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Comparative Analysis of pro-Russian parties in Bulgaria and Serbia: ATAKA and Serbian Progressive Party SNS

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Abstract: *The focal point of this scholarly article is a comparative analysis of two parties that advocate the Russophile and Eurasian ideas in the Balkans. The article utilizes a range of methodologies, including comparative analysis, to explore the ways in which Russia continues to wield influence in the region through these parties, leveraging historical, cultural and religious ties. In this context, the article undertakes a comparative analysis of the ATAKA party in Bulgaria and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia. The analysis encompasses a comprehensive examination of the ideological foundations, programmatic agendas, approaches towards minority groups, and the actions of these parties in both domestic and foreign policy domains. Additionally, the electoral successes of the ATAKA and SNS parties in their respective countries, along with the public's perception of these parties, are integral components of the study. A significant aspect of the article involves a thorough literature review, which explores the ideological distinctions and commonalities among populist parties experiencing growth in Europe. The article provides valuable insights for those interested in the populist parties.*

Key words: Populism, ATAKA, SNS, Balkans, Pro-Russian

Introduction

The concept of a unified Europe has existed for a considerable period of time, and the endeavor to identify a common ground and construct this notion was a complex undertaking. The conclusion of World War II provided an opportunity to achieve this objective, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and democratic revolutions in Central and Eastern European countries that had previously been part of the Eastern Bloc served to enhance the appeal of this idea. The expansion of both the EU and NATO, incorporating states from Central and Eastern Europe that had recently adopted democratic systems, marked a significant milestone in the pursuit of a unified, democratic Europe. However, after several decades of relative prosperity, peace, and stability in Europe, the geopolitical landscape underwent a dramatic shift. The Ukrainian-Russian war brought Europe to the brink of all-out war. Consequently, the international landscape has witnessed a shift in dynamics, with certain domestic actors expressing support for Russia's endeavors to revive the concept of Eurasianism.

One of the domestic supporters of Eurasian thought became the Russophile-oriented parties in the Balkan region. In different countries, these parties found fertile ground and were established at the beginning of the recent century. Russophile thought is typically delineated as a sentiment of profound respect and admiration for Russia. The Russophile orientation in the Balkans is a political, economic and cultural strategy aimed at maintaining strong political, economic and cultural relations with Russia (Karčić, 2022, p. 1). In this context, cultural, linguistic and Orthodox Church elements are identified as the main binding factors between Russia¹ and the Balkan societies.

The conclusion of the Ottoman-Russian war in 1877-1878, which resulted in the defeat of the Ottomans and the establishment of independence for the Balkan nations, led to a significant strengthening of Russia's relations with the Balkan nations. The patronage of the Orthodox Christian communities in the Balkans by Russia, coupled with the resurgence of the concept of

¹ In order to increase its own influence in the Balkan Peninsula during the Ottoman period, Russia assumed the role of patron for the Orthodox people residing in that region and emerged as the most significant ally in supporting the independence movements of the Balkan nations against the Ottomans. This assistance from Russia was met with profound gratitude by the Balkan societies, thereby facilitating Russia's access to warm seas (Karčić, 2022, p.1), albeit to a limited extent.

Pan-Slavism², which sought to unify all Slavic peoples (Heraclides & Dialla, 2015, p. 171), garnered profound admiration for Russia in the Balkan region. The conclusion of the Second World War and the geographical and political positioning of the Balkans within the Eastern Bloc, under the influence of the Soviet Union, guaranteed the persistence of the connections between the Balkan societies and Russia. The political, economic and cultural relations between the Balkan societies and Russia enabled them to adopt a Russophile stance.

However, the economic and political crises that escalated in the Balkans in the mid-1980s, and the democratic revolutions that followed after 1989, also damaged the strong relations between Russia and the Balkan societies. In this region, the oppositionists who admired Western Europe and longed for a democratic system formed the governments of the new era, and the Russophiles who were blended with the communist ideology lost power. Nonetheless, during the early 2000s, the Balkans underwent another period of political and economic turbulence, leading to the establishment of new populist political parties and the ascension to power of leaders with a pro-Russian orientation. These parties effectively garnered support from those disillusioned with the preceding era, thereby expanding their electoral base.

In the context of the Balkans, two countries, Bulgaria and Serbia, have historically sought to cultivate robust ties with Russia, guided by their own national interests (Guins, 1949, p. 127). In turn, Russia has endeavored to maintain a close relationship with these two nations, in alignment with its strategic interests in the region. The focal point of this research endeavor is a comparative analysis of the Russophile and far-right parties in Bulgaria and Serbia. The investigation will entail a comparative analysis of the following aspects: the origins of these parties, their influence within their respective countries, their relationship with Russia, their geopolitical implications, and the distinctions and commonalities between them.

The emergence of extreme right-wing, populist and Russophile parties in the Balkans, their close ties with Russia, and Europe's quest for an alternative to this phenomenon have contributed to the ongoing relevance of these parties. Consequently, there is a necessity to research and compare these parties. This article aims to address this necessity by employing a comparative

² The concept of Slavic unity was initially proposed by Alexander I, the Russian emperor, who advocated for the establishment of a federation that would unite the various Slavic communities (Guins, 1949, p. 125).

political analysis methodology to study two selected cases: ATAKA party in Bulgaria and Serbian Progressive Party SNS in Serbia.

The initial segment of the article constitutes the introduction, while the subsequent segments primarily address the ideological doctrine, domestic and foreign policy approaches, and electoral achievements of the ATAKA and SNS parties. In the final segment, the ideological, domestic and foreign policy differences and similarities between the ATAKA and SNS parties are addressed, and the electoral achievements are compared. This enables the conclusion to be drawn as to the direction in which societies in the countries are heading.

The purpose of this article is to provide an answer to the following questions:

1. In what political sense can the relationship between ATAKA and SNS be characterized as one of proximity?
2. What are the similarities and differences in their ideology, and domestic and foreign political orientations?

Firstly, the study encompasses the right-wing and populist parties that are experiencing a surge in Europe and the Balkans. These parties are characterized by their Russophile and Eurasian ideology. A comprehensive literature review has been conducted to elucidate the factors contributing to their rise, their ideological affinities and divergences of the right wing in Europe.

Literature review- The ideological distinctions and commonalities among populist parties in Europe

A significant number of studies have been conducted on the populist, Russophile (Eurasianist) parties, and these have employed case studies or comparative political analysis to address the issue. Furthermore, the authors adopt divergent approaches to the rise of the far-right parties in Europe. For instance, Kitschelt (1997) and Betz (1994) posit that the primary factors are immigrants and a high unemployment rate. Goodwin (2011) eschews the immigration problem in favor of a focus on the national identity of European societies as a causal factor for the rise of far-right parties. He conducts a social examination of far-right voters in various elections at different times and periods, claiming that most supporters of far-right parties are less educated

and impoverished Europeans who fear the loss of their national identity due to the influence of various immigrant groups.

In their seminal work, Langenbacher and Schellenberg (2011) pioneered a novel approach by exploring influential strategies to counteract the proliferation of far-right populism in Europe. Their work offers a comprehensive analysis of the strategies employed by far-right parties, which have the potential to undermine European democracy and society. The authors meticulously delineate the organizational structures of these parties and the groups they target. A distinguishing feature of this study is its comprehensive approach, encompassing not only established European nations but also Hungary and Bulgaria. Building upon this foundation, Eremina and Seredenko's (2015) study delves into the philosophical underpinnings and historical evolution of right-radicalism, while concurrently offering a detailed analysis of the legal and political dimensions of extreme right-wing parties. The authors employ the novel term "socially dangerous" to describe far-right parties, positing that this designation stems from the characteristics of these parties, which are widely recognized as extreme right-wing, anti-democratic, anti-constitutional and anti-establishment. The authors contend that far-right parties do not represent a novel phenomenon, but rather, they can be traced back to historical antecedents such as Nazi and fascist movements. They assert that these ideologies do not originate from outside Europe, but rather, they are deeply embedded within European societies and have emerged from these very contexts. The authors further contend that these parties exert a significant influence on the contemporary European party and political system, as well as on society and the state. Furthermore, the authors undertake an examination of the evolution of far-right ideology in the context of social instability, nationalism and conservatism, and the utilization of anti-immigration discourse as a means of garnering followers and supporters by far-right parties. The purpose of this examination is to demonstrate the dangerous situation in Europe after the spread of these parties, given that their ideology differs from the liberal and democratic point of view.

In their article, Wilson and Hainsworth (2012) posit that the far right is disseminating throughout Europe and has encountered varied degrees of success in recent years. The authors delineate the hallmarks of far-right parties, encompassing populism, authoritarianism, and nativism – a synthesis of nationalism and xenophobia. They contend that the prevailing leitmotiv of these

parties is euro-skepticism, a sentiment that has the potential to influence future electoral outcomes. The analysis identifies deficiencies in the organizational structure of these parties as a contributing factor to their electoral success, particularly in the context of their utilization of modern media, particularly the internet, to disseminate their ideologies. The authors further underscore the authoritarian nature of far-right populism and the absence of coherent economic policies as significant vulnerabilities. The article goes on to propose a series of recommendations for countering the far right, including the promotion of a cosmopolitan alternative to nationalism, a focus on the local level, and the facilitation of intercultural dialogue.

However, Mudde (2000) proposes a typology that is conducive to comprehending radical right-wing parties and their categorizations. He delineates the radical right using four criteria and delineates the ideology of these parties. According to Mudde, these four criteria are nationalism, xenophobia, law and order, and a welfare chauvinist program. Mudde's argument is that far-right parties advocate a nationalistic doctrine and call for cultural and political unity to establish a homogeneous society under the control of a strong state. They regard homosexuality as an internal threat and call to oppose international or supranational organizations which they perceive as external enemies. Mudde states that far-right ideologues are polarizing society between "them" and "others" in the socioeconomic aspect and claim that social benefits belong just to "their people".

Rooduijn's (2015) argument differs from that of Mudde in that it identifies globalization as a contributing factor to the rise of the far right and populism in Europe. The study identifies winners and losers in this context, categorizing losers as those who are threatened by international competition. The analysis indicates that populist radical right parties gain support from those who align with their nativist and Eurosceptic positions. Rooduijn's (2015) argument aligns with the findings of other authors who attribute the rise in support for the right wing to unemployment and immigration. The 2014 European elections, as reported by Rooduijn, marked a significant shift in the political landscape, with populist parties emerging as key players. The unexpected results, as highlighted by various media outlets the day after the elections, underscored the significance of this political realignment. Rooduijn's analysis identifies multiple factors contributing to the sustained success of populist radical right parties in the coming years. Firstly, the populist radical right will maintain its main program topics – immigration and

European integration – which will help to gain new followers. Secondly, the oldest extreme populist leaders have been replaced by a younger and more moderate generation, who are more pragmatic when it comes to corporate matters on the international level or to accepting the primacy of the European Union.

Stevkovski (2015) posits that the rise of far-right parties and populism in the European Union is associated with the strong ties of society to "political culture," which encompasses the political experience of previous generations, characterized by nationalism and nativism. The author further asserts that the repercussions of the economic crisis, characterized by declining living standards, rising unemployment, and the loss of employment opportunities among the youth demographic, have contributed to the escalation of far-right extremism. Stevkovski further contends that Western Balkan countries, including Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, are particularly susceptible to the rise of far-right extremism due to the persistence of unresolved political challenges and the pervasive influence of strong nationalism. The author emphasizes that the European Union must take preventive measures and accelerate the integration process for non-member states to avoid a new cycle of conflict. The solution, the author asserts, must encompass not only political and security measures but also broader educational, social and cultural discourse. The author further contends that European political elites and dominant political parties are culpable for the proliferation of populism, as they prioritize electoral success and align with far-right extremists to maintain their power. Stevkovski acknowledges that an economic crisis may precipitate an escalation in right-wing extremism and populism, without undermining the reciprocal response from "the others", which would entail a tightening of security within the European Union.

It is evident that there are numerous types of far-right parties that employ varied strategies to achieve power and gain more followers in Europe and the Balkan region. With regard to the connection between Russia and the far right and Russophile wing in Europe and the Balkans, both sides benefit from this relationship. The common ground shared by the Russophile and far right wing and Russia is the national interest, conservatism, and opposition to both NATO and the EU. It is further noteworthy that Bulgaria and Serbia represent nations within Europe where both the far right and the Russophile-oriented parties have established a robust foundation for their ideological propagation.

Bulgaria: ATAKA party

Bulgaria is a country in Southeastern Europe that has witnessed a marked surge in extreme right-wing sentiment, particularly following its accession³ to NATO in 2004 and the economic downturn in 2008. In 2005, as Bulgaria was preparing for the parliamentary elections, a new political party called ATAKA was established by Volen Siderov (Genov, 2010, p. 40), who had previously worked as a journalist and directed TV programs. ATAKA differed from other existing parties regarding discourse, ideology, and ideas⁴. The ATAKA party adopted a stance representing the extreme right nationalist wing through its use of harsh rhetoric directed at the Turkish and Roma minorities in the country (Minkenberg & Végh & Zobel, 2021, p. 9). Conversely, its skepticism towards Euro-Atlantic institutions and its advocacy for the idea of strengthening ties with Russia as an alternative to politics and Eurasianism led to the party's emergence as a representative of Russophiles in Bulgaria (Pirro, 2014, p. 610). The ATAKA party utilized the SCAT television channel and the Nova Zora newspaper to disseminate its ideology and ideas, and its impact on society has been evident in a relatively brief period (Dandolov, 2017, p. 117).

A thorough examination of the principles and approaches of the ATAKA party reveals its categorization as a representative of the extreme right and extreme nationalist wing within the political spectrum (Gressel, 2017, p. 3). The ATAKA party, which adopts a nationalist stance, has committed itself to the protection of Bulgarian identity and the promotion of the Christian Orthodox religion, which exerts a profound influence on national identity (Sygkelos & College, 2015, p. 167, Frusetta & Glont, 2009, p. 562). Whilst ATAKA defended the preservation of the unity and integrity of the country as its primary objective, it was not a proponent of Bulgaria's EU and NATO membership, and viewed this membership unfavorably. In this context, it proposed that the American military bases established in Bulgaria over time should be removed, and that Bulgaria should assume responsibility for its own defense (Sygkelos, 2015, p. 167). The Party has adopted a firm position in opposition to Bulgaria's involvement in the coalitions and operations established by the United States. In terms of its position on Bulgaria's EU

³ Bulgaria, in conjunction with a number of post-communist countries, became a full member of NATO on 29 March 2004 during the second wave of post-Cold War enlargement (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024, p.1).

⁴ The ATAKA is a far-right party with an extremely radical ideology. It was established after Bulgaria's transition to democracy. The formation of such an entity is not unusual in a country with a totalitarian past, such as Bulgaria.

membership, ATAKA adopts a neutral stance, though it has voiced opposition to the closure of Bulgaria's nuclear reactors in Kozloduy and has emphasized the importance of Bulgaria's autonomy in international decision-making (Sygkelos, 2015, 172).

Domestic and Foreign politics of ATAKA

The ATAKA party is recognized as the entity with the most stringent minority policies in Bulgaria after the Bulgarian Communist Party, a consequence of its ideologically extreme nationalist character. The ATAKA party, which supports a homogeneous Bulgarian state, has viewed the Turkish and Roma minorities in Bulgaria as impediments to Bulgarian identity. It has gained prominence for its robust stance against minorities in minority policy, proposing the assimilation of these ethnic groups (Dandolov, 2017, p 118).

A further distinction between the ATAKA party and other political entities in Bulgaria pertains to the outlook on Bulgaria-Russia relations. Bulgaria experienced nearly a half-century under the governance of the communist system, during which period the country's relationship with Russia remained strong. After the early 1990s revolution, a democratic system was established, leading to significant shifts in Bulgaria-Russia relations. The political actors involved in establishing the new administration, including the United Democratic Forces, opted for a policy of minimal engagement with Russia, aligning instead with the Euro-Atlantic wing. Consequently, during this period, Bulgaria's relations with Russia experienced a significant deterioration. In contrast to other parties, the ATAKA party advocated for the Eurasian concept, proposing that Russia and Bulgaria foster robust relations in a political context and various other domains (Frusetta & Glont, 2009, p. 562). The ATAKA Party perceives Russia as the nation with the closest cultural and religious affinities to Bulgaria. It also presents historical evidence of Russia's role in Bulgaria's emancipation from Ottoman rule and the establishment of an independent state as evidence for the strengthening of ties between the two countries (Ghodsee, 2008, p. 37). It advocates for the strengthening of economic and political relations with Russia (Sgourev, 2009, p. 642). Concurrently, it is among the parties that oppose the EU's sanctions against Russia due to the Ukraine war (Polyakova, 2014, p. 36). When considering the party's affinity with Russia and its endeavors to unify the Russophile structure in Bulgaria under its umbrella, as well as its

promotion of the EURASIA concept, it becomes evident that ATAKA embodies both Russophile and Eurasianist principles.

The success of ATAKA in the elections

Following its foundation in 2005, the ATAKA party participated in the parliamentary elections and surpassed the electoral threshold by securing 8.1 percent of the votes, consequently obtaining 21 out of 240 parliamentary seats (Sgourev, 2009, p. 642). This development served as a litmus test, revealing the prevailing discontent among the Bulgarian electorate towards the available political alternatives during that period.

The ATAKA party, which began the electoral process with a strong performance, continued to increase its popularity and maintained its position as the fourth strongest party in Bulgaria until 2014. Concurrently, although leader Volen Siderov was unsuccessful in winning the presidential elections held in 2006, he finished as the second strongest candidate (Frusetta & Glont, 2009, p. 552). ATAKA's performance in the European Parliament elections in 2009 is indicative of its initial success, with the party receiving 2 seats (Polyakova, 2014, p. 208). Following the 2014 electoral cycle, the ATAKA party experienced a decline in its electoral fortunes, leading to a reduction in its influence (Minkenberg & Végh & Zobel, 2021, p. 9). In a 2014 general election, a party called ATAKA received just over 4% of the votes and won 11 seats in the Bulgarian Parliament, but this was actually an indication of the party's declining popularity at the time (Kanev, 2014, p. 185). In the 2017 parliamentary elections, the ATAKA party entered into a coalition with other nationalist and far-right parties, a strategic move that was designed to regain its electoral strength.

Despite its commitment to safeguarding Bulgarian identity, its embrace of Orthodox Christianity, its attempts to maintain favorable relations with Russia from various vantage points, and its ambivalent stance towards Euro-Atlantic institutions, the party has encountered challenges in aligning its policies with the evolving geopolitical landscape. This has resulted in a shift in voter preference towards newly formed nationalist parties⁵, which have emerged as a response to the

⁵ The political parties known as Velichie and Vazrazhdane are recognized as pro-Russian entities within the Bulgarian political landscape. These parties have been observed to exhibit ideological affinities with ATAKA, with a shared objective of safeguarding Bulgarian identity and fostering robust connections with Russia. Additionally, these parties have been noted to harbor a degree of skepticism towards Euro-Atlantic institutions. In the 2024 Bulgarian

changing international environment. Consequently, the ATAKA party is compelled to devise novel strategies that take this rapid transformation into account.

Serbia: SNS party

Serbia, a country situated in the center of the Balkan Peninsula, is landlocked⁶ and thus has no access to the sea. Due to its location, it is a country that some countries seek to increase their influence over in terms of both geostrategy and geopolitics. Historically and culturally, Russia has given importance to bilateral relations with Serbia by using both the Orthodox religion and the Slavic race, and these two countries have always been close to each other (Konitzer, 2011, p. 108-109). Consequently, the Serbian society has adopted a distinct stance towards Russia, aligning with Russia in the international arena⁷. In addressing challenges that Serbia has been unable to resolve independently, Russia has adopted a role akin to that of a guardian, assuming a leading role in the resolution of these issues⁸, a policy that has persisted to the present day. In light of these historical and geopolitical considerations, it is evident that there have always been factions within Serbia that adhere to a Russophile and Eurasian ideological orientation. One such party is the Serbian Progressive Party SNS.

The Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka) was established in 2008 by Aleksandar Vučić and Tomislav Nikolić (Petrović, 2024, p. 82). The founders of the SNS Party such as Vučić had previously been members of the Serbian Radical Party⁹ (Tournois, 2021, p. 595). Subsequently, SNS members left the SRS party due to its excessively radical and extreme political stance and ideology and established their party (Spasojević, 2023, p. 268). The Serbian

parliamentary elections, Vazrazhdane received 14 percent of the vote, while Velichine received 4.8 percent, and the two pro-Russian parties passed the threshold. These elections are an indication that Ataka voters are shifting to these nationalist and extreme right-wing parties (Nikolov, 2024, p. 1).

⁶ Following Montenegro's secession from former Yugoslavia in 2006, Serbia lost its connection with the Adriatic Sea and became a landlocked country.

⁷ Despite Serbia's non-participation in the sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia and its pro-Russian stance towards Russia's attacks on Georgia and Ukraine, Russia has emerged as Serbia's most significant ally on the Kosovo issue (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2014, p.1).

⁸ Despite the fact that Kosovo's independence was recognized by numerous countries in 2008, Serbia did not accept this independence, instead adopting a stance that Kosovo is considered to be part of its own territory, with historical and religious links. Russia has been Serbia's strongest supporter on the Kosovo issue, providing unwavering support for Serbia's Kosovo policy through its position and influence within the United Nations (Petrović, 2024, p. 80). In return, Serbia has demonstrated its loyalty to Russia from various perspectives. Notably, Serbia refrains from participating in the sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia.

⁹ Srpska Radikalna Stranka

Radical Party (SRS)¹⁰ is known to have represented the extreme right wing in Serbia, adopting a particularly tough stance against both the EU and NATO. Indeed, the SRS was known to have supported the Eurasian idea and suggested a strong alliance with Russia. By contrast, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been described as adopting a more moderate and cautious political stance, taking different steps, especially on the EU membership issue, and approving the membership (Tournois, 2021, p. 590). The SNS's political legacy from the SRS is characterized by its endorsement of the Eurasian concept and its advocacy for fostering positive relations with Russia, thus becoming the recognized representative of the Russophile movement within Serbia. Among the SNS party's founders, Aleksandar Vucic played a pivotal political role in different election periods, subsequently ascending to the positions of prime minister and president of Serbia. The founders of SNS sought to adopt more pragmatic and soft politics regarding the EU membership, to enhance Serbia's economic stability and pursue accession to the European Union (Richter & Wunsch, 2019, p. 12). The adoption of a strategic approach, emphasizing EU membership, the economic development and modernization of the country, and the enhancement of Serbia's relations with Russia, has yielded notable outcomes. This approach has facilitated the swift consolidation of the SNS party's position across Serbia, effectively drawing support from disillusioned voters who had formerly been affiliated with other political parties.

It is possible to consider SNS as a center - right party (Konitzer, 2011, p. 107). The objective of SNS is to preserve the national Serbian identity and culture in the same time to strengthen the ties between the national culture and the Orthodox Serbian Church¹¹ (Spasojević, 2019, p. 149). While the SNS party defines itself as the protector of Serbia's national borders, it also considers Kosovo to be part of Serbia and unequivocally opposes the independence of Kosovo.

Domestic and Foreign politics of SNS

About the stance adopted by the SNS party regarding the Euro Atlantic institutions, the EU and NATO, a divergence of policies is observed. Concerning NATO, a degree of skepticism has been voiced, and no steps have been taken in the direction of membership. The assertion has been

¹⁰ The Serbian Radical Party is a political party that occupies the extreme right wing of the political spectrum. Founded in the early 1990s under the leadership of Vojislav Šešelj (Bakic, 2013, p.1).

¹¹ In the Balkan region, the strongest link between Balkan communities and Russia was forged through the medium of the Orthodox religion (Karčić, 2022, p. 1).

made that the country is capable of pursuing an independent and self-sufficient policy in the international arena. Steps have been taken in this direction, including a preference for Russia and China as sources of armament and the possession of the strongest army in the Balkan Peninsula (Tournois, 2021, p. 597-598). Conversely, when contemplating EU membership, SNS adopts a more nuanced and self-interested approach, recognizing the multifaceted implications of such a decision.

Despite its conservative and nationalist inclinations, SNS places significant emphasis on EU membership as its primary agenda (Spasojević, 2023, p. 269). In essence, this pragmatic approach is designed to fortify Serbia's regional and national connections, thereby fostering economic growth. However, while aspiring for EU membership, it upholds national independence and demonstrates intransigence, particularly in regard to Kosovo. This dynamic plays a pivotal role in Serbia's inability to attain EU membership (Tournois, 2021, p. 602). The SNS party has been observed to adopt a markedly Russophile stance, perpetuating historical Russia-Serbia relations at a consistent level (Petrović, 2024, p. 83). Despite its prioritization of EU membership, the SNS party demonstrates reluctance to compromise on Serbia's strong ties with Russia (Samorukov & Vuksanovic, 2023, p.1). Politically, Russia is recognized as a key supporter of Serbia's stance on the Kosovo issue and does not recognize Kosovo's independence (Konitzer, 2011, p. 106). Economically, Russia is a significant source of Serbia's energy resources, providing natural gas (Petrović, 2024, p. 80). Serbia has also demonstrated a preference for Russian military equipment and military training. The SNS party has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the Ukrainian-Russian war but has not favored the EU's sanctions against Russia, which have placed EU membership in a difficult situation (Spasojević, 2023, p. 271). These points display the Russophile approach of the SNS party.

The success of SNS in the elections

The establishment of the SNS party in 2008 has been met with notable political success. Since its establishment, the SNS party has emerged as the most dominant political entity in the country, consistently garnering the highest number of votes in various electoral processes. Concurrently, the founder of the SNS party, Aleksandar Vucic who was one of the strongest politicians with

real power (Lutovac, 2020, p. 194), has experienced a significant ascent in his career, culminating in his appointment as both prime minister and president of Serbia.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the SNS party, which entered the elections in a coalition named 'Future We Believe In - Aleksandar Vucic', received 48 percent of the votes and this result marked the first electoral coalition to secure an absolute majority in parliament, thereby securing 158 seats out of 250 and propelling Aleksandar Vucic to the position of prime minister (Inter-parliamentary union, 2014, p.1). In the 2016 early parliamentary elections, the SNS party once again received 48.25 percent of the votes. Despite experiencing a setback in these elections, the SNS party managed to maintain its position in parliament, consequently securing 131 seats (National democratic institute, 2016, p.2). Consequently, Vučić maintained his position as prime minister.

Aleksander Vučić, who participated in the Serbian presidential elections held in April 2017 on behalf of the Serbian Progressive Party and achieved significant success, became the president of the country by receiving 54.9 percent of the votes (Rudic, 2017, p.1). Following these elections, Aleksandar Vučić ascended to the presidency, thereby inaugurating a new chapter in his career (Marina, 2023, p. 522).

In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the SNS party, in coalition with other political actors, emerged victorious, securing a substantial majority with 63,5 percent of the popular vote and amassing 187 parliamentary seats out of 250 (Bursać & Vučićević, 2021, p. 192-193). This high result in the parliamentary elections in Serbia marks a significant milestone in the party's historical trajectory, as it has never previously attained such a triumph (Dragaljo, 2020, p. 1). While the SNS party secured a majority in the national assembly during these elections, Aleksandar Vucic managed to maintain his position as president.

The personality and political flexibility of Aleksandar Vucic and its policy which was named as a multi-vector policy can be noted as key factors in the successes achieved in elections in Serbia by the SNS party since its establishment (Wiszniewska, 2024, p. 47). Significant steps have been taken by President Aleksandar Vučić towards EU membership, to promote positive economic growth. Furthermore, strong relations with Russia have been maintained to counterbalance Western influence (Lutovac, 2020, p. 201), while simultaneously avoiding making concessions

on the Kosovo issue to protect national interests and identity (Wiszniewska, 2024, p. 51). At the same time, he has taken significant steps towards the implementation of economic development policy in the country. The populist rhetoric and stance of the SNS party, which is designed to appeal to a broad cross-section of the electorate, has also contributed to its popularity among potential voters.

Comparative analyses of ATAKA and SNS

A comparative analysis of the ideological and internal political dynamics between ATAKA and SNS

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the political landscape, this section will undertake a comparative analysis of the ATAKA and SNS parties. The analysis will encompass a range of criteria, including domestic and foreign policy, public support, and electoral growth. The analysis reveals numerous similarities and differences between the two parties. These discrepancies manifest in their respective ideologies and ideas, as well as in their domestic and foreign policy frameworks.

The ATAKA party is a political entity that is ideologically far-right and populist in nature (Polyakova, 2014, p. 207). ATAKA has distinguished itself from other extant Bulgarian parties by adopting a political strategy that can be characterized as radical, and by representing the extreme right of the political spectrum. It perceives itself as the guardian of Bulgarian identity and Orthodox Christianity in the country, and its primary objective is to safeguard the sovereignty of the state. The political stance of the aforementioned party has resulted in its emergence as the representative of Russophiles in Bulgarian politics. With regard to the SNS party, in contrast to the ATAKA party, it is representative of the center-right and national conservative political wing (Tournois, 2021, p. 592), yet it continues to utilize populist rhetoric and approaches balancing the politics between East and West (Spasojević, 2023, p. 274). The SNS party, since it was formed by separating from the Serbian Radical Party, which already had a very radical ideology, chose a softer and pragmatic political tradition (Petrović, 2024, p. 82) and by adopting this method, it influenced many voters and brought them to its ranks, which paved the way for its outstanding success in the elections. While presenting itself as the guardian

of the Serbian nation and national identity, it seeks to safeguard Serbia's sovereignty and opposes the interference of foreign powers in its internal affairs.

In the context of domestic politics, the ATAKA party has garnered notoriety for its confrontational posture towards minority communities, particularly those of Turkish and Roma¹² descent (Genov, 2010, p. 40). This attitude has been a source of concern for these communities, with observers attributing the roots of this tension to the historical legacy of Ottoman rule over Bulgaria and the subsequent relationship between Bulgaria and Turkey (Pirro, 2014, p. 613). The utilization of minority groups as scapegoats to safeguard identity, and the adoption of a political approach that creates a divide between “us and them”, can also be regarded as a measure that exacerbates the polarization of the country's politics. The SNS party, in contrast to ATAKA, adopts a softer and more pragmatic approach towards ethnic minorities in the country. The negative role played by Serbs during the dissolution of Yugoslavia continues to resonate in global public opinion, and the SNS party's approach towards minorities, characterized by its softness, has contributed to its rise. Concurrently, the SNS party has garnered support from segments of the population that have become disillusioned with the political discourse of other parties in Serbia, thereby augmenting its electoral base through the attraction of these disillusioned voters to its cause. This phenomenon, therefore, positions the SNS party as a populist and a unifying entity, capable of attracting diverse segments of the population.

Since its foundation in 2005, the ATAKA party has participated continuously in elections at various levels. Due to the successes it achieved in the first terms, it became the fourth strongest party in the country for a period of time. Despite experiencing a decline in its voter base in later terms, it achieved certain successes through its participation in coalitions. Despite these achievements, ATAKA has not yet become the strongest party with the ability to form a government on its own, and its influence in both domestic and foreign Bulgarian politics remains limited. A notable feature of ATAKA's political development is its role as a catalyst for the emergence of new parties that adhere to populist, nationalist, and extreme right-wing policies¹³,

¹² The ATAKA party has adopted a similar stance towards ethnic minorities to that of the Bulgarian Communist Party, advocating for the assimilation or deportation of these groups as a means to establish a homogeneous Bulgarian society. The adoption of a tough stance by ATAKA towards minority groups ultimately resulted in the escalation of political polarization and a subsequent decline in its electoral support.

¹³ Such as Vazrazhdane (Revival) Party

and which have gained significant power in Bulgaria. Since its establishment in 2008, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has participated in elections at various levels of government, achieving success after success. Concurrently, its leader, Aleksandar Vucic, has experienced a meteoric rise in his career as the party has grown stronger, rising from the party chairmanship to the positions of prime minister and president of Serbia. In the most recent elections, the SNS emerged as the most dominant party in the country, with the ability to form a government (Spasojević, 2019, p. 148). In contrast to the ATAKA party, the SNS has played a pivotal role in shaping both domestic and foreign policy in Serbia.

A comparative political analysis of foreign policy between ATAKA and SNS

In the realm of foreign policy, it is evident that significant disparities exist between the positions adopted by the ATAKA and SNS parties. Despite the apparent Russophile orientation shared by both parties, their respective stances on foreign policy diverge markedly. The rationale behind these divergent positions can be attributed to the divergent state interests of the two nations.

The ATAKA party is distinctive among Bulgarian political parties in its approach to the country's EU membership, which it regards with a degree of skepticism. This is due to Bulgaria's status as an autonomous and self-governing nation on the international stage. The party asserts that the EU's globalized policies represent a threat to Bulgaria's national sovereignty (Sygkelos & College, 2015, p. 171). Indeed, the primary policy of the far-right ATAKA party is to position itself as the guardian of the nation. Following Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, ATAKA did not advocate for the nation to exit the bloc. Instead, the party put forward a proposal to reevaluate Bulgaria's relationship with the EU. The political party SNS adopts a divergent stance from ATAKA about EU membership; since its establishment, SNS has favored EU membership and incorporated this objective into its agenda. SNS is a party that has chosen to prioritize the modernization and economic development of Serbia, recognizing that to achieve this objective, it is necessary for Serbia to accede to the EU and have strong regional and international ties and networks. According to SNS, EU membership serves as a catalyst for the development of both regional and national economic connections, thereby facilitating Serbia's economic advancement (Wiszniewska, 2024, p. 48 - 49).

The ATAKA and SNS parties adopt a comparatively lenient position on the question of EU membership, in contrast to their stance on NATO. This discrepancy in position can be attributed to the expectation that EU membership would have a beneficial impact on the economy, albeit to a limited extent. Conversely, when it comes to NATO, both parties adopt a more cautious and skeptical approach, reflecting a range of reasons for this divergent position. The ATAKA party is known for its anti-NATO stance (Ghodsee, 2008, p. 36). The party's position on NATO is that the organization represents Western imperialism, and it aims to see Bulgaria withdraw from the institution (Ganev, 2017, p. 11). The party's position on the matter of Bulgarian statehood is that the country should be independent in both domestic and foreign politics. In contrast, the Serbian Progressive Party has adopted an independent stance towards NATO. The bombing of Serbia by NATO in the Kosovo War of 1999, which resulted in the loss of life and property, has led to a negative perception of NATO among Serbian society. Consequently, the SNS party has aligned itself with the sentiments of the Serbian people, thereby garnering their support (Konitzer, 2011, p. 115).

In terms of their respective stances on relations with Russia, ATAKA and SNS parties are characterized by congruence in their positions. Both parties are regarded as proponents of Russophile and Eurasian ideology, and they advocate for the maintenance of robust relations with Russia across various domains. The rationale for this approach, as previously outlined, is rooted in historical, cultural, religious, and economic factors. Notwithstanding the aforementioned congruence, it is noteworthy that ATAKA and SNS diverge in their perspectives on relations with Russia. The enhancement of relations with Russia is perceived by ATAKA as a counterbalance to the West. Conversely, SNS adheres to a balanced approach, aligning its policies with the interests of both Russia and the EU (Konitzer, 2011, p. 122-123). It is evident that ATAKA is in favor of a policy that is entirely Eurasian in nature and is the representative of Russophiles. Conversely, SNS exhibits a divergent approach from the SRS party from which it broke away and acts in a manner that is more aligned with its own interests, seeking to establish a balance between Russia and the EU.

A comparative analysis of the electoral success of ATAKA and SNS

In the period following Bulgaria's transition to democracy, the policies of the parties formed after the revolution and the failure of these parties to overcome the political and economic crises have created disappointment among the majority of the population. ATAKA has attracted the attention of this segment with populist rhetoric and has received significant support from this part in the elections (Ghodsee, 2008, p. 31). In the early years of its establishment, ATAKA achieved significant success in the elections and generally participated in coalition governments. However, in the subsequent electoral cycle, the party has witnessed a decline in its electoral fortunes. Despite its inability to ascend to a position of governing alone in Bulgaria, ATAKA has emerged as the voice of a demographic that is predominantly statist, conservative, nationalist, and pro-Russian. This phenomenon signifies a shift in Bulgaria's foreign policy orientation, moving towards Euro-Atlantic integration rather than Euro-Asian alignment.

The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been observed to achieve significant electoral success since its establishment, initially through its participation in the 2008 Serbian parliamentary elections, and continuing through subsequent electoral victories. The party's leader, Aleksandar Vučić, ascended to the roles of prime minister and subsequently president. The SNS's pro-European Union (EU) policies and economic development initiatives have garnered the support of the Serbian society, thereby consolidating its position of authority. The SNS party's populist rhetoric, conservatism, nationalism and pro-Russian stance contributed to its electoral success (Lutovac, 2020, p. 197). In contrast to the ATAKA party, the SNS experienced a steady rise and has become a significant actor in both the domestic and foreign politics of the Serbian state.

It is evident that the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has undergone significant growth and achieved considerable electoral success, thereby emerging as the dominant political force in the country. The SNS has garnered support from various segments of the Serbian populace, including the right-wing, nationalist, and conservative factions, as well as the Russophile community. The SNS's balanced and pragmatic political stance, which caters to a wide range of demographic groups, has contributed to its sustained popularity and electoral appeal.

A comparative analysis of the political ideologies and strategic approaches of the ATAKA and SNS parties reveals significant parallels. The ATAKA party is characterized by an extreme right-

wing stance and a pronounced Russophile orientation. Despite the potential consequences, including the loss of its electoral base, the ATAKA party has maintained its ideological and political principles, continuing to follow the course of action it has previously outlined. With regard to the SNS party, the absence of clarity in its ideology and political movement methodology is attributable to its more pragmatic and interest-based actions. The determination of the party's clear rank and line is complicated by its strong ties with Russia on the one hand and its pro-EU soft populist politics on the other.

As a result, Euro Atlantic institutions such as the EU and NATO are able to formulate a coherent strategy in opposition to extreme right-wing parties, such as the ATAKA party. However, it is challenging to establish a definitive policy against populist right-wing political parties, such as the SNS, due to the complexity inherent in predicting the subsequent political maneuvers of such entities.

Conclusion

In the Balkans, there has been an observable rise in the number of political movements over the last century, with many of these movements focusing on power. One such movement is the Russophile or Eurasian movement, which can be defined as one that is focused on Russia and which is seeking to develop strong relations with that country. In this respect, many parties with Russophile or Eurasian ideology have emerged in the different Balkan countries. This article examined the political actions and success of the ATAKA party in Bulgaria and the SNS party in Serbia in this regard, and made a comparison between them. Historically, Bulgaria and Serbia have been close allies of Russia in the Balkans, due to cultural and religious influences and interactions, and the role that Russia that has played in the independence of the two countries and its economic, political and military support after.

The comparative analysis of ATAKA and SNS parties serves as an illustration of the broad spectrum of right-wing, populist and Russophile parties that are present and experiencing an increase in popularity in the Balkans. The characteristics exhibited by the two parties under scrutiny are, to a greater or lesser extent, reflected in right-wing and Russophile parties in other Balkan countries.

Both the ATAKA and the SNS parties embody the emergence and expansion of the Russophile and Eurasianist movements within the Balkan region. These parties perceive Russia as a pivotal element in counterbalancing the influence of the EU and NATO, and they conduct their relations with Russia following this perspective. When analyzing the ATAKA and SNS parties are ideologically Russophile and Euro-Asian inclined. However, a divergence emerges in terms of the policies they pursue and the achievements they have attained.

In this particular context, the ATAKA party adopts a populist and extreme right-wing policy, while maintaining an unwavering Eurosceptic (Polyakova, 2014, p. 209) and anti-Euro Atlantic stance. In the realm of international relations and foreign policy, the party seeks to fortify its ties with Russia as an alternative to the EU and NATO. The ATAKA party's robust stance, its opposition to the EU and NATO, as well as its markedly nationalist and anti-minority policies have collectively impeded the party's ability to expand its base of support, resulting in a decline in support rather than an increase in different electoral cycles. Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges, the ATAKA party has managed to preserve its position within the Bulgarian political landscape.

Despite its Russophile, nationalist and right-wing ideological inclinations, SNS has adopted a more inclusive and moderate stance in contrast to ATAKA. While consolidating its relationship with Russia, it has adopted a more pragmatic and interest base approach, expressing a favorable view towards EU membership as a means of promoting economic development in Serbia. This comprehensive approach has been instrumental in enhancing the party's electoral performance, leading to its emergence as the dominant political force in Serbia.

The different political methodologies of ATAKA and SNS are due to their knowledge of the society in their countries and how they can influence and attract them to their side in the elections. Since Bulgaria is already a member of the EU and NATO, ATAKA party has tended towards a harsher nationalist and pro-Russian policy due to the opportunities it has, while SNS, on the contrary, has preferred a more self-interested and softer balancing policy between Russia and the EU due to Serbia being outside the Euro Atlantic institutions.

To conclude, in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the European Union has recognized the imperative to fortify its unity and cohesion, encompassing both international relations and

domestic dynamics. This has led to a discernible emphasis on the necessity of incorporating Russophile factions within the EU's political framework. When considering the ATAKA and SNS parties, it becomes evident that the parties in other Balkan countries with a similar orientation perceive Russia as a counterbalance to the unifying policy of the EU, thereby posing a threat to EU interests in the Balkans. Additionally, the absence of the Western Balkan states from both the EU and NATO has created a void in the region (Karčić, 2022, p.1), thereby enabling the proliferation of Russophile parties. If Euro-Atlantic institutions are unable to integrate the Western Balkans in a balanced manner in the near future, these movements may gain momentum, potentially leading to some states withdrawing from the institutions they have integrated into.

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