keeping ultranationalist parties out of power:* By denying diplomatic contacts and political party assistance to ultranationalist parties, the US signals the consequences likely to follow cross-party cooperation with these groups. In demonstrating its antipathy towards ultranationalism, the US hopes to prevent center-right parties (namely the DSS) from establishing a coalition government which would provide ultranationalist forces with executive control.

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<sup>33</sup> Woerhol (2006).

- *Limiting ultranationalist parties' influence on policymaking:* In outlining its aversion to ultranationalist parties, the US may also seek to lessen the extent to which these parties' programmatic preferences impact upon Serbian policy. The isolation of Serbia's ultranationalists could potentially serve to undermine their base of support, thereby challenging their grip on Serbia's political transformation.
- *Inciting change within ultranationalist parties:* By isolating ultranationalist parties, the US tacitly conditions its assistance on programmatic and ideological reform within these parties. Having been refused US assistance and cooperation, it is clear to SRS and SPS representatives that unless they reject ultranationalism, they will continue to be ostracized by the international community.
- *Maintaining ideological distance from ultranationalism:* By denying US assistance and contacts to the SRS and SPS, the *cordon sanitaire* may likewise seek to highlight US opposition to ultranationalism. In refusing to communicate with these parties, the US sends a clear message that it opposes a politics based on ethnic exclusion.

In sum, it is conceivable that in its desire to bring peace and stability to the Western Balkans, the US employs the

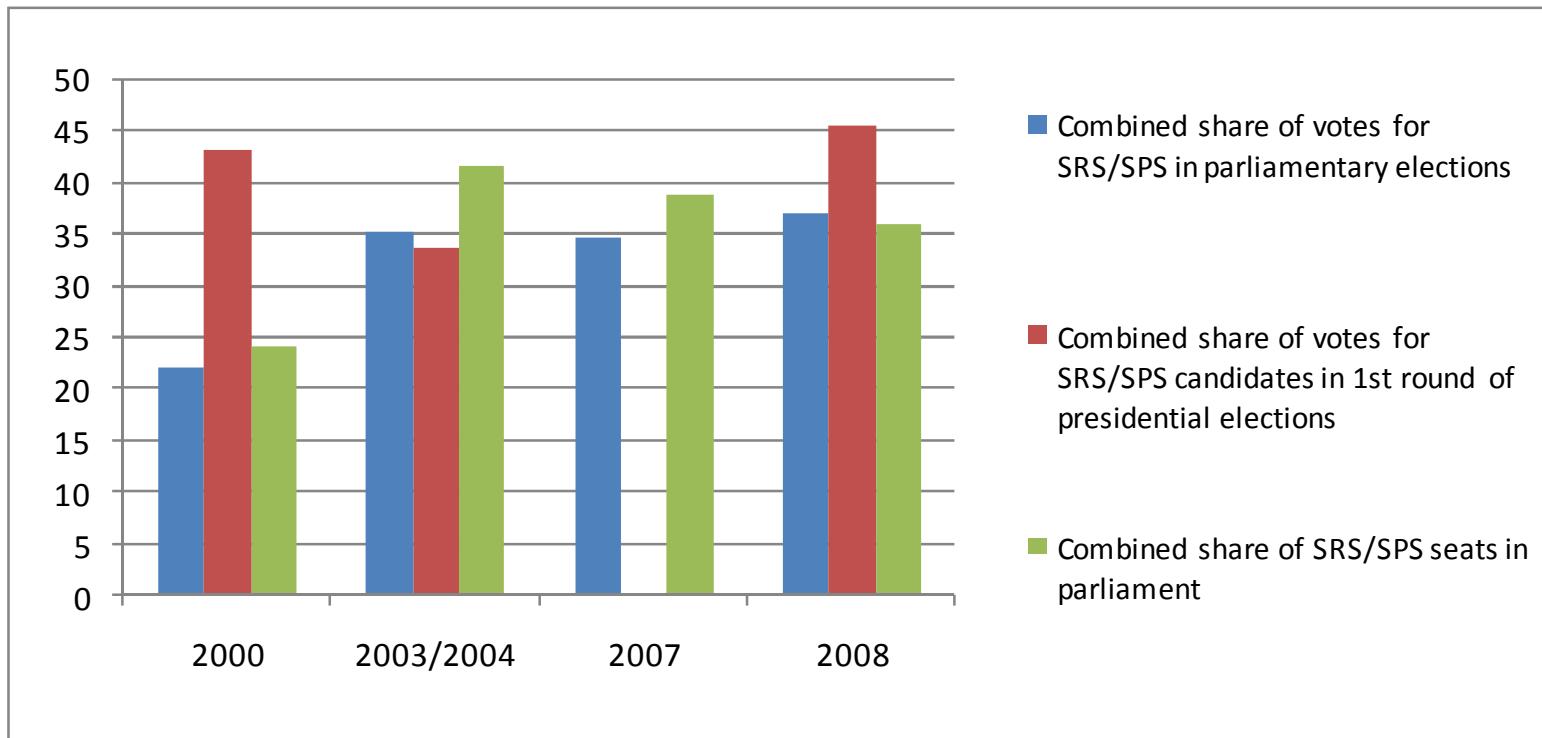
*cordon sanitaire* to serve a variety of purposes, each aimed at eliminating the relevance and prevalence of ultranationalist forces. The goals sketched above are therefore directed at cross-cutting levels: the Serb electorate, the party system as such, the republican parliament, ultranationalist parties themselves, and the US public at large. Given that the *cordon sanitaire* likely serves an amalgamation of the aforementioned purposes, to what extent are its goals being met? The following pages examine each of these goals in greater depth.

### **Decreasing support for ultranationalist parties**

Perhaps the chief aim of the *cordon sanitaire* is that of quelling further support for Serbia's ultranationalist parties. Were this goal being met, one would expect support for ultranationalist parties to stagnate and, ideally, decrease, in the aftermath of the policy's implementation. The evidence indicates that the policy's record is mixed in this regard.

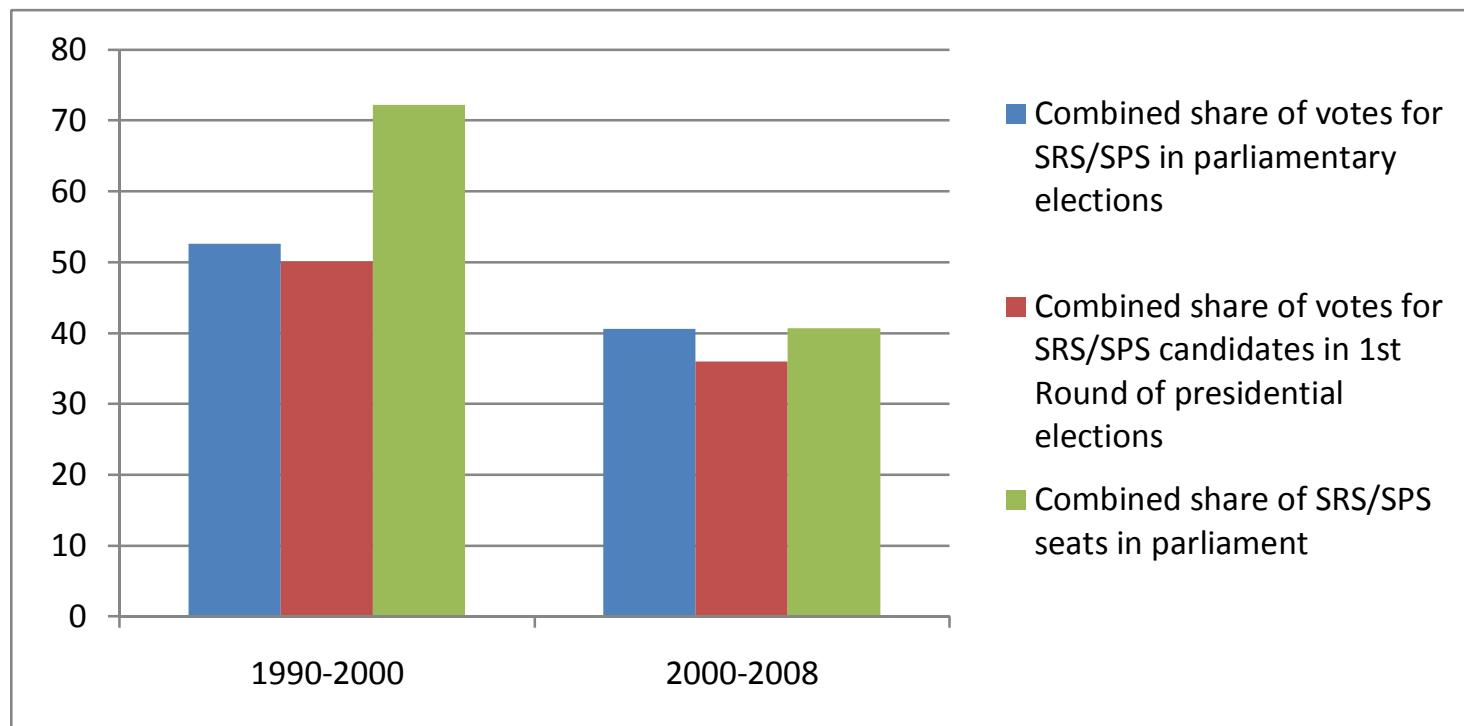
If comparing the evolution of the parties' cumulative popular support from the date of regime change (October 5, 2000) to today, we see that the policy has been largely ineffective: the parties' cumulative share of votes in both parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as these parties' combined share of seats in parliament, has *increased* since the policy was first implemented in 2000 (see figure 2). Although Serbia's ultranationalist

**Figure 2: Combined SRS/SPS Party Strength 1990-2008<sup>34</sup>**



<sup>34</sup> The Presidential elections held in September 2000 were at a Federal level, as opposed to the Republican level. It should also be noted that in the parliamentary elections of May 2008 the SPS competed in coalition with two small parties. As such, the share of votes for the SRS and SPS in parliamentary elections is slightly lower than is reflected in this graph. All data concerning election results were drawn from Goati (2004), 250 and CESID, available at: [www.cesid.org](http://www.cesid.org).

**Figure 3: Combined SRS/SPS Party Strength from 1990-2000 and 2000-2008<sup>35</sup>**



<sup>35</sup>All data concerning election results were drawn from Goati (2004), 250 and CESID, available at: [www.cesid.org](http://www.cesid.org).

parties fared minor cumulative losses from 2003/2004 to 2007/2008, the parties recently experienced a significant turn of fortunes in Serbia's Presidential elections held in January 2008, with their support increasing by more than ten percentage points. This suggests that the implementation of the *cordon sanitaire* has failed not only to diminish support for ultranationalist parties but also to stabilize that support at more modest levels.

If, however, the post-communist period is viewed in its entirety (and the results of 2000 are taken to represent an anomaly), the outlook is less somber. As figure 3 demonstrates, the combined share of votes for the SRS and SPS in parliamentary elections has decreased considerably from 1990 to the present. From 1990-2000 the combined share of votes for the SRS and SPS in parliamentary elections averaged 52.6 percent, while from 2000-2008 that figure was just 40.6. Viewed in terms of seats in parliament, from 1990 – 2000 the SRS and SPS occupied a combined average of 72.2 percent of seats in parliament, as compared to 2000-2008 when they held an average of just 34.8 percent of seats in parliament. There has also been a cumulative decrease in support for SRS and SPS presidential candidates.

Unfortunately, such divergent findings are ultimately inconclusive. While, on the one hand, support for ultranationalist forces has risen since the policy was first implemented in 2000, it has diminished, in some cases

considerably, since the 1990s. This speaks to a mixed record of success in what is perhaps the policy's chief goal.

### **Keeping ultranationalist parties out of power**

At the time of writing, more than seven years have passed since Milosevic left office and Serbia's ultranationalist parties have yet to regain control of the republic's executive branch. Despite strong public support for the SRS, the party has failed to reassume executive powers. Likewise, the SPS has yet to partake in a coalition government. This indicates that at least one goal of the *cordon sanitaire*; that of effectively sidelining Serbia's ultranationalists, has been met.

On the surface, this is irrefutable. As of May 2008, the SRS and the SPS have failed either to form a coalition government or to obtain the Serbian presidency<sup>36</sup>. To date, the closest these parties have come to executive control was the silent support the SPS provided the government of the DSS, the G17 Plus, the Serbian Renewal Movement, and New Serbia. It is noteworthy, however, that the election results of May 11, 2008 have provided Serbia's ultranationalists with their first opportunity to form a post-Milosevic government. Although coalition negotiations were still ongoing at the time of writing, the SRS and SPS coalition had already achieved what had hitherto been beyond reach: a pledge of support from Kostunica's DSS. In fact, less than 24 hours after the election

results were announced, DSS and SRS spokesmen confirmed that the two parties were engaged in coalition negotiations<sup>37</sup>. By May 13—just two days after parliamentary elections were staged—the parties announced that they had drafted an agreement laying out the character and goals of Serbia’s next “national” government<sup>38</sup>. Were the SPS coalition to agree to these terms, Serbia’s ultranationalists would have the number of mandates necessary to form a governing majority. Such an alliance would place executive powers in ultranationalist hands.

By all accounts, the results of the May 11 elections have crowned the SPS as the next government’s ‘kingmaker’. It is uncertain whether they will chose to form a government with the SRS and DSS or opt instead to forge an alliance with the DS-lead coalition, “For a European Serbia”. Regardless of their options, two things are now clear: 1) the DSS no longer opposes a republican-level alliance with Serbia’s ultranationalists, and 2) the next Serbian government will most likely include at least one ultranationalist party: the SPS. Neither of these speaks to the *cordon sanitaire*’s success.

## **Limiting ultranationalist parties’ influence on Serbian policy**

Intimately connected with the aforementioned goals is that of limiting ultranationalist parties’ influence on Serbian policy. The *cordon sanitaire* has been less successful in this regards. Perhaps the clearest indication hereof is offered by Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit* Index. As figure 4 illustrates, Serbia’s transition to liberal democracy stagnated in the midst of 2002. This period corresponds to an upsurge in popular support for Serbia’s ultranationalist parties, which briefly ebbed after Djindjic’s assassination in March 2003 but increased markedly in the months thereafter<sup>39</sup>.

As a consequence of ultranationalists’ resurgence, the DSS-led government did not command the votes necessary to pass legislation on its own. To get its proposals accepted by parliament, it depended on the support on the opposition, including Serbia’s extremist parties. According to the ICG, “The Kostunica government has also had to rely covertly on that extremist party [the SRS] to pass several key laws and has often acted as though it were a coalition partner.”<sup>40</sup> Serbia’s first post-Milosevic constitution adopted in 2006

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<sup>37</sup> “DSS, SRS discuss next cabinet”, *b92 Radio and Television*, May 12, 2008, available at: <http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?mm=5&dd=12&yyyy=2008>.

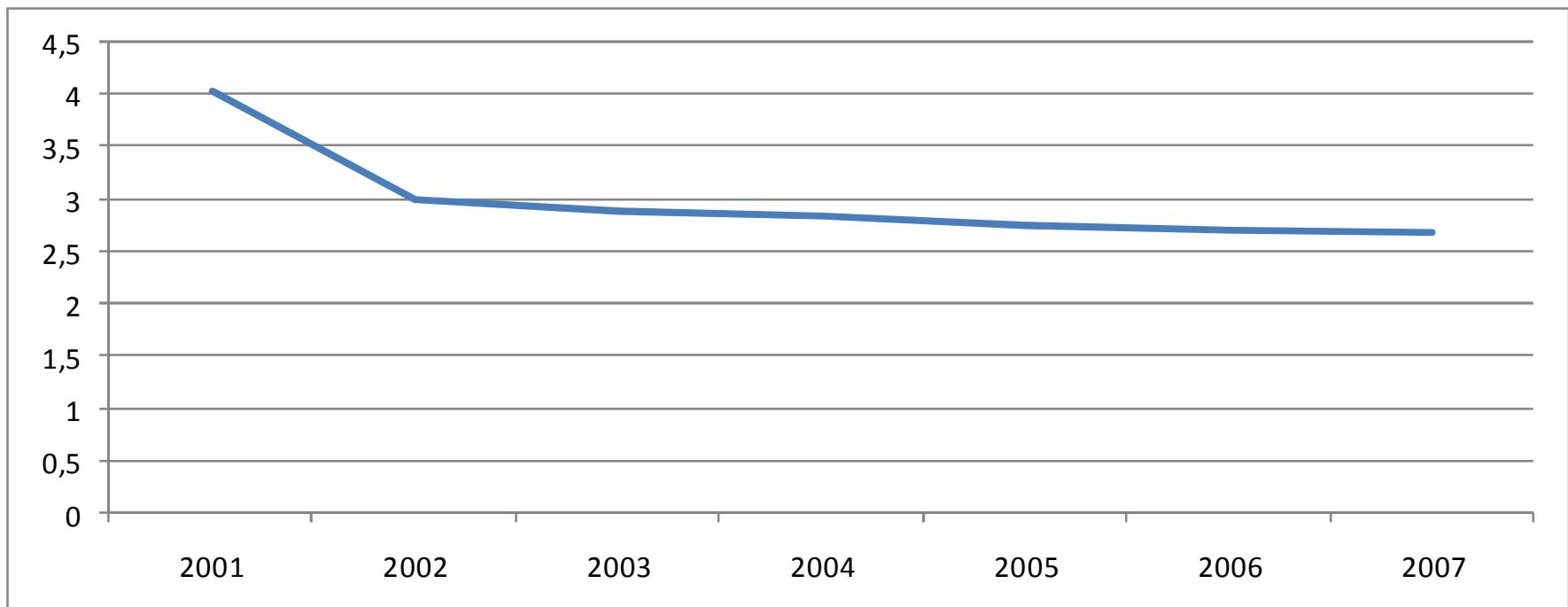
<sup>38</sup> “Radicals, DSS come up with draft agreement”, *b92 Radio and Television*, May 13, 2008, available at: <http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?mm=5&dd=13&yyyy=2008>.

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<sup>39</sup> For polling data pertaining to popular support for Serbian political parties during this period, see: Strategic Marketing Research, available at: <http://www.smmri.co.yu/code/navigate.asp?Id=65>

<sup>40</sup> International Crisis Group, “Serbia Spinning its Wheels”, *Europe Briefing*, 39 (23 May 2005), 2.

**Figure 4: Freedom House's Nations in Transit Score for Serbia<sup>41</sup>**



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<sup>41</sup> Nations in Transit examines the process of democratic reform in the post-communist states of Europe and Eurasia. Countries are given a score from 1 to 7, 1 representing the highest and 7 the lowest level of progress (Freedom House 2007).

is exemplary of this phenomenon. Not only has autonomy to the Serbian province of Vojvodina been limited, but it has become considerably easier for authorities to call a state of emergency, and the independence of the judiciary has been compromised. There is in fact little doubt that the constitution was the product of a bargain between the DS, the DSS, the SRS, and the SPS.<sup>42</sup>

Of perhaps even greater significance for Serbia's tardy trajectory was the silent support the SPS provided to the Kostunica government. In 2004, the DSS-lead coalition formed a minority government. To achieve the majority necessary for a working quorum, the coalition depended on the silent support of the SPS. It goes without saying that SPS support did not come without concessions. It was thus reportedly under SPS pressure that the government halted forcible (i.e. involuntary) extraditions to the ICTY<sup>43</sup>. Likewise, it was thanks to SPS demands that the governing coalition supported the controversial *Law on the Rights of Indictees in the Custody of the International Criminal Tribunal and Members of their Families*, entitling Serbian indictees and their families to free legal representation, accommodation in The Hague, and travel to and from the Netherlands. Additionally, SPS representatives were

awarded lucrative posts in state-owned firms as well as positions in public service. There is thus little doubt the third goal of the *cordon sanitaire*, that of limiting ultranationalists' influence on Serbian policy, has not been achieved.

### **Inciting change within ultranationalist parties**

The *cordon sanitaire* has had even less success in facilitating transformation within ultranationalist parties. Although there is a marked decrease in inflammatory rhetoric, neither the SRS nor SPS has abandoned its ultranationalist sentiments. Both parties renounce cooperation with the ICTY, refuse to admit to Serbia's complicity in atrocities conducted during the Yugoslav wars, and have yet to renounce the use of violence in Kosovo. Thus, the SRS adheres to the same party program that it did in 1996<sup>44</sup> and its party magazine is tellingly entitled *Velika Srbija* (Greater Serbia). In fact the most radical version of SRS nationalism was put forth by Vojislav Seselj as late as 2006. In his political testament, Seselj instructed party members never to abandon their pursuit of a Greater Serbia and to "persistently fight to free Republika Srpska Krajina and Republika Srpska and to unite all Serbian territories."<sup>45</sup> The SPS, for its part, has publicly stated that violence is

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<sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group. "Serbia's New Constitution: Democracy Going Backwards", *Europe Briefing*, 44 (8 November 2006), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Despite this policy, the voluntary nature of DSS-lead extraditions, including that of General Sretan Lukic, was in question.

<sup>44</sup> Jovan Komsic (2006): 15.

<sup>45</sup> Seselj's testament available at: <http://www.srpskinacionalisti.com/sadrzaj.php?tip=ves&is117328>.

a legitimate means to maintain Serb sovereignty in Kosovo and most recently supported legislation which would effectively deny domestic organizations the freedom to recognize Kosovo's independence. A key indicator of these parties' ultranationalist sentiments can be witnessed in parliament, which both parties regularly exploit as a platform from which to hurl rhetorical abuse at colleagues from opposing parties. One widely reported example took place in late 2006, during the parliamentary proceedings for the nomination of Serbia's Deputy Prime Minister. SRS parliamentarian Zoran Krasic publically branded the G17 Plus' nominee, Ivana Dulic-Markovic, as an Ustasha<sup>46</sup>. The SRS proceeded to launch a virulent campaign against Dulic-Markovic, repeatedly questioning her loyalty to the Serbian state, as well as that of her brother and father. Indeed, both SRS and SPS MPs regularly resort to slanderous rhetoric, profanity, and similarly provocative behavior.

To be sure, the parties are also entertaining modest, if cosmetic, reforms. In recent years, each party has sought to target its public relations effort at the so-called 'losers' of Serbia's transition. Without substantively altering their policy

preferences, the parties now emphasize socioeconomic issues such as pension reform, privatization, and college tuition fees, rather than high-profile (and highly divisive) issues such as the Greater Serbia project or cooperation with the ICTY. According to the SRS's socioeconomic program, for example, the fight "against corruption and criminals" ranks highest amongst its list of concerns<sup>47</sup>. During his Presidential campaign, the SRS candidate, Tomislav Nikolic, even refrained from wearing the standard party badge depicting a portrait of Vojislav Seselj. According to Nikolic, doing so would have served to divide Serbs; as a presidential candidate, his intention was to represent Serbia in its entirety. As for the SPS, it eagerly portrays itself as a run-of-the-mill left-of-center European party. As one member stated, "We are a left party. We want to be included in the left parties of Europe. Every country needs a party to take care of the losers of transition."<sup>48</sup> The SPS has also gone to great lengths to stress its pro-European orientation. It thus emphasizes its support for EU membership and has been markedly less emphatic about its opposition to NATO membership.

Unfortunately, such changes remain only skin-deep. Whatever its claim to European ideals, members of the Socialist International were

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<sup>46</sup> *Ustasha* refers to a nationalist organization aimed at securing independent statehood for Croats. They came to power briefly in World War Two, having allied with the Nazis. They are accused of large scale atrocities against Serbs and other minorities, including the establishment of numerous concentration camps.

<sup>47</sup> Party program as listed on the website of the Serbian Radical Party.

<sup>48</sup> Dejan Backovic, Socialist Party of Serbia, interview conducted on 10 February 2007 in Belgrade, Serbia.

unconvinced by the SPS's self-professed transformation; its application for membership was denied on the grounds of the party's unrepentant ultranationalism and its leading role in the Yugoslav wars. Moreover, despite these parties' alleged aversion to corruption and criminality, past practices on the part of the SRS and SPS call the veracity of such statements into question<sup>49</sup>. And, as stated above, the parties' positions on the so-called 'national question', including cooperation with the ICTY, have gone unchanged. Clearly then, the fourth goal of the *cordon sanitaire*, that of inciting change within ultranationalist parties, has gone unmet.

### Maintaining ideological distance

The final goal of the *cordon sanitaire* is that of indicating US disapproval of ultranationalism. As regards this goal, there is little doubt that it has been achieved. Indeed, few have reason to doubt the sincerity of this conviction or the scope of the schism between US and ultranationalist policies. On virtually all fronts, US and SRS/SPS policies are irreconcilable: Where these parties' officials regularly invoke the Virovitica-Karlovac-Karlobag line US representatives consistently condemn

the Greater Serbia project<sup>50</sup>. While the US was one of the foremost advocates of an independent Kosovo, the SRS and SPS continue to insist on Serbia's territorial continuity. By refusing to devote taxpayers' money to the establishment of contacts with or the provision of assistance to Serbia's ultranationalists, the US has sent a clear signal that such positions will not be supported by the US administration.

### Conclusion

In light of the assessment laid out above, what course of action should US democracy promoters take when it comes to ultranationalist parties in Serbia and the Western Balkans at large? Should they maintain the status quo or has the time come to consider possible alternatives to the *cordon sanitaire*?

As we have seen, in Serbia the policy can claim modest successes. Two goals of isolationism have thus far been met: at the time of writing, neither the SRS nor the SPS has gained hold of the executive branch and ideological distance from ultranationalism has been attained. Both are reputable achievements: executive powers would enable ultranationalists to determine the course of Serbian politics, while its condemnation of ultranationalism provides the US with clear moral authority. Unfortunately, the policy's

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<sup>49</sup> The links between both parties to Serbia's underworld has been well documented. See for example, Maja Miljkovic and Marko Attila Hoare, "Crime and the Economy under Milosevic and his Successors", in Sabrina Ramet, *Serbia since 1989: Politics and Society under Milosevic and After* (London: University of Washington Press, 2007), 192-226.

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<sup>50</sup> The line is a euphemism for the Greater Serbia project referring to the geographical borders of a united Serbian nation.

successes end there. The goal of lessening support for ultranationalist parties has been only vaguely realized. Compared to the support these parties' boasted in the 1990s, their popularity has waned considerably. Yet since the implementation of the policy in 2000, support for these parties has actually increased, so much so that few would deny their corrosive impact on Serbia's liberal democratic trajectory. Notably, two of the policy's goals have not been realized: apart from cosmetic alterations, both parties exhibit remarkable continuity with the Milosevic era and, despite their lack of access to the executive branch, both parties continue to exert pressures on national policymaking. Such failures are significant, not least because of the growing likelihood of an SRS-DSS-SPS alliance and the numerous consequences such a government would have on Serbia's international standing.

**Table 3: Goals Met and Unmet<sup>51</sup>**

Goal	Result
Decreased party strength	2
Lack of power <sup>52</sup>	3
Policy influence	1
Change within party	1
Maintaining distance	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

<sup>51</sup> 3 = goal achieved, 2 = state of ambiguity, 1 = goal unachieved. A score of 15 would represent total success and a score of 5 total failure. The score of 10 places the policy precisely in the middle, reflecting a state of overall ambiguity.

<sup>52</sup> At the time of writing, the SPS was on the verge of forming a coalition with either the SRS or the DS. Should they form either such coalition, this score would decrease.

After all, when in May 2007 Nikolic was appointed Speaker of Parliament, the repercussions hereof were more than rhetorical: the Serbian Dinar fell to record lows against the Euro and the Belgrade Stock Exchange declined dramatically. Thus, if tallying the totals of successes and failures, one is forced to conclude that there is ample room for improvement (see table 3).

As has been demonstrated, the policy's inability either to promote change within ultranationalist parties or to negate their impact on national policy is worrisome, not least because the direction of Serbia's transition remains so precarious. It is telling that an increasingly vocal group of US government officials and assistance providers doubt the wisdom of maintaining this policy. One USAID official based in Serbia remarked that, "Personally, I think that we should be reviewing that policy."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, for many of those working in Serbia, the policy seems untenable, with one USAID employee calling the policy "ridiculous"<sup>54</sup> and another "silly"<sup>54</sup>. Whatever the policy's successes, its failures call its relevance into question. The task now is to devise a policy that would exert a moderating influence on Serbia's ultranationalist parties, without

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<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, USAID Belgrade, interview conducted in Belgrade, Serbia on March 2, 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous, USAID Belgrade, interview conducted in Belgrade, Serbia on June 21, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Anonymous, USAID Economics and Governance Office, interview conducted in Belgrade, Serbia on March 15, 2007.

compromising the achievements that have thus far been made.

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