Regionalist parties in Croatia and Serbia: Between historic regions and nationalising states

by

Dejan Stjepanović, University of Edinburgh

Paper presented at the ECPR annual conference 2013, Bordeaux

1 This is a very rough draft, please do not quote
1. Introduction

Interest in sub-state party politics in Western Europe has grown in the last two decades to which a high volume of relevant publications testifies. In the region of Southeastern Europe, there has been little research on sub-state regional politics in general even less on the strategies of sub-state parties.

This paper looks at regionalist parties (as well as state-wide with regionalist agenda) in historic regions of Croatia and Serbia. Strategies of parties promoting regionalist interests in Dalmatia, Istria and Slavonia in Croatia as well as Vojvodina and Sandžak in Serbia are compared. The paper shows how structural conditions including territorial precedents as well as ethnic compositions of the regions influence various strategies for promotion of regional interests at the state level and their success.

The paper looks at the political strategies since the (re)introduction of multi-party politics in both states in 1990. The focus of comparison are two main features, the issue of territorial restructuring, i.e. what sort of ‘exit options’ from the central state the regionalist parties demand while the second feature relates to the definition of membership by the party in the regional polity, either as ethnonationally plural or singular. The parties studied are the parties representing regional interests and demanding the establishment of a regional polity or extension of competences in cases where the institutional framework does not exist.

2. Regional polities, exit options and party politics

Within the totality of territorial units we can easily distinguish functional entities such as free trade zones or environmental protection areas from territorial units established for
political purposes. Polities are specific kinds of the latter. According to Bauböck’s definition, “a politically organized society or community with its own institutions for making collectively binding decisions for a specified group of persons and/or within a bounded territory”\(^2\) is a polity. Polities, based on that definition, can be smaller, larger or equal to the state’s spatial outreach. The primary focus of this thesis is on polities with a dominant territorial dimension rather than those defined in other ways, such as diasporas or non-territorial minority autonomies,\(^3\) and in particular on the meso-level, of sub-state regional polities.

One has to bear in mind that not all territorial units designed for political purposes are polities. Statistical territorial units, electoral units or territorially deconcentrated structures of central government need not be defined as polities. A polity implies a certain degree of autonomy in decision-making and implementation of those decisions, as well as accountability to individual members of that polity. As regards sub-state polities, federal units of a federal state are a prime example of polities. Asymmetric autonomous regions would qualify as polities as well.

Consequently, a degree of autonomy is essential for defining a territorially based sub-state polity as it allows it to extricate itself from some of the state-level cooperation arrangements without necessarily seceding from the state, something Bartolini calls ‘partial exit.’\(^4\) The disengagement from state-level arrangements or partial exit can focus on cultural, fiscal, legislative and administrative aspects or can be more encompassing, resulting in various forms of autonomies and decentralised sub-state entities, symmetrically or asymmetrically integrated.

The demands of sub-state actors are usually accompanied with the state’s territorial management strategies best defined as “[t]he efforts of central elites to cope with the territorial dimension of policy problems and to contain territorially based challenges to the

---


\(^3\) Most of the literature makes a distinction between personal and territorial autonomy (see for example Lapidoth, 1997, pp. 194-197) although in real life elements of territorial and personal/cultural autonomy are used simultaneously and the distinction between the two types is often fuzzy. On non-territorially defined polities and the related concept of national cultural autonomy see Ephraim Nimni (ed), *National Cultural Autonomy and its Contemporary Critics*, (London: Routledge, 2005)

\(^4\) Bartolini (2005), pp. 4-12.
central power structure."\(^5\) The interaction of sub-state political demands and centralised territorial management usually result in a particular form of governance arrangement. Regional polities and nation-states are particular varieties of territorial systems and governance arrangements. Both regionalism and nationalism engage in the definition of membership. In order to explain why and how states and nations relate to territory and membership, it is worth looking at the more As mentioned, the notion of citizenship has evolved to be understood as membership in a state,\(^6\) but debates in citizenship studies on issues such as immigration in sub-state polities in Europe\(^7\) show that citizenship has spatial references not exclusively limited to the state or supra-state level polities. This ‘nested citizenship constellation’ is characterised by overlapping of political memberships\(^8\) within one broader state (or supra-state as in the case of the EU) citizenship. Thus, the territorial organisation and division of powers as a part of state governance arrangement can help us understand the relations between polities at different spatial levels and definitions of membership in each of them which regulate who has a legitimate claim of belonging to a polity, symbolically, but above by actively participating in determining its future and enjoying rights in it. Oftentimes, in there is a distinction between civic and territorially defined criteria of membership and ethnically defined membership on the other hand.

Rogers Smith, offers a useable analytical framework focused on identity politics and its role in the construction of political ‘peoples’ and membership in polities (state, sub-state or supra-state). According to his theory, “political actors and movements advance an account of the community they wish to shape and lead that includes identifiable economic, political power and ethically constitutive stories”.\(^9\) These ethically constitutive stories are, in other words, definitions, claims and visions of a specific *peoplehood*, its boundaries and

---


\(^7\) See Jo Shaw, “Political Rights and Multilevel Citizenship in Europe”, in Elspeth Guild et al., eds., Illiberal Liberal States: Immigration, Citizenship, and Integration in the EU (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 29-49.

\(^8\) Rainer Bauböck, “Cold constellations and hot identities: Political theory questions about transnationalism and diaspora”, in Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 302.

membership. For the purposes of this paper, the ethically constitutive stories will primarily relate to party programmes and official documents and statements.

A dominant approach to regional party competition is that one of second-orderness or second-order elections, the idea that national elections are the most important, followed by the European and/or sub-national elections. Deschouwer argues against this tendency towards the nationalisation of the party politics literature, and instead talks about multilevel party systems,\textsuperscript{10} which are the result of much more complex interactions between several tiers of government especially in the EU context. Elsewhere,\textsuperscript{11} Deschouwer shows that the national level is not the only relevant level of politics and that regional electoral politics matter and can mobilise a significant number of voters. Parties in turn recognise this development and adopt their programmes and campaigns to the regional level in which the issues need not perfectly fit the national level.

Even those who do recognise that sub-state elections do not have to be subordinate often fail to problematise those occurrences in which political parties do not possess a unique political agenda across the territory of a given state. Oftentimes, “state-wide parties move onto NSWP [non-state wide party] turf by stressing regionalist agenda either through regionally tailored variations of state-wide party programme, and/or by allowing regional branches of the state-wide party greater organisational autonomy in competing in the region.”\textsuperscript{12} More recent publications deal with this issue and provide several conceptual tools for understanding territorial party dynamics. Thus, Swenden and Maddens\textsuperscript{13} define statewide parties as those which participate in statewide and regional elections and have a


\textsuperscript{13} Wilfred Swenden and Bart Maddens (eds.), \textit{Territorial Party Politics in Western Europe} (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-30.
large territorial pervasiveness. Thorlakson\textsuperscript{14} distinguishes integrated statewide parties from truncated parties, which exist at only one level of government. Apart from these, there are regional parties that compete in statewide elections without securing representation in statewide parliaments, as well as statewide parties with regional party branches. The latter type is often a regionalised party where the final say (at least formally) remains with the centre. These parties are to be distinguished from federalised parties in which parties/branches at the sub-state (federal or regional) are the main decision makers, while the party agenda at the federal level reflects the compromise between them. Another type of party that often seeks support from regional electorates is the so-called catch-all party.\textsuperscript{15} What characterises these parties is the thinning down of ideological component of the party programme, competition by means of personalities, and the attempt to develop cross-cleavage appeal to wider electoral clienteles.

Some authors, such as Dawn Brancati, have argued that state-wide parties advocating autonomy or decentralisation have a stabilising effect on the state. On the other hand, according to her, claims for “autonomy are more likely to lead to instability if they are made by regional parties”\textsuperscript{16} The ‘negative’ effects associated with decentralisations are, following Brancati’s argument, caused by regional parties that are likely to stimulate conflict and secessionism by promoting regional identities and advocating legislation that can be harmful to other regions or minorities. The analysis of the cases in this paper questions some of these assumptions and show that there is no direct correlation between regionalist parties, regional identities and especially not secession.

When mentioning the decentralisation of authority to the sub-state regional level, regional autonomy is one of the most commonly used models. Autonomy is a particular form of decentralised governance arrangement that accommodates competing self-determination


(and self-governance) claims emanating from regional and national structures. Autonomy is a ubiquitous term and has several other context specific meanings. In the context of autonomy’s relation to a state, that this thesis analyses, refers to elements of shared sovereignty in particular domains. Autonomy is often the proclaimed goal of regionalist political parties and one of the essential elements of the new regionalism, although not all regionalist projects desire constitutionally guaranteed autonomy.

By definition, territorial or regional autonomies have fixed borders and populations, administrative powers and many other criteria of statehood save the right to external self-determination. However, territorial autonomy is, in most cases, used as a mechanism for the management of ethnonational conflict, rather than as a tool for the management of territorial diversity per se. Territorial diversity need not only be a product of ethnic or national conflicts but can be an outcome of an interaction between a large number of factors including territorially-specific historic development, economy and non-ethnic identities, among others.

Autonomy is often seen “as a potential remedy to self-determination claims”\(^\text{17}\) or as a desirable tool for easing ethnic tensions whereby it is bestowed upon ethnic/national minorities or indigenous peoples within the framework of minority rights protection. Some authors have primarily been concerned with the issue of ethnoterritoriality, where the “chief social actors are ethnic groups which possess a geographical underpinning.”\(^\text{18}\) Although there is no agreement as to who is entitled to territorial autonomy and under what conditions, Safran suggests that the ‘deserving candidates’ should be those driven mainly by cultural rather than economic benefits.\(^\text{19}\) However, Lapidoth mentions that there might be other reasons for establishing autonomy\(^\text{20}\) that are not caused by ethnic tensions.

\(^{17}\) Marc Weller and Stefan Wolff (eds.), Autonomy, Self-governance and Conflict Resolution. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 2. (This is a direct quote and the use of the word remedy might be somewhat problematic. Responses are related to claims rather than the remedies.)


According to her, these are mainly the cases of internationalized cities or territories such as Hong Kong and Macao, or Danzig and Trieste historically.

Although there are different views as to the costs and benefits of territorial autonomies, what is common in most of the literature referred to is that it deals primarily with territorial autonomy that comes about as the result of ethnonational/religious minorities or stateless nations’ claims. This paper shows that autonomy claims can also come as an outcome of coincidence of various territory-specific boundaries, which need not be driven by the interests of a single ethnic group.

A more nuanced and readily-applicable approach is that of Bartolini, who offers a concept of exit that can be used both for analysing non-secessionist demands by the sub-state regions as well as the territorial management strategies by the central state. Bartolini suggests that territories can exit from within state organisations, creating various forms and levels of partial exit that can be exercised within (and across) territories and is radically different from the total exit options such as secession. Partial exit allows for the possibility of consuming selective public goods across territorial units. Instead of considering autonomy (together with other forms of regional decentralisation and self-government) as a slippery slope towards secession, exit options allows a territory to extricate itself from some of the nation state-level cooperation arrangements without formally seceding from the state. The disengagement from the state-level arrangements can focus on cultural, fiscal, legislative and administrative aspects or can be more encompassing, resulting in various forms of autonomies and decentralised regions.

### 3. Croatia’s cautious autonomists

Since 1992, Croatia has been divided into 20 counties (županije) and the city of Zagreb, whose governing bodies are directly elected by a proportional electoral system. According to the Croatian constitution, counties retain their original competences but they can also

---

21 Bartolini (2005), pp. 4-12.
transfer these to municipalities or accept additional devolved competences from the state. Counties have little fiscal autonomy and are still heavily dependent on state budget transfers. From 1993 until 2001, the parliament of Croatia (Sabor) was organized as a bicameral institution with the House of Counties (Županijski dom) as the upper chamber comprising three representatives from each county. As the system favoured the ruling nationalist conservative party of the day, the HDZ, the socialist-led coalition abolished the upper chamber in 2001 through constitutional amendment. Heads of regions (župani) used to be elected by the county assemblies, but as of 2009 they are directly elected. Speaking of historic territories, modern-day Croatia consists of the crown lands of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia, the largest part of the former March of Istria and the independent city-state of Dubrovnik (Ragusa). While Croatia and Slavonia were merged into a single autonomous unit in 1868, Dalmatia was only joined to other Croatian lands by the negotiated deal that created the ‘banovina’ (dukedom) of Croatia in 1939.

In December 1992, the then ruling right-wing HDZ government adopted a law that divided Croatia into 20 counties (županije) and the city of Zagreb. The historical borders of the Croatian crown lands/regions were fully ignored for that purpose. In a paper published a few months before the adoption of laws on counties, Josip Vrbošić, writing on the proposal for the territorial restructuring, argued that the proposed 20 small-sized counties cannot express historical, infrastructural and cultural needs and interests nor can they be a natural self-governing whole (unit). Despite this, he strongly opposed the division of Croatia into “the four known macroregions and their legal establishment as counties,” which would according to him “lead to too much decentralization and would certainly have negative effects on the still unfinished process of national integration.” Interestingly, Vrbošić mentions the ‘known macroregions,’ meaning the historic regions or crown lands of Croatia, Dalmatia, Slavonia and Istria. It is these four regions, without naming them explicitly, which Vrbošić feared could jeopardise the process of national integration.

---

Consequently, the competencies of the new županije were not far reaching but were limited to the fields of education, healthcare, regional development and planning, and roads and infrastructure. Lacking fiscal autonomy, Croatian counties were highly dependent on state budget transfers. The Sabor was restructured as a bicameral institution with the House of Counties (Županijski dom) as the upper chamber consisting of three representatives from each county. This system clearly favoured the HDZ and was established to safeguard Tuđman’s autocratic rule. The other function of the territorial restructuring was to gerrymander Serb dominated areas as well as to hamper potential or existing regionalist political projects that could have been given an institutional framework if the county borders overlapped with the historic regions of Croatia. Amongst the few territories whose borders to a large degree corresponded to its historic nominal predecessor’s boundaries was the Istrian County.25

Since its establishment in 1990 and the first election it contested in 1992, the Istrian Democratic Assembly (Istarski demokratski sabor-Dieta democratica Istriana) won every single election held in the Istrian County, both for the state parliament and the county assembly. It was founded as an alternative political project to that of exclusive nationalism promoting plurinational and bilingual (Croatian and Italian) character of the region. Membership was defined by a combination of civic and plurinational elements. IDS’s platform was based on the protection of Istria’s economic interest and tourism as an important source of revenue, as well as the promotion of a civic, territorial, multicultural and multiethnic character of Istrian polity. Territorial autonomy was advocated but without trying to cause violent conflict with the central government. After the change of Tuđman’s regime in 2000, the IDS managed to push through a statute of the Istrian region in the Croatian parliament, which mainly protects Istria’s cultural and linguistic specificities. The IDS have often said that they will put a moratorium on demands for full autonomy, including fiscal and legislative competences for as long Croatia stays outside of the EU, not to be branded as a secessionist party. Now that Croatia is a full member of the EU, it remains to be seen if the IDS will advance the claims for territorial autonomy of Istria.

25 Nevertheless, some of the historic Istrian municipalities and towns, such as Opatija/Abbazia, Lovran and Mošćenice and the Kvarner/Quarnero islands in the vicinity of Rijeka, became parts of the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County.
Table 1. IDS electoral results in the Istrian County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Year</th>
<th>Parliamentary Lists</th>
<th>Local/County 1993</th>
<th>Chamber of Counties 1993</th>
<th>Parliamentary Lists</th>
<th>Local/County 1997</th>
<th>Chamber of Counties 1997</th>
<th>Parliamentary Lists</th>
<th>Local/County 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>IDS</td>
<td>41.30</td>
<td>74.17</td>
<td>HDZ</td>
<td>13.61</td>
<td>15.52</td>
<td>HDZ</td>
<td>10.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>60.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>51.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>IDS</td>
<td>60.64</td>
<td>46.35</td>
<td>HDZ</td>
<td>14.39</td>
<td>16.70</td>
<td>HDZ</td>
<td>10.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>44.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>IDS</td>
<td>44.77</td>
<td>41.94</td>
<td>HDZ</td>
<td>10.87</td>
<td>11.59</td>
<td>HDZ</td>
<td>11.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The territory of historic Dalmatia, unlike Istria does not exists as distinct political organisation in the form of autonomous government since 1992 despite the historic precedents. In Socialist Yugoslavia, Dalmatia was not recognised as a federal nor as an autonomous unit under either the Croatian or federal constitutions. This was so despite the

---

26 The results are compiled by the author from available data at the level of the Istrian county. Since 2001 constitutional reforms, the upper Chamber of Counties has been abolished. The table shows electoral results of the IDS and its main rival, the HDZ including coalition partners. The years in which the IDS contested elections as a main partner of a coalition are 1995, 2000, 2003 and 2009. Sources (Šantić, 2000; Državno izborno povjerenstvo http://www.izbori.hr; Županijsko izborno povjerenstvo: Županija istarska,http://www.gong.hr; Istarski demokratski sabor http://www.ids-ddi.com); Correspondence with Tedi Chiavelon, Secretary General of the IDS).
fact that the communist party leaders from Dalmatia strongly argued in favour of an autonomous region within Croatia and Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, with the growing decentralisation of the state, and especially after the adoption of the 1974 Constitution, an opportunity for bottom-up regional decentralisation emerged. In particular, the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Croatia allowed for the establishment of associations of municipalities. The Association of Municipalities of Split was formed in 1974. Its territorial extent matched historic Dalmatia and was renamed the ‘Association of Municipality of Dalmatia’ after 1986, now with clear references to the historic territory. Following the victory of the nationalist HDZ in the first democratic election in Croatia in the 1990s, some of the mainly Serb inhabited areas of northern Dalmatia left the Dalmatian Association of Municipalities and their leaders formed an Association of Municipalities with the Serb ethnic majority. The Croat nationalist-dominated Sabor, abolished by a constitutional amendment all the Associations of Municipalities in Croatia. As interethnic tensions grew in 1990 and 1991, some of the ethnic Serb leaders declared ethnic autonomy (and secession subsequently) from the Republic of Croatia, as the war on the territory of Dalmatia started.

At the same time, in 1990, a regionalist Dalmatian party was created, called Dalmatian Action (Dalmatinska Akcija – DA). The party advanced the agenda of the regionalisation of Croatia and the preservation of interethnic peace, which was legitimised by Dalmatia’s historically evolving differences from mainland Croatia, which included references to Dalmatia’s specific economic and intergroup relations, but also a particular interpretation of the past. The DA programme further claimed that the party “represents the interests of all Dalmatians wherever they live, as well as all those who live in Dalmatia despite their religion and nationality”. The Article 2 of the programme says that the DA is fighting for the protection of Dalmatian ethnic, cultural and linguistic uniqueness. These stipulations of the programme are somewhat ambiguous and one cannot be certain whether they refer to a Dalmatian regional identity or an ethnic or even national one, or all of them at the same time. This is further complicated by the reference in the Article 5 to the demand that the rights of self-identified Dalmatians (in censuses) should be equal to those of national

27 Article 1, Program Dalmatinske Akcije.
minorities. The DA programme also declared that it wishes to create political and cultural ties between Dalmatians in Dalmatia and Dalmatians in Croatia and the rest of the world.

The DA contested state-level election for the first time during the parliamentary election in 1992, the first election in the independent Republic of Croatia. In fact, the DA joined the coalition of the IDS and a smaller Rijeka regionalist party (RiDS). The overall number of votes in favour of the coalition were 83,623, most of them coming from Istria and Rijeka. Unlike the IDS that won all three constituencies in Istria, the DA did not win a single constituency in Dalmatia. However, as 60 MPs were elected by party list proportional representation and the IDS-DA-RiDS coalition won one more seat, the DA president Mira Ljubić-Lorger was appointed an MP in the Sabor. This was the first and only time that the Dalmatian Action had a political representative at the central state level, not so much because of its regional support in Dalmatia but largely because of support of its coalition partners. It is important to mention that the DA strategies emulated to a large degree those of the IDS, believing that the successful programme of the IDS could be replicated in Dalmatia. The DA opposed both of the exclusive nationalist projects are advanced the demands for federalisation of Croatia based on historic regions – crown lands.

However the support for the party remained limited to few specific, littoral social elements and included a specific, regionalist, understanding of history. The DA did not manage to achieve larger congruence of interests and to impose itself as a pivot for those. For these reasons primarily, I would suggest characterising the regionalism promoted by the DA as sectional regionalism. The argument in favour of this characterisation is that despite the declared aims of representing the entire territory of the historic region, through its policies and its interpretation of history, identity and economy related indicators, Dalmatian regionalist entrepreneurs explicitly addressed only a small section of the regional population and interests.

There are other, more recent cases of political regionalism in Croatia such as the one promoted by the Hrvatski demokratski savez Slavonije i Baranje [Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja] HDSSB, a right-wing populist party advocating regional

reorganisation of Croatia to benefit once affluent, currently economically deprived historic region(s) of Slavonia (and Baranja) founded in 2007. Unlike the two previous parties in Dalmatia and Istria that stressed plurinational and multiethnic membership criteria in the regional polities. The HDSSB political programme defines it as a “party of national orientation” that “opposes the concept of federalisation of Croatia and autonomism [autonomaštvo].” The project is not multiethnic to say the least, underscored by the fact that the party founder and one of its presidents has been convicted of ethnically motivated war crimes. Paradoxically, the centralism is blamed as the biggest hindrance to the development of Croatia and subsidiarity as a remedy in its programme. But, even more interesting is the fact that the party leaders kept demanding that Croatia be divided into five regions with a high degree of competences whose borders would correspond to the historic Croatian regions. For that reason, the party strategies could be called crypto-autonomist, as it publically defames autonomist demands while advancing decentralisation of power across historic territories. The party is relatively successful in electoral terms and came third in the last two parliamentary elections in the constituency that covers the largest part of Slavonia. In the most recent county elections held in 2013, it came third after the HDZ and the social democrats in the four counties of Slavonia, and it came first in the Osijek-Baranja county winning over 30% of the vote.

Probably the most peculiar of the regionalist parties in Croatia’s historic regions is the Croatian Democratic Libertarian Alliance of Dalmatia (Hrvatski demokratski slobodarski savez Dalmacije – HDSSD). The party just like the HDSSB defines itself as a patriotic, national, Croatian party that claims to “represent the interests of Dalmatia as a single territorial, administrative and socio-economic region” as can be seen in the party programme. Otherwise the strategies of the party are a quintessential example of political mimicry in the sense that HDSSB’s programme is nearly entirely imitated with references to Slavonia substituted by Dalmatia. Even the acronym resembles that of the HDSSB. This sort of strategies did not find much support in the electorate and the only result is in the Split-

---

29 HDSSB party programme (2007).
31 HDSSD programme [http://hdssd.hr/index.php/component/content/article/83-o-nama/97-program-rada-hdssd-a](http://hdssd.hr/index.php/component/content/article/83-o-nama/97-program-rada-hdssd-a)
Dalmatia county (one of the four Dalmatian counties) where the party mustered 1.97% voters’ support in the 2013 county elections.

4. Serbia’s partly successful autonomists

According to the 2006 constitution, Serbia is a unitary state with two autonomous provinces organised along asymmetrical lines, Kosovo and Metohija in the south and Vojvodina in the north. Serbia has no control over Kosovo, which in 2008 declared independence and is recognised as such by an increasing number of states. Apart from Vojvodina and its meso-level government, other units of territorial government in Serbia are municipalities (and cities). In theory, the 2006 constitution allows for the creation of other autonomous provinces but under demanding conditions. There are 29 districts (okruzi) with no elected government, which serve as field-offices of the central government. In 2009, the law on regional development foresaw the creation of seven NUTS II statistical regions. Due to lobbying of Sandžak regionalist parties, who opposed the division of the historic region of Sandžak into two statistical units a new law has been adopted creating five statistical regions (Vojvodina, Belgrade, Šumadija and Western Serbia, Southern and Eastern Serbia, Kosovo and Metohija). Apart from Sandžak, where mainly Bosniak political elites promote decentralization but have failed in obtaining an autonomous status regionalist politics are most visible in Vojvodina.

Vojvodina, an autonomous multiethnic province in the north of what is now Serbia, has had a somewhat different historical development from Serbia proper as it was a part of the Habsburg Empire. After the end of the First World War, most of the historic Vojvodina was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS; Yugoslavia). Following the Second World War, and especially the constitutions of 1963 and 1974, Vojvodina was reestablished as an autonomous province with competences that, in most respects, equalled those of the federal units of the SFR Yugoslavia character of the province. The multiethnic autonomous institutions were early victims of Serbian centralising nationalism in the 1990s under the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević. One of Milošević’s early endeavours was precisely to curb Vojvodina’s autonomy.

Since 2000 and the regime change in Serbia, there is a growing support for devolution among Vojvodina’s electorate regardless of the ethnic divide. Vojvodina’s main regionalist
parties promoting regional autonomy in Vojvodina in the last decade are the state-wide Democratic Party (DS) and the regional League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV). Apart from multiculturalism and references to historical institutions of Vojvodina, these parties rely on economic arguments to support their autonomist claims. With the support of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), they have controlled the majority of Vojvodina’s 120-seat assembly since 2000. Together these parties promote a multinational membership concept in Vojvodina with clearly defined group boundaries. Their demands for autonomy were partly met by the adoption of the Statute of Autonomy which is based on Serbia’s constitution from 2006.

Sandžak is a historic region in the south-west of Serbia that does not exist as a single administrative unit. It is inhabited by an ethnic Bosniak majority. The main regionalist parties that until relatively recently demanded autonomy on various grounds. The SDA outlined its demands in the Memorandum on the Establishment of the Special Status of Sandžak32 a very broad territorial autonomy was demanded and membership was defined in relation to the Bosniak regional majority. While the SDP in 2003, together with Vojvodinian regionalist LSV and Hungarian minority VMSZ formed a coalition named Together for Tolerance (Zajedno za toleranciju). The SDP in many ways wanted to emulate the strategies of the Vojvodina regionalist LSV, capture the votes of Sandžak Serbs and present itself as a truly multi-ethnic party advancing the interest of the entire territory of Sandžak. The coalition won 4.2% or 420 000 votes in Serbia and did not pass the 5% threshold and was unable to enter parliament. These structural constraints, such as the 5% threshold, once again influenced the position the party would take in the subsequent election. The amendments33 to the electoral law in 2004 (the previous stipulations being subjected to criticism for de facto excluding minority representation at the state level), have removed the threshold for political organisations that are formally defined as minority parties. The SDP, while returning to the minority political turf, still tried to present itself as a more moderate minority party with a regional base, thus having a stronger coalition potential.

---

32 Memorandum o uspostavljanju specijalnog statusа za Sandžak у оквиру остатка Jugoslavije, Novi Pazar, June 1993.

33 Закон o izboru narodnih poslanika, ispr. dr. zakona, 18/2004.
Table 2. Election results of SDA and SDP in Sandžak

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Local elections 2004</th>
<th>State parliament elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of seats in local assemblies (total 252)</td>
<td>Number of local mayors (out of six municipalities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDA (Lista za Sandžak – Uglijanin)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDP (Ljajić)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Bochsler 2010)

Autonomy claims for Sandžak were dropped altogether by both the SDP and the SDA in the 2000s. SDP and the SDA leaders still favour preservation of the Sandžak region as a form of political action, while due to the centralised state system and lack of regional resources, being reconciled to the fact that the principal site of political action is still the central state. This could explain why both the SDP and the SDA leaders agreed to assume ministerial posts in the 2008 Serbian government. By co-opting the major regionalist parties, the central state elites, on the other hand, kept their privileged position in regional development issues by securing a precedent that building of coalitions will focus on the state-sponsored development projects. At the same time, by including competing Sandžak parties in the government, the central state remained the final arbiter in the intra-Bosniak political conflict in Sandžak.

5. Conclusion

New regionalist strategies demanding regional autonomy, promoting regional identity and multinationally and plurinationally defined membership as well as economic interests were
common for the strongest regionalist parties in Istria and Vojvodina since 1990. In Istria, demands for autonomy were muted in certain periods. These could be potentially invigorated in the new constellations of the EU membership in which the autonomy is not considered a taboo and where the potential for secession is minimised. In Slavonia, HDSSB a right wing party, nationally exclusive promoted state-wide majority ethnic identity and a form of crypto-autonomism. Nearly the same characterisation can be made of the HDSSD in Dalmatia, a right wing party promoting mononational membership in an autonomous Dalmatian polity. What is common for the Dalmatian parties is a high degree of imitation or even mimicry. In the 1990s, the DA emulated IDS strategies and failed. In 2010s the HDSSD mimicked HDSSB and did not achieve any considerable results. The Sandžak parties are relegated to monoethnic, minority party strategies, that were co-opted by the central state and dropped autonomy demands in favour of access to the central state resembling strategies of traditional regionalists in Western Europe.