

What is Parliamentarism to Populists? The Populist Redefinition of the Concept of Parliamentarism in Parliamentary Debates in Post-Milošević Serbia



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RESEARCH

UROS UGARKOVIC 

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the semantic aspect of the effect of populism in power on parliamentarism. The research focuses on the case of Serbia between 2001 and 2022, which corresponds to the post-Milošević era of contemporary Serbian political history and includes a decade before and after the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) took power in 2012. Drawing on the traditions of conceptual history and rhetorical political analysis, this paper reconstructs the debate over the concept of parliamentarism in Serbian parliamentary debates during the period under observation in order to analyze how populist agents' interpretation and use of the concept of parliamentarism related to and affected established conceptual conventions. The paper argues that the excessive centralization of power in the hands of the populist executive, which marked the first decade of SNS rule, was accompanied by SNS deputies' attempt to redefine the concept of parliamentarism through the rhetorical reconstruction of its internal morphology. This attempt was manifested in SNS deputies' contestation of the established conventions of articulating the concept of parliamentarism with the concepts of parliamentary sovereignty, which implied the superiority of parliament in the institutional system of the polity, and ministerial responsibility, understood as the effective scrutiny of the executive by the institution of parliament as a whole.

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR:

Uros Ugarkovic

Adolfo Ibañez University, CL

uugarkovic@alumnos.uai.cl

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Most of the literature on populism, while engaging in a lively debate over the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon, tends to agree on the importance of the role of the populist leader (Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016; Urbinati 2019; Vergara 2020; Weyland 2017). The empirical literature on populism in power seems to suggest that one of its principal characteristics is the process of excessive centralization of power in the hands of the populist executive, i.e., the process of executive aggrandizement (Caiani & Graziano 2022; Muno & Pfeiffer 2022; Pappas 2019; Ruth 2017; Vachudova 2021). This point raises an interesting question about the characteristics of the phenomenon of populism in power in polities with a parliamentary institutional design. The latter is commonly understood to imply the centrality of parliament as a pluralist, representative, and deliberative institution and the formal subordination of the executive to it. Parliamentarism, therefore, is expected to function as a curb on populism in power. The rise of populism in power, in contrast, seems to necessarily imply the subversion of the principles of parliamentarism. The empirical literature suggests that populists can, and occasionally do, reach and exercise power in parliamentary institutional systems. However, when they do so, they tend to do it at the cost of the erosion of parliamentarism, dispensing with its spirit, substance, and principles (Pappas 2016; Vaarakallio 2013; Weyland 2020). Populism in power is seen to be leading to the disempowerment of parliament as an institution and its de facto subordination to the executive (Maatsch & Miklin 2021).

As a way of contributing to the aforementioned literature, this paper analyzes the effect of populism in power on parliamentarism from a semantic perspective. This approach implies the adoption of the Wittgensteinian assumption that one does not discuss phenomena but concepts, and the consequent assumption of the importance of the conceptual (de)contestation and struggle over the control of the political language for the activity of politics (Freeden 2006). In this sense, this work focuses on the interpretation and use of the concept of parliamentarism in public political discourse in order to identify the populist agents' articulation of the concept and to analyze how it relates to the established conceptual conventions. Put differently, it inquires into the effect that the political discourse of populist political agents might have on what is perceived to be the meaning of the concept of parliamentarism. In this way, this work shifts the focus of political analysis to the field of the struggle over the (re)construction of concepts that mediate our perception of social and political reality.

In its empirical section, this work focuses on the case of post-Milošević Serbia, which is illustrative of populism in power in a polity with a variant of parliamentary institutional design. This era in Serbian political history, which began with the downfall of Milošević's regime in 2000, can be divided into two subperiods, namely, periods before and after the right-wing populist Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka—SNS) came to power in 2012. The SNS was formed in 2008, when a group of prominent members of the nationalist anti-EU Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka—SRS) broke away from the SRS and formed a new organization, which they framed as a moderate, conservative, pro-EU political option. The SNS quickly became the dominant party on the Serbian political scene. The party has been the senior member of all coalition governments from 2012 onwards. It exhibited populist traits from the outset. The literature has elaborated extensively on the populist character of the SNS (Mikucka-Wójtowicz 2019; Stojiljković & Spasojević 2018), which is seen to

be, together with Fidesz in Hungary, one of the two paradigmatic cases of a positively integrated populist party on the European continent (Zulianello 2020). The first decade of SNS rule was characterized by the ever-increasing personalization of politics and the concentration of power in the hands of the populist executive, that is, the SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić. This process was not interrupted even after Vucic abandoned the prime ministerial post and assumed the role of the President of Serbia—a popularly elected yet ceremonial role with very limited constitutional powers—in 2017. The same period of SNS rule was characterized by the increased erosion of parliamentarism and its hollowing out from within the formally parliamentary institutional form (Jovanović 2022; Tepavac 2021; Vukomanovic 2021). This process culminated in the crisis of Serbian parliamentarism in early 2019, when the majority of the opposition parties left Parliament and boycotted its sessions. The same parties boycotted the parliamentary elections in 2020, leaving the 2020–2022 Parliament without an organized opposition.

The two decades of Serbian post-Milošević political history, including a decade before a populist party came to power and a decade of populist rule, provide us with a good case for analyzing the way in which populism in power affects parliamentarism. In order to inquire into the semantic aspect of this process, this paper reconstructs the debate over the concept of parliamentarism in Serbian parliamentary debates in the period under observation in order to analyze how the populist agents' interpretation and use of the concept of parliamentarism related to and affected the preexisting debates and established conceptual conventions.

In doing so, this paper principally draws on the traditions of conceptual history and rhetorical political analysis (Finlayson 2007, 2018) in a way that is inspired by the so-called Jyvaskyla school of thought. This school considers conceptual history and rhetoric to be two co-constitutive and mutually implicating traditions, and it regards the rhetorical use of concepts as illocutionary speech acts in political debates as one of the main factors conditioning the longer-term change in dominant meaning(s) of a concept and its patterns of use. The Jyvaskyla school of thought is principally indebted to the work of Kari Palonen, who famously suggests observing Koselleck's and Skinner's approaches as two different perspectives, namely temporal and rhetorical perspectives, on conceptual contestation and change (1999) and proposes considering conceptual history as a style of political theorizing (Palonen 2002). In so doing, he attempts to establish an approach to political analysis informed by the basic assumptions of the concept-historical and rhetorical traditions. Following Skinner, Palonen (2005) proposes focusing on actual political life rather than on scholarly literature and suggests focusing on the contestation over the concepts in debates, particularly parliamentary debates as their paradigmatic form (Palonen 2017). Clearly, the process of contestation over a basic social and political concept, such as the one of parliamentarism, extends far beyond the confines of the institution of parliament. Nevertheless, when it comes to the choice of primary sources for the analysis of conceptual conflict and change, scholarly works within the Jyvaskyla school exhibit a clear preference for parliamentary debates, which are understood and approached as a conceptual, discursive, and ideological 'nexus' (Ihalainen & Palonen 2009; Ihalainen & Saarinen 2019; Ihalainen, Ilie & Palonen 2016; Palonen 2013).

This work considers the internal morphology (Freedon 2006, 2019) of the concept of parliamentarism to consist of four parliamentarism-constitutive concepts: deliberation, (free) representation, responsibility (of ministers to parliament), and (parliamentary) sovereignty (Ihalainen, Ilie & Palonen 2016; Palonen 2012). This is

not to say that this articulation of the concept is considered a neutral definition of parliamentarism, but rather that this particular conceptualization of it is used as an analytical construct against which the parliamentary interventions under analysis are evaluated. Therefore, when analyzing the interpretation and use of the concept of parliamentarism in parliamentary debates under observation, this work particularly focuses on the way the said concept is articulated with the four parliamentarism-constitutive concepts, as well as how these concepts themselves are interpreted when articulated with the concept of parliamentarism. Lastly, in order to avoid the pitfalls of adopting the nominalist approach while applying an analytical construct created upon the scholarly literature and academic vocabulary to the analysis of real-life parliamentary debates, which are of entirely different genres, this work will be sensitive to the onomasiological dimension of the concepts under analysis.

THE CONCEPT OF PARLIAMENTARISM IN SERBIAN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DELIBERATION

The conceptual convention of defining the concept of parliamentarism in terms of the concept of deliberation, which itself was interpreted in very substantive terms, has been very strong in Serbian parliamentary life and has not been challenged throughout the analyzed period. Members of Parliament would frequently remark that the etymological root of the words ‘parliament’ and ‘parliamentarism’ is the word *parlare*, which means *to speak*. Another frequently invoked maxim, particularly popular among the deputies of the ruling majorities of the pre-2012 period, was ‘the essence of parliamentarism is debate, not voting.’ After ascending to power in 2012, SNS deputies perpetuated the conceptual convention of defining the concept of parliamentarism in terms of the concept of deliberation, understood in substantive terms as free and fair deliberation *in utramque partem*.

The firmness of this conceptual convention might appear counterintuitive given the social history of contemporary Serbian parliamentarism. The first decade of SNS rule was characterized by the significant and continuous deterioration of the conditions for meaningful parliamentary deliberation. The SNS deputies even developed their own method of obstructing meaningful parliamentary debate while passively ratifying high volumes of government-initiated legislative proposals. This method involved consolidating the debate on tens of disparate and unrelated law proposals and submitting over 300 amendments¹ to the first item on the list. The purpose of this tactic was to use up the time dedicated to the debate in detail on the item on the agenda and get to the vote on the legislative package that is the object of the consolidated debate without meaningful parliamentary deliberation. Once the debate finished, most of these amendments, which would often be almost identical in content, would be rejected, for even those who proposed them would not vote for them, making it obvious their purpose was not to improve the proposal on the agenda, but to prevent meaningful parliamentary deliberation. This technique was intensively used by SNS Members of Parliament (MPs) from late 2017 to December 2018, when, precisely due to its use, the majority of opposition parties decided to

¹ According to the rules of procedure of the Serbian Parliament, the debate in detail lasts 10 hours, after which the debated item is voted on. An MP who submits an amendment has two minutes to elaborate on it, which means that, in the debate in detail, a maximum of 300 amendments can be presented.

leave the Parliament and boycott its sessions, accusing the SNS-led ruling majority of using the positive procedural rules to abuse the opposition and remove the conditions for meaningful parliamentary debate. The same parties boycotted the general elections of 2020, which resulted in the 2020–2022 Parliament being a Parliament without effective opposition. The period from the 2016–2020 Parliament onwards was also characterized by a sharp increase in the use of populist rhetoric and the populist discursive frame (Aslanidis 2015) by SNS deputies. This was manifested in the epideictic glorification of Aleksandar Vučić as the leader of ‘decent’ or ‘normal’ people and the delegitimization of the opposition as a subversive element controlled and financed by foreign centers of power and led by corrupt domestic politicians.

This apparent paradox can be best explained by recurring to Skinner’s framework of three levels on which conceptual dispute can occur. These are the level of criteria for the application of a concept, that is, its sense or meaning; the level of its application and range of references, that is, the rhetorical conflict over the (im)pertinence of its application in its commonly accepted and undisputed meaning in order to describe a certain phenomenon, action, person, or state of affairs; and the level of attitude toward it, that is, its normative tone (Skinner 2002, 158–74). It is important to note that the dispute over the concept of deliberation in Serbian parliamentary debates occurred on the level of application of the concept, as different sides in the debate were using it to accuse the other of not behaving in accordance with the principles of parliamentary deliberation in its agreed-upon meaning. Therefore, the meaning of the concept of deliberation and the nature of its articulation with the concept of parliamentarism have not been contested. Manifestations of this phenomenon can be observed in various interventions made by the SNS deputies, both backbenchers and more prominent members of the parliamentary group. For instance, in his intervention made in 2020 to the parliament without the opposition, an SNS deputy and the first-time MP Luka Kebara made the following remarks:

We are often being critiqued that we are the ones who deteriorate democracy, that we are responsible for the supposed “lack of parliamentarism” in Serbia. Ladies and gentlemen, it is precisely Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS who insist that we must talk with everyone. We are the ones who promote dialogue. After all, we won a huge number of votes in the elections, and we could have formed the government all by ourselves, and yet, we were the ones who wanted to hear the voices and perspectives of others: perspectives of the minorities and perspectives of the opposition. We all remember the many problems that we had with the opposition in the previous Parliament. Some representatives of the opposition, some of their deputies, were destroying the inventory here in the Parliament, they were disturbing the work of the whole Parliament, and we have allowed that only to show that we are the ones who insist on democracy (2020)

The intervention of Aleksandar Martinović, leader of the SNS parliamentary group in both the 2016–2020 and 2020–2022 Parliaments, made in the context of the presentation of the draft of the new code of behavior for members of parliament formulated and proposed by his parliamentary group, was a speech act of similar characteristics:

With this code, we show that we want to behave in a way that is different from the way some members of Parliament behaved in the previous

and some other parliaments. We wish that Parliament becomes a place of dialogue, a place that will host decent, civilized people, who belong to different political parties, who have different worldviews, who have different political convictions, but who do not see each other as enemies (...). With the promulgation of this code, we will prevent Parliament from becoming a gladiator arena. We will make sure it becomes a place in which there will be dialogue, discussion, and contestation of opinions, and in which there will never again be insults, curses, all sorts of expressions of fascism, physical assaults, violence, incitation of any sort of hatred, be it national, racial, based on language, age, sex, age, wealth, level of education, or any other criteria (2020)

The purpose of these speech acts was to defend from and respond to accusations by the opposition and sections of the public that the SNS has contributed to the deterioration of Serbian parliamentarism by intentionally removing the conditions for meaningful parliamentary deliberation and to shift the responsibility for the said state of affairs back to the extra-parliamentary opposition. Although the dispute on the level of application of the concept has taken an intensive form, the meaning of the concept of deliberation and the nature of its articulation with the concept of parliamentarism have not been questioned. The conceptual convention of defining the concept of parliamentarism in terms of the substantive notion of deliberation was not contested throughout the period under analysis.

REPRESENTATION

It was beyond dispute in Serbian parliamentary debates of the period to define parliamentarism in terms of the concept of representation and assume that everything that parliamentarians do, they do in their capacity as representatives of the citizenry. However, an intense debate occurred regarding the issue of the desirable form of parliamentary representation, that is, the nature of the mandate. While the advocates of the free mandate argued that mandate should belong to deputies, the defenders of the principle of the party mandate, most frequently referred to by the MPs themselves as the 'imperative mandate,' argued that mandate should belong to political parties.

The position of the advocates of the free mandate rested upon the claims that the free mandate is a genuine parliamentary and liberal principle that protects deputies' freedom of opinion and freedom of speech. The free mandate has also been qualified as a modern, democratic, and European principle, implying that its adoption is a necessary step toward the further modernization, democratization, and Europeanization of Serbia.

On the other side, the defenders of the party mandate argued that the party mandate is a necessary instrument for the protection of the fragile Serbian parliamentarism against the practices of mandate-trading and changing political party affiliation, which were fairly common practices in 21st-century Serbian parliamentary life. It has been claimed that it was necessary to protect political parties because they are indispensable for the proper functioning of parliamentarism, even if that meant protecting parties from MPs themselves. Moreover, it was argued that the institute of free mandate is a relic from the past that cannot be effectively implemented in modern-day circumstances. Not least importantly, it was sustained that a party mandate is an appropriate solution in a proportional electoral system with closed

party lists, which implies that citizens are voting for political parties, their ideologies, programs, and worldviews, without knowing which individuals will be representing them. The party mandate was framed as an intrinsically democratic institute that protects the will and preferences of citizens, as expressed in elections and reflected in the composition of Parliament, from the possibility of distortion caused by MPs changing their political affiliations.

After its formation, the SNS became part of the free-mandate camp. However, an important part of the reason for this orientation of the right-wing populist SNS lies not in its ideological settings but in the circumstances of its formation. The SNS was formed during the 2008–2012 Parliament, when a group of MPs from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) broke away, destroyed their blank resignations with which they had previously put their mandates unconditionally at the disposition of the party, and formed an independent parliamentary group, which later evolved into the SNS. It is clear, therefore, why their adherence to the principle of the party mandate would be inconsistent, as it would imply putting in question the legitimacy of the formation of the SNS as a party. Furthermore, the split of the SRS and the formation of the SNS have had a complex effect on the dynamics of political representation at the subnational level, as hundreds of SRS deputies in representative assemblies of the units of local administration migrated to the newly formed SNS. Since these deputies have not been able to destroy their blank resignations as their colleagues in the national Parliament have, their act often resulted in the SRS activating their blank resignations and terminating their mandates. This action generated a serious hindrance to the capacity of the newly formed SNS party to influence political decision-making at the subnational level. The SNS leadership endorsed the 2010 Constitutional Court decision that declared the practices of blank resignations and the party mandate unconstitutional, hoping this decision would lead to the return of mandates to SNS deputies stripped of them due to activating their blank resignations, which, in turn, would result in an increase in the level of political representation of the newly formed SNS at the subnational level. In that sense, it is worth emphasizing that, in the debate over the desirable form of parliamentary representation, the right-wing populist SNS party has been a defender of the parliamentary principle of free mandate and an advocate of articulating the concept of parliamentarism with one of free representation.

SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The debate over the concepts of ministerial responsibility and parliamentary sovereignty and their articulation with the concept of parliamentarism has had a very different trajectory. These two concepts are mutually implicating, and they usually appear together in the interventions under analysis, due to which they will be analyzed together in this section. Before 2012, the concept of parliamentarism was conventionally defined in terms of the notion of ministerial responsibility to Parliament, which implied the effective scrutiny of the executive by the institution of Parliament as a whole. As for the concept of parliamentary sovereignty, in the period preceding the arrival of the SNS to power in 2012, parliamentarism was predominantly defined in terms of the centrality of the institution of Parliament and its superiority over the other parts of the institutional system of the polity. The superiority of Parliament was understood to be stemming from it being the institution through which citizens exercise their sovereignty, which implied the capacity to appoint the executive and hold it accountable, promulgate and change the laws, as well as promulgate or

change the constitution as a document that establishes the rules of the game in the polity. This position has been predominant but not uncontested. The counter-position was based on the argument that parliamentary sovereignty exists in the United Kingdom but does not and cannot exist in Serbia, for the latter has a codified constitution that establishes a strict separation of power between the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. The three branches of power are to be considered equal, the argument went, which implied that none can be considered superior to the others. However, this position, which challenged the articulation of the concept of parliamentarism with that of parliamentary sovereignty, appeared sporadically and never gained traction. The conventional way of defining parliamentarism in the period before 2012 remained the one that implied the superiority of Parliament as the institution through which the citizenry exercises its sovereignty.

Manifestations of these two conceptual conventions can be identified throughout the period preceding the SNS' arrival to power in 2012 in parliamentary interventions made by both minority and ruling majority MPs, parliamentary speakers, and government ministers. It is important to notice that adherence to these conceptual conventions was not only a matter of formal declaration. The 2008–2012 Parliament saw instances of the president and deputy president of the parliamentary group of the Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka, DS), a senior member of the governing coalition, harshly criticizing the government, headed by their own party, for trying to avoid exposing itself to parliamentary scrutiny. In doing so, they would qualify such behavior as not being in accordance with the 'essence of parliamentarism' and reiterate that it is the duty of Parliament as a whole, including both the opposition and the governing majority, to scrutinize the government effectively and hold it accountable (Čomić 2009; Kolundžija 2009).

After coming to power in 2012, SNS deputies engaged in the contestation of these two conceptual conventions. This process, which was of a rather gradual nature, intensified during the 2016–2020 Parliament. To illustrate its character and scope, instead of referring to decontextualized representative parliamentary interventions, this work will recur to what Kenneth Burke called 'representative anecdotes' which, in *pars pro toto* fashion, are representative of a wider phenomenon they are an instance of. This approach allows us to better contextualize the observed speech acts in the rhetorical situation within which they originated, as well as in the debate and exchange they formed part of. One such representative anecdote can be found in the debate over the interpretation of the concept of parliamentarism that took place during the constitutive session of the 2016–2020 Parliament. In Serbian parliamentary culture, constitutive sessions, which formal purpose is the validation of mandates of deputies and the election of the speaker and vice presidents of Parliament, are seen as an appropriate platform for deputies to reflect on the state of Serbian parliamentarism and to offer their reflections on the next 4 years. Therefore, these sessions are considered to be setting the tone for the parliamentary debates of the 4-year parliamentary period to come.

In the opening act of the 2016–2020 Parliament constitutive session, the Democratic Party (DS) deputy Dragoljub Mićunović, who, being the oldest deputy, presided over the session until a new speaker was elected, perpetuated the two aforementioned conceptual conventions by stating the following:

It is our duty to protect the dignity of Parliament. We need to protect it, first of all, from ourselves, but then, also, from the attacks of all those

other branches of power which would attempt to usurp Parliament's jurisdiction and humiliate it in different ways. (...) We here are the people gathered together, we are its representatives and bearers of its sovereignty. No other branch of power can be above this one (2016)

In his intervention, Vojislav Šešelj, president of the parliamentary group of the right-wing SRS, which was positioned on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from the DS, perpetuated the two conceptual conventions in a similar fashion:

The executive needs to be taught, once and for all, that Parliament is not its follower and that it is not the task of Parliament to execute the political goals of the executive power. The task of Parliament is to strictly scrutinize the executive, so that every time ministers appear here in Parliament, they have a hard time and are sharply critiqued both by the deputies of the majority and the opposition. (...) We wish this Parliament would change its role in society, fully establish the principle of division of powers, and position itself above the executive (2016)

In direct response to Šešelj's intervention, the president of the ruling SNS parliamentary group, Aleksandar Martinović, delivered a speech in which he contested the conceptual convention of articulating the concept of parliamentarism with those of responsibility and sovereignty:

As for what Mr. Šešelj says, there does not exist, to the best of my knowledge, one single parliament in which ministers fear their own parliamentary majority. There is one good book in which the preface is better than the content of the book itself. British political theorist Sidney Low wrote a book called *English Parliamentarism*. The Serbian translation of that book was published in Belgrade in 1929, and the preface to the book was written by the best Serbian public law theorist, Slobodan Jovanović. In it, in his own style, he explained the main principle of all parliamentary democracies. He said, the same party is represented both in the parliament and in the government; however, in the parliament with its privates and in the government with its generals. Just like in the army, a regular soldier does not command his superior officer, in political life the one who is politically superior does not take orders from those below him. I don't see anything wrong with the model of parliamentary democracy that exists in Serbia. (...) It is a big question what would happen with the state if we a priori critiqued everything that comes from the Government of the Republic of Serbia and if Parliament as a whole was a body controlling the government, and if we all were against the government. (...) I agree that the opposition should critique, but allow us, who voted for this government and will keep voting for this government in the future, to support this government, and that this government has a political ally in us (2016)

Martinović's intervention provoked a wave of responses. Vojislav Šešelj questioned the *ethos* of the author referred to by Martinović as 'an author from the beginning of the 20th century who did not leave a significant trail in constitutional-legal political theory,' and opposed both the content of his argument and its underlying 'militaristic approach to the political sphere of the society' (2016). In another response to Martinović, the DS deputy Bojan Pajtić defended more explicitly the principles of ministerial responsibility and parliamentary sovereignty:

It is the duty of every responsible government to understand that it is the citizens who are the bearers of the sovereignty, and that each and every MP individually is, in a formal sense, superior to Aleksandar Vučić as prime minister, or to any other prime minister; that the citizens are sovereignty bearers and that we are the representatives of citizens. The government is there to be controlled, to execute the laws promulgated in Parliament. It is not the purpose of Parliament to be there for the government and to be an “ally” of the government (2016)

We can identify a similar form of defense of the two conceptual conventions in the response to Martinović’s intervention made by Nenad Čanak, president of the parliamentary group of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV):

First of all, I have to remind you that the National Assembly is a particularly important institute, for it is the highest representative body of all citizens. As the highest representative body of all citizens, I have to remind you, because I have noticed that, when it comes to this, there exists a misconception among some of my colleagues, that all of us who sit here were directly elected in the elections, and all the others, such as government, managers of public companies, and all other officials, are appointed officials. That is a very important difference, for they draw their legitimacy from us, us who are directly elected, and not us from them. (...) All of us who sit here represent someone and are responsible to the citizens of this country, but at the same time, the executive power is responsible to us, responsible to this Parliament. (...) The purpose of Parliament is, among other things, to rigorously scrutinize the government’s proposals and legal initiatives before they become legally binding (2016)

More responses of a similar sort were made to Martinović’s speech. These responses defended one or both of the challenged conceptual conventions, leaving Martinović alone in his argumentative position. However, he did not seem to be affected by the pushback. Several months later, he showed that his understanding of parliamentarism, the role of Parliament, and the role of the parliamentary majority remained unaffected:

I don’t know how you understand politics, but I am proud of the fact that I, together with my colleagues from my parliamentary group, am a political ally of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, headed by Aleksandar Vučić. (...) Parliamentarism supposes synergy, cooperation between Parliament and the government. We are not enemies of this government. We are friends of this government (2016b)

One could argue that Martinović provides a fairly accurate description of the Westminster model of parliamentarism. However, the monist Westminster model is quite different from the dualist model of parliamentarism found in Serbia. In the monist Westminster model, ministers are members of Parliament, the Cabinet de facto dominates and determines the dynamics of parliamentary activity, and the main political cleavage runs between the parliamentary majority, which the ministers are part of, and the opposition. In contrast, the dualist model of parliamentarism implies strict separation of the Parliament and the Government as two distinct branches of power and the accountability of the latter to the former. The application of the logic of the Westminster model to the institutional structure of the dualist

model of parliamentarism, therefore, can have considerable consequences. Serbian dualist parliamentarism has conventionally been defined in terms of the superiority of the Parliament in the institutional system of the polity and its duty to effectively control and scrutinize the executive. In a nuanced rhetorical move, Martinović recurs to the logic and practices of the Westminster model to justify the challenge to the aforementioned local conceptual conventions, which have been dominant in Serbian political discourse at least since Milošević's downfall.

First, with his militaristic analogy, Martinović contests the convention of defining the concept of parliamentarism in terms of the concept of parliamentary sovereignty. He reverses the hierarchical order between Parliament and the government, and indicates that parliamentarism implies, or at least is not incompatible with, the subordination of Parliament to the executive. In so doing, he goes far beyond the long-existing yet marginal position in Serbian parliamentary debates that questioned the articulation of the concept of parliamentarism with that of parliamentary sovereignty by claiming that the legislative and the executive are two equal branches of power whose mutual relationship is defined by the written constitution and based on the former's formal capacity and duty to scrutinize the latter. Second, he contests the established convention of defining the concept of parliamentarism in terms of the concept of ministerial responsibility, understood as the effective scrutiny of the executive by the institution of Parliament as a whole. Martinović implies that it is the job of the opposition, but not equally so of the ruling majority, to control and scrutinize the government. He goes as far as rhetorically asking what would happen to the state if Parliament as a whole were a body scrutinizing the executive, implying that such a principle would threaten the stability of the state. Rather than control, accountability, or scrutiny, he defines the relationship between Parliament and the executive in terms of synergy and cooperation. When describing the character of the relationship between the parliamentary majority and the government appointed by it, Martinović reduces all categories that could be used for its description down to the false dichotomy of friend-enemy, and then frames the parliamentary majority as a friend or ally of the government. This rhetorical strategy invisibilizes all other categories in terms of which the relationship between the parliamentary majority and the executive could be described and thought of, such as responsibility, accountability, control, or scrutiny. Furthermore, the effective accountability of ministers to Parliament is significantly hampered if it is thought of and practiced in the context of the reversed hierarchical order between the party generals in the executive and their parliamentary privates.

The intentionality of Martinović's use of the privates and generals analogy needs to be highlighted. Deputy president of the SRS parliamentary group in the 2007–2008 and 2008–2012 parliaments, Martinović was one of the SRS members who migrated to the newly formed SNS, making it to the position of the president of the SNS parliamentary group in the 2016–2020 and 2020–2022 parliaments. In 2007, while in opposition as an SRS deputy, Martinović invoked the same story, this time framing it as a problem, an undesirable phenomenon bothering parliamentary systems, and calling it a 'dilemma' and 'critique' that Slobodan Jovanović had leveled against British parliamentarism (2007). Nine years later, in his capacity as the president of the parliamentary group of the ruling party and de facto leader of the parliamentary majority, he used the same analogy but with a positive tone, framing it as a principle of parliamentarism and parliamentary democracy.

Martinović's speech act needs to be observed and analyzed in the context of the increasing personalization of Serbian politics and the excessive centralization of power in the hands of the populist executive, then prime minister and now-president Aleksandar Vučić. An integral part of this process was the disempowerment of Parliament and its de facto subordination to the executive. The purpose of Martinović's speech act was to lend legitimacy to this state of affairs and to refute the accusations that SNS rule contributed to the deterioration of Serbian parliamentarism. In order to argue that SNS rule is compatible with the principles of parliamentarism, SNS deputies have engaged in a redefinition of the concept of parliamentarism, primarily by contesting its articulation with the concepts of parliamentary sovereignty and ministerial responsibility. Such conceptualization of parliamentarism implies that the superiority of the institution of Parliament in the institutional system of a polity and the effective scrutiny of the executive by the institution of Parliament as a whole are not necessarily its constitutive features. The opposition pushed back against this intent of redefinition of the concept, defending the established conceptual conventions. However, the voice of the opposition has been increasingly silenced, be it through the tendentious moderation of sessions by the SNS-affiliated speaker, the abuse of positive parliamentary procedures with the aim of marginalization of the opposition, or through elaborate techniques of avoiding meaningful parliamentary debates discussed in the previous subsections. The voice of the opposition had fully disappeared from the Serbian parliamentary debates in the second half of the 2016–2020 and the entire 2020–2022 legislative periods.

CONCLUSION

In instances such as the one when the SNS deputy Žarko Mićin (2015) declares, 'Nothing can be above the interests of the citizens of Serbia, not even the preservation of the spirit of parliamentarism, nor the dignity of the Parliament,' the question becomes who interprets the interests of the citizens. Parliamentarism can be understood to imply that the interests or will of the citizens, or heterogeneous 'people' as the democratic subject, are formulated through free and fair parliamentary deliberation between the representatives of the intrinsic social heterogeneity (Palonen 2009). The interests or will of citizens do not preexist the debate but are a product of parliamentary debate, underpinned by parliamentary procedure and spirit, due to which the two cannot be separated, let alone opposed to one another. Populism, on the other hand, is conventionally understood to imply that the populist agent represents the will or interests of the people that exist irrespective of parliamentary debate. In this sense, it is evident why claiming that the interests of the citizens should be placed above the spirit and procedure of parliamentarism, while implying that one party, a populist party, is the sole representative of such interests boils down to suggesting that the program and proposals of one particular party, the populist party, should be put above the parliamentary procedure and spirit. This, in turn, implies disposing of the substance of parliamentarism altogether, regardless of the fact that it can be done from within the parliamentary institutional form.

Empirical studies on populism suggest that the effect of populism in power on parliamentarism tends to consist in the reduction of the autonomy of the institution of parliament and its subordination to the executive. The purpose of this paper was to illuminate the semantic aspect of this phenomenon by inquiring into how populists in power affect the debate over the meaning of the concept of parliamentarism. This paper focused on Serbian parliamentary debates between 2001 and 2022, which

corresponds to the post-Milosevic period of Serbian political history and includes a decade before and after the coming to power of the populist SNS in 2012. It concluded that the process of excessive centralization of power in the hands of the executive, which was the principal characteristic of the SNS rule, was accompanied by the SNS deputies' attempt to redefine the concept of parliamentarism through the rhetorical reconstruction of its internal morphology. This redefinition attempt consisted in the contestation of the established conceptual conventions of articulating the concept of parliamentarism with the concepts of parliamentary sovereignty, which implied the centrality of Parliament in the institutional system of the polity, and ministerial responsibility, which implied the effective scrutiny of the executive by the institution of Parliament as a whole.

In doing so, they engaged in an attempt to alter one's perception of what should be understood by parliamentarism, what parliamentarism means, what it implies, and what way of functioning one should expect, or at least consider acceptable, from a system called parliamentary. Once we acknowledge the social and political function of concepts and the intrinsic link between social and political reality and the concepts that we use to think and describe it, we can appreciate the link between the dynamic of the contestation over the sense of the concept of parliamentarism on the one side and what we perceive as changes in the functioning and mode of operation of the parliamentary system on the other.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Uros Ugarkovic  orcid.org/0000-0002-0778-2469
 Adolfo Ibañez University, CL

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