NEW DIVISIONS, STRUGGLES AND SOLIDARITIES IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

International Scientific Conference

Belgrade, June 13–14, 2025

Vera Backović & Aleksandra Marković (editors)

Sociological Scientific Society of Serbia

New Divisions, Struggles and Solidarities in South East Europe
Book of Proceedings
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Editors
Vera BACKOVIĆ,
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy
Aleksandra MARKOVIĆ,
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy

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For the publisher
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Belgrade, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

This book of proceedings is the outcome of the international conference *"New Divisions, Struggles, and Solidarities in South East Europe,"* organised by the Sociological Scientific Society of Serbia and held in Belgrade on June 13-14, 2025, at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory. Conceived as a regional event held every two years, the conference aims to create a space for dialogue and exchange among scholars interested in the complex social, political, and cultural processes in the region. This is the second time that the Sociological Scientific Society of Serbia have organised such a conference, intending to establish a lasting platform for regular academic collaboration and critical reflection on the region's dynamics.

During 1990s the new states in the South-East European region faced several tectonic changes at the same time: brutal wars and migrations on a large scale, post-war authoritarianism (in most cases), the dissolution of what used to be a common country and the formation of new nations, as well as a rather extreme version of neoliberal post-socialist transformation. All of these processes have shaped their subsequent trajectories. Post-Yugoslav societies still share significant similarities, as they were parts of the same political, economic and cultural space for more than seventy years (1918–1991). At the same time, notable differences have emerged across the newly formed states over the past three decades. Bearing this in mind, the central theme of this conference was the sociological analysis of developmental tendencies of post-Yugoslav societies in the 21st century, with particular emphasis on comparative approach. The papers presented here reflect this orientation and demonstrate the value of combining different perspectives and theoretical lens for understanding contemporary South East Europe.

The first section, *Politics of Memory and Right-Wing Contestations*, brings together analyses of how historical narratives and nationalist discourses shape current political dynamics. Sergej Flere, in *Medieval Golden Age in History Textbooks from Yugoslav Republics and Their Successors*, examines representations of the medieval past in history education and their role in nation-building. Dejan Bursać, in *The Phantom Menace: A New Perspective on Right-Wing Parties in Serbia*, offers a new perspective on right-wing parties in Serbia, discussing their ideological positions and strategies of political contestation.

The second section, *Social Movements and Political Mobilisation*, highlights the emergence of new forms of collective action and solidarity. Jelena Pešić, Ana Birešev, and Tamara Petrović Trifunović, in *Reaffected, Reengaged? Exploring New Political Mobilisations in Serbia* examines the dynamics of new political mobilisations and civic engagement. Nemanja Zvijer, Marija Radoman, and Aleksandra Marković, in *The Formal Features of Protest Slogans as an Element of Symbolic Struggle in Serbia's Faculty Blockades (2024–2025)* analyse the symbolic struggle of students in Serbia during the protests of 2024/2025. Milena Jakičević, in *Reclaiming Solidarity: The Interplay of Education and Resistance in Contemporary Social Movements*, explores the interplay of education, culture, and resistance in contemporary social movements.

The third section, *Labour, Migration, Social Inequalities, and Rights on the Periphery*, focuses on precarious working conditions, migration processes, and the erosion of fundamental rights. Aleksandra Marković and Željka Manić, in *Precarious Working Conditions for Migrant Workers in Serbia*, conduct a content analysis of media portrayals of migrant labour in daily newspaper *Danas*. Ksenija Klasnić, Anita Dremel, Krešimir Žažar and Đurđica Degač in *Invisible Household Labour and Digital Solutions: Gender Divisions in Mental Labour and the Role of Artificial Intelligence*, explore how artificial intelligence tools influence existing gender inequalities. Dunja Poleti Ćosić discusses patterns of circular migration from Serbia in *Migration Out of Necessity or Sufficiency: A Case Study of Circular Migrants from Serbia*. Irena Petrović and Milica Vesković Anđelković, in *Immigration between Needs and Fears*, investigate public attitudes toward immigrants. Milica Vesković Anđelković and Nataša Jovanović Ajzenhamer, in *International Education in Serbia*, discuss the opportunities and challenges of internationalisation in the education sector. In the last paper in this section, *Invisible Strings and Visible Laws: Reproductive Rights in Serbia, Romania, Hungary and Poland*, Carina Puiu and Sorana Constantinescu explore the erosion of women's rights in the aforementioned countries.

The fourth section, *Urban Transformation and Identity*, examines how rapid social and spatial changes influence individual and collective identities. Vera Backović, in *How Does Radical Urban Transformation Change the Symbols of Belgrade?*, analyses the symbolic implications of urban neoliberal transformation. Božidar Filipović, Irena Stojković, and Marijana

Veselinović, in *Should We Ghost Goffman?*, investigate self-presentation practices among young people on Instagram.

Taken together, these papers offer different perspectives and insights into the processes shaping post-Yugoslav societies today. We hope this book of proceedings will be of interest to researchers, students, and all those engaged in understanding the region's evolving social landscape, and that it will contribute to further establishing this conference as a continuous and valuable forum for academic exchange.

Editors
Vera Backović
Aleksandra Marković

POLITICS OF MEMORY, OLD AND NEW CONTESTATIONS IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Sergej Flere[1]
University of Maribor, Slovenia

Original scientific paper
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MEDIEVAL GOLDEN AGE IN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS FROM YUGOSLAV REPUBLICS AND THEIR SUCCESSORS

Abstract: Elementary school history textbooks for the grade dealing with the Middle Ages from the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav republics were studied. The focus in each case was on domestic history. Particular focus was on national idealisation, particularly on the fabulation of a golden age. The treatment was both across the environments and time-wise. The patterns of nationalism differed: in Croatia and Serbia, national idealisation was present in both periods, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Northern Macedonia, it appeared during the first period, and grew with time. In Montenegro, it was absent in the first period, but has appeared recently. In Slovenia, upon appearing in the first period, it withdrew in the second period. Kosovo textbooks in both periods were modest in substance and could not be considered to maintain the idea of a golden period. Hence, it was found that nationalism was present in most environments already under socialist Yugoslavia, but the dynamics of rise (and fall) varied. Ethnic essentialism is also present almost everywhere and in both periods. Nationalist fabulation could be expected in the second, nation-building period, after the Yugoslav break-up, but it was thriving already before in most cases, indicating there was space for nationalist proclivities during the Yugoslav period.

Keywords: history textbooks, Yugoslavia, golden age, retrospective nationalist construction, nationalism, lineage

Srednjovekovno zlatno doba u udžbenicima istorije iz jugoslovenskih republika i njihovih naslednica

Apstrakt: Analizirani su udžbenici istorije za osnovne škole, iz jugoslovenskih i postjugoslovenskih republika, za razrede koji obrađuju srednji vek. U svakom slučaju fokus je bio na domaćoj istoriji. Posebna pažnja posvećena je nacionalnoj idealizaciji, naročito stvaranju predstave o Zlatnom dobu. Obrada je vršena kako među različitim sredinama, tako i kroz vreme. Obrasci nacionalizma su se razlikovali: u

1 sflere6@gmail.com,https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1000-1413

Hrvatskoj i Srbiji nacionalna idealizacija bila je prisutna u oba posmatrana perioda; u Bosni i Hercegovini i Severnoj Makedoniji javila se u prvom periodu i vremenom se intenzivirala. U Crnoj Gori je u početku bila odsutna, ali se pojavila u novije vreme. U Sloveniji se, nakon što se javila u prvom periodu, povukla u drugom. Kosovski udžbenici u oba perioda bili su skromni sadržajem i ne može se reći da su održavali ideju o Zlatnom dobu. Na osnovu toga se može zaključiti da je nacionalizam bio prisutan u većini sredina već u vreme socijalističke Jugoslavije, ali da je dinamika njegovog rasta (i opadanja) varirala. Etnički esencijalizam takođe je gotovo svuda bio prisutan i u oba perioda. Nacionalističke fabulacije mogle su se očekivati u drugom, nacionalno-integracionom periodu nakon raspada Jugoslavije, ali su u većini slučajeva bile izražene i ranije, što ukazuje na to da je u jugoslovenskom periodu postojao prostor za jačanje nacionalističkih sklonosti.

Ključne reči: udžbenici istorije, Jugoslavija, zlatno doba, retrospektivna nacionalistička konstrukcija, nacionalizam, poreklo

Introduction

The rise and fall of Yugoslavia have been a focal point of scholarly interest, particularly within the social sciences (Bieber & Galijaš, 2014). Among the most scrutinised aspects of this historical trajectory are the history textbooks of post-Yugoslav states, which have sparked both special interest and sharp criticism (e.g., Stojanović, 2016; Pavasović Trošt, 2018a; Pavasović-Trošt & Mihajlović-Trbovc, 2020). These analyses have predominantly centred on the 20th century, with particular emphasis on World War II and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. A recurring theme in these studies is the role of textbooks as instruments of "nation-building" and "nationalisation"—a process that unfolded both before and after Yugoslavia's disintegration in 1991.

Within scholarly literature on post-Yugoslav states, Croat and Serb nationalism—and its manifestation in education—have attracted the most attention. The shift in textbook narratives following Yugoslavia's dissolution is striking: from depictions of relative harmony in socialist Yugoslavia to narratives emphasising deep-seated animosities and atrocities, sometimes with vivid, naturalistic portrayals of these events (Pavasović-Trošt, 2018a). Despite a general pattern of historical revisionism in post-Yugoslav history textbooks during the 1990s, significant variations exist. For instance, Slovenia's approach to modern national history in the post-dissolution period primarily focused on internal Slovenian matters, minimising interethnic conflicts and downplaying blame (Brodnik, 2019).

This study examines elementary history textbooks covering the Medieval period, a subject introduced to students aged 12–14 (6th or 7th grade). The analysis focuses on the comparison between the socialist and post-socialist periods, recognising the significant shift in historical narratives. The medieval era is particularly influential in shaping young minds, as it is often depicted through romanticised themes of knights, chivalry, and national heroism. This portrayal can serve as a foundation for ethnic nationalism, especially when knights are depicted as merciless warriors who fought "the other" and when a direct lineage between medieval heroes and the present-day nation is implied. Historians caution against such representations, emphasising that pre-modern ethnic identities and modern nationhood are distinct concepts (Malešević, 2022; Fine, 2006). Geary (2002) critiques European nationalism for treating the medieval period as a time of "primary acquisition of land," reinforcing notions of uninterrupted national inheritance.

This research explores whether textbooks perpetuate the idea of a "golden age"—a notion that some scholars consider essential to national identity. A.D. Smith (1997) argues that the golden age serves as a touchstone of heroic virtue and national grandeur, while Hobsbawm (1983) contends that such narratives are primarily modern constructs designed for nation-building. Malešević (2022) attempts to reconcile these perspectives, asserting that golden-age narratives were historically employed to transform largely indifferent peasant populations into nationally conscious citizens. Given this, history textbooks represent a powerful medium for intertwining historical narratives with ideological objectives.

During the Yugoslav socialist period, history textbooks ostensibly promoted the ideology of "brotherhood and unity" (Koren, 2012). However, the extent to which they also incorporated national medieval narratives and nationalist undercurrents warrants investigation. Malešević (2002) suggests that Yugoslav socialism operated on two ideological levels: a normative level that emphasised abstract, universalist humanist ideals, and an operational level that devoted significant attention to the distinct histories of individual Yugoslav nationalities. This dual framework may have been reflected in history textbooks, potentially accommodating nationalist narratives alongside the official rhetoric of unity. Furthermore, conflicts within Yugoslavia's leadership between 1966 and 1991 —seemingly suppressed by Tito's practice of replacing national leaders—fueled cultural elites' grievances regarding language, historical interpretation, and territorial issues (Flere & Klanjšek, 2019; Wachtel, 1998).

Methodology

Socialist Yugoslavia was composed of six republics, succeeded by the same number of future states (plus Kosovo, which had a province status in Yugoslavia). Thus, each had their own set of textbooks, approved by the respective Ministries of Education. We gathered history textbooks from all 7 entities, now from during the socialist period and in the new, post-1991-2 period, when the republics became independent states (Serbia and Montenegro became independent in 2006, Kosovo declared independence in 2008). All have disposed of at least one textbook in both periods. The total was 42 textbooks. Sections on the respective Medieval period were content analysed. The part dealing with domestic Medieval history was focused upon.

The establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the 1995 Dayton Accords, for our purposes, needs a further note. The 1995 Dayton Accords, by which it is presently ruled, enabled the establishment of a Bosniak, a Croat and a Serb school system. The Croat and Serb school systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina follow their respective matrix states in the history curricula and textbooks, and they are considered in this paper only within the sections on the respective republics. Only textbooks in the Bosniak system in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity are considered.

Findings

The findings will be presented for the six republics, separating the socialist and post-socialist, independent republics' textbooks in each case. To make the presentation more systematic, one section is devoted to each land, now an independent state (although one remains impugned). The section is then divided into a portion devoted to the socialist period and one to the post-socialist, present one.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the first period, Perić's textbook (1957) was probably the first produced within B&H. It took a cautious approach, presenting Medieval Bosnia, the Bosnian Church, holding that its rulers most of the time had a vassal position vis-à-vis Hungarians and Byzantines (Perić, 1957, pp. 96-97). However, it made no mention of the Bosnian foremost ruler, Tvrtko as if self-consciousness were still lacking.

The book by Omanović (1975) represented a textbook product. It writes of Medieval Bosnia with a stress on the Bosnian Church, "which played an important role in the defence of independence of the Bosnian state against Hungary and the Pope. It was closely related to the Bosnian nobility and the Ban" (Omanović, 1975, p. 52). What she writes of Tvrtko's period adds up to a golden age, possibly as contrast to the present: internal order was solidified, enabling territorial expansion and blooming of external trade (Omanović, 1975, p. 68). Most importantly, "[i]t was the largest South Slav state in Medieval times" (Omanović, 1975, p. 70). Upon the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, Islamization was conducted. Nobility was the one most frequently to convert to Islam, "to retain their estates" (Omanović, 1975, p. 104). On the other hand, it was members of the Bosnian Church who converted most frequently (Omanović, 1975, p. 104). Conversion was an instrument to better one's position, but at times it was conducted by force. But "Islamicized population retained its language and customs" (Omanović, 1975, p. 99).

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia**,** in FB&H, all textbooks hold that Medieval Bosnia was a state with a cultural nucleus, "located on the border of Catholicism and Orthodoxy" (Hasičić, 2010, p. 93; Pelidija & Isaković, 1994, p. 41; Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 103). Again, it was the Bosnian Church that contained the cultural nucleus. "As the Church was no competitor to the nobles, they supported it." (Hadžiabdić et al., 2008, p. 96). The Church also collected no taxes (Hadžiabdić et al., 2008, p. 93). It assisted in the struggle against the Hungarian-Croat and Serb rulers (Hadžiabdić et al., 2008, p. 96). A religious specificity was to be found in tombstones (*stećci*) (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 101; Hasičić, 2010, pp. 113-114). Authors also note the existence of the Catholic and Serb Orthodox Church in Medieval Bosnia (Hasičić, 2010, pp. 106-107).

Post-Yugoslav textbooks write that Bosnia was first mentioned in the 10th century and reached its "full assertion" under Kulin Ban in the 12th century (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 85). Kulin ban "was beloved among the people" (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 85). Under his rule, the first known diplomatic document comes about, among all South Slav peoples (an agreement with Dubrovnik, into a trade agreement with Dubrovnik, "which could only be rendered by a sovereign ruler" (Hasičić, 2010, p. 93; Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 86). Under foreign pressure, Kulin Ban only seemingly rejected the Bosnian Church teaching (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, pp. 86, 89). Under King Tvrtko, Bosnia became the "largest state in the Balkans" (14th century) (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 89) and "the mightiest one" (Hadžiabdić et al., 2008, p. 97). Although Catholic, Tvrtko "defended all three religious groups" (Hadžiabdić et al., 2008, p. 89). Having had possessions in Serbia, he was crowned again, as "King of Serbia, Bosnia, Dalmatia, Croatia and the Littoral", allowing for a different interpretation than Božić (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 89; Hasičić, 2010, p. 97). It was also a time "of maturity of Bosnian society" (Pelidija & Isaković, 1994, p. 73).

Another peak in national self-assertion is to be found in the textbook by Pelidija and Isaković (Pelidija & Isaković, 1994, p. 137), who hold that the Bosniak nation "was born" with the brilliant defeat over Austrians by local Muslims/Bosniaks in the Battle of Banja Luka in 1737. The latter were beaten, whereas the victorious Ottoman forces were composed almost exclusively of locals, without proper instruction from the Grand Porte (Pelidija & Isaković, 1994, p. 137).

All this adds up to a "golden age" reached in Medieval Bosnia (sovereignty, political and economic strength, territorial expansion, cultural uniqueness, rulers loved by the populace). Authors in FB&H are inclined that this age was not to have been severed by the introduction of Ottoman rule. Ottoman rule is pictured almost as a minor change, as Ottoman rule was characterised by "religious tolerance" (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 121), which was to have bloomed even in previous independent Bosnia. However, the lack of a material basis of the Bosnian Church made it facile and voluntary to change to Islam (Muminović & Muminović, 2010, p. 117). It is, nevertheless, conceded that Christians had somewhat greater tax charges under the Ottomans.

Croatia

In the socialist period, the 1952 textbook by Salzer and Mali was an elaborate one, writing in detail on Slavs, not only South Slavs. It divided them into people already as of Early Medieval times. After a mighty Croat state in the 10th century, Croats were to have lost their independence. However, these and most later authors weave in the issue of Pacta Conventa, an alleged agreement between Hungarian King Koloman and ruling Croat noble families, after a defeat of Croat forces by Koloman in 1102. Were this true, a Croat political subjectivity would have endured. The document exists in a questionable rescript 200 years later (Engel, 2001, pp. 34-36). Most prominent historians cast doubt on the authenticity of the document (Klaić, 1967; Fine, 2006).

According to Salzer and Mali, an agreement between Koloman and Croat nobles was entered into, granting autonomy to the latter, without naming the document (Salzer & Mali, 1952, pp. 57-58). Salzer and Mali were politically correct, within the terms of the times, granting titular peoples of Yugoslavia separate Medieval histories, except for Montenegrins: they do not establish the existence of a Zeta state before the late 10th century. At that, there is no remark on the ethnic nature of Zeta (Salzer & Mali, 1952, pp. 65-68). The dominant Bosnian Church in Bosnia is considered different from the Catholic and Orthodox ones (Salzer & Mali, 1952, p. 127). Croat bravery is particularly underscored, although 'domestic traitors' were also to have existed in as early as the 9th century (Makek et al., 1974, p. 33), indicating a statehood against which organised subversion existed.

In the period after gaining independence, Makek issued a new textbook fundamentally changing the earlier text (Makek, 1995). He now claimed Medieval Bosnia was a Croat land, (Makek, 1995, p. 38), "linguistically" corroborating the claim by the alleged presence of ikavian speech in Bosnian Medievality, an alleged Croat trait (Makek, 1995, p. 38). Croatia could be understood as the largest Medieval kingdom. The linguistic corroboration is suspect, as ikavian is spoken today by štokavian Bunjevci in Serbia[2]. Doclea also was to have been so initially Croat and its Church remained within the Western realm (Makek, 1995, pp. 36-7).

A current Croatian textbook continues to present Pacta Conventa as a form of continuation of the Croatian golden period. Birin et al. (2020), in a currently used textbook, make no mention of Pacta Conventa. But they present the famous St. Donatus Church in Zadar/Zara, acknowledging its Byzantine style, built also under Byzantine rule in the 9th century, but they attribute the construction to "Croat building activity" (Birin et al., 2020, p. 228). This was the period of Slavic and Avar attacks, but Zadar was under Byzantine rule, as reflected in the Church style (Fine, 2006, p. 35).

All this is part of the "golden thread" notion of Croatian history, according to which there were many turnabouts, but Croatia, in one form or another, however imperfect, persisted from the early Medieval times until the present. This is supplemented by a depiction of a pattern of history which was one of initial rise and welfare improvement (in the early Medieval period, of which little is known), whereas after the loss of independence in 1102, the stress is on the role of the higher nobility and its incessant struggle to preserve autonomy. In this manner, Birin et al. state, the golden thread states, "Croats elect a new dynasty" (Birin et al., 2020, p. 274), as if this were an act of universal suffrage in 1527.

As Petrungaro, an Italian historian, notes in his analysis of Croat history textbooks: neoromanticism and selectionism pervade them. This goes for Medievality as well. Neoromanticism is found particularly in depicting the Medieval Croat state, whereas selection is noted in cherry picking of only details, the idea of Croat political continuity (Petrungaro, 2009, pp. 20-25). A "golden age" is to be found already in the Early Middle Ages, but continued through efforts, particularly on the part of the Croat nobility, to uphold Croatian continuity into Modern times.

2 Council of Europe, Fifth Evaluation report on Serbia, https://rm.coe.int/serbia-ecrml5-en/1680ab8322

Kosovo

Prior to the Yugoslav dissolution, Serb textbooks considered Kosovo their own as of the settling of Serbs in the Balkans, whereas Kosovo textbooks in Albanian, relating to this period, considered it conquered by Emperor Dušan (Kodra & Gexha, 1987). The latter authors noted that Dušan ruled the Balkans (Kodra & Gexha, 1987, p. 54), but they remain silent on how Albanians/Arbs fared under him. The Albanian textbook in the post-dissolution period does not speak on the issue of Serb Medieval domination in Kosovo at all. It refers to local Albanian feudal lords and the independent dukedom of Arberia/Albania under Dhmitry in the 13th century, "peak in statehood"... "recognised in Europe". The Balšići/Balsha of Doclea are considered Albanian (Kodra & Gexha, 1987, p. 29), wishful of dominating entire Albania whereas Kosovo is graphically depicted as under Bulgarian influence (Kodra & Gexha, 1987, p. 23).

Already then the land was inhabited by Arbers, previously Illyrians. Their territory had contracted, but the people remained (Kodra & Gexha, 1987, pp. 20-23). The other Albanian ruling families were to have been Topia and Shpata, ruling regions to the South (Kodra & Gexha, 1987, p. 30). In this way, Kosovo itself is sidelined. The peak of Albanian fame came in keeping Ottomans at bay by Skenderbey in the 15th century, which made him "famous in Europe" (Rexhepi & Frasher, 2018, pp. 47-49). Here, again, we encounter a "golden age".

Montenegro

Montenegro is the smallest of the post-Yugoslav states, its ethnic identity incomplete (Malešević & Uzelac, 2011), hence declaring independence only in 2006.

Prior to the dissolution, Petrić and Radonjić (1975-1994, printings unchanged) covered the entire South Slav Medieval history. They mention Doclea as a polity only as of the 10th century (Petrić & Radonjić, 1978, p. 41). Rulers of the land, now Montenegro, are referred to, but without claiming that these Medieval creations were Montenegrin in nature. In passing, they mention that "since the 14th century, the Doclea/Zeta area was also designated as Montenegro" (Petrić & Radonjić, 1978, p. 44) and continue to write without designation of an ethnicity. They mainly narrate how power changed hands, including its becoming and ceasing to be part of larger structures. They stress the cunning of domestic Prince Vojislav, who made the Byzantine army believe there was a mighty military adversary facing them by the production of sounds (Petrić & Radonjić, 1978, pp. 45-46). They write with respect to Croatia and particularly to Serbia, referring to them as long-lasting entities. Possibly Petrić's and Radonjić's intention was to impress students by completely another historical entity – Rascia, elaborating the splendour of King Milutin's palace and garments (Petrić & Radonjić, 1978, pp. 59-60).

In the period after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the introduction of new textbooks was preceded by a discussion in which a critique of the previous textbooks prevailed, particularly for national identity not being dealt with (Perović, 2017). The 2021 history textbook for 7th graders by Popović and Miranović holds an opposite position on these issues, but they lack corroboration. Popović and Miranović tell students that the first "Montenegrin state" was established in the 7th century (Perović, 2017, p. 26). Not much is told about it except that it had to fight to maintain independence to Macedonia and Byzantium (Perović, 2017, pp. 26-27). They concede Doclea fell under the (Serb) Nemanyid dynasty, but "memory of the earlier Kingdom did not vanish". Autonomy was gained in littoral cities and in the entire Doclea (Perović, 2017, p. 42). Their King Bodin expanded the state to include "Rascia, Travunia, Zahumlje and Bosnia" (Perović, 2017, p. 29) while he was under Papal protection. During this period, ecclesial development is noted.

North Macedonia

Šoptrajanov's et al. (1960) textbook was the first one in socialist Macedonia. It dealt modestly with domestic history, devoting 5 pages to Emperor Samuil's rise and fall (10th century) (Šoptrajanov et al., 1960, pp. 114-118) and attributing his success mainly to circumstances like dissatisfaction with being exploited. It had not yet held a position on the ethnic nature of Samuil's empire.

The textbook by Dimevski and Čukarski (1980) tells that Macedonia was inhabited by "Macedonian Slavs" about the 9th century, who were technically under Byzantine and Bulgarian overlordship, but "the relationship was weak" (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 41). So even then, "[Macedonians] conducted their lives autonomously, led by their princes" (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 41). The Macedonian Slavs "seceded" from Bulgaria in 969 and created a "Macedonian state". In this endeavour, they were led by princes David, Moses, Aron and Samuil. Samuil became the "Macedonian Emperor", who expanded his state. He also disposed of a Patriarchate, the highest ecclesial office in Orthodoxy. A "Macedonian feudal aristocracy" was also to have existed (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 46), which would definitely make for the golden period. Unfortunately, aristocrats soon, without a struggle to Byzantium, ceded Macedonia "in order to preserve its riches and privileges" (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980,

p. 46). Samuil's state lasted only until 1014, when the armed forces composed of "Macedonian soldiers" (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 43) were defeated by Byzantine ones under Emperor Basil II. This was followed by uprisings in the same century, "because the Macedonian people could not bear such a yoke" (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 48). The religious group of Bogomils were particularly active in the resistance; hence, authors assess their role as "progressive" and "emancipatory" (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 51).

The text leaves no doubt that there was a Macedonian identity, a Macedonian state, a Macedonian people; the culture is not elaborated, and the Macedonian Orthodox Archbishopric/Patriarchate is referred to. The relationship with Bulgars is clearly defined in adverse terms, as Macedonians suffered "dangers from Bulgaria" already in the 9th century (Dimevski & Čukarski, 1980, p. 41). Fine, however, flatly states: "there was then no Macedonian ethnic awareness" (Fine, 2006, p. 161).

In current times, the post-Yugoslav period, Macedonian history textbooks are contested by the Bulgarian Government, where Medieval issues take centre stage.

Textbook by Naneski and Memeti (2006) may have seemed an innovation, by entry of numerous minor rulers and events, to fit into a consociational order, such as North Macedonia had become. Authors are also cautious not to impose narratives quite at odds with facts, but still to be faithful to their nationhoods, Macedonians and Albanians. Thus, Medieval Macedonians as such are mentioned only on p. 53, in the 11th century, as a people opposing Byzantine oppression. Samuil is not designated expressly as a Macedonian ruler. Macedonian political identity is resolved by entering numerous local feudal lords who were to have been "independent" (Naneski & Memeti, 2006, pp. 85-88). Samuil's empire is considered to have spanned from the Adriatic to the Black Sea (Boškoski et al., 2010, p. 44). In fact, Samuil's empire was titled "Bulgarian" (e.g. see Rossos, 2008, p. XVIII).

Albanians are seen both as a people appearing earlier (the name Arbs was to have appeared in the 6th century, Boškoski et al., 2010, p.32), and being subjugated by the Ottomans later (Skenderbey holding strong against them in the 15th century, Boškoski et al., 2010, p. 104). Besides these two major groups, Wallachs of Macedonia are also accorded attention (93-94). Islamization is assessed basically as a forced event (Boškoski et al., 2010, p. 96). However, "(Macedonians) retained their language and customs" (Boškoski et al., 2010, p. 96).

Stojanov and Bliznakovski, analysing Macedonian history textbooks, may be right that for a country challenged as to its national existence, such narratives operate as what Marx called "opium of the masses". "Students are reassured that Macedonia is not something new, that our name belongs to *us* and that *our country* as not always been *small* and *weak* (Stojanov & Bliznakovski, 2017, p. 80). This demonstrates how different the countries we are dealing with are, although Macedonia is not the only one to face such identitarian challenges and contestations.

Serbia

The textbook by Popović, Živković and Čubrilović, probably the first in Serbia after World War II (1954), applied a cautious approach. It accorded a lot of space to the three nations recognised prior to World War II and dealt with caution on Macedonia and Zeta. Among the textbooks from the first period, in Nešić's and most other textbooks Medieval Serb polities were nationally identified with present day Serbs and Serbia, in spite of a break during the Ottoman period of more than 400 years, when there were no schools in the Serb language (Roudometof, 2001, p. 49). Nešić (1966) and Božić (1972/1984) viewed neighbouring entities similarly. Under title "Serb state under the Nemanyids" Božić wrote (Božić, 1972/1984, p. 163): under Stefan (Nemanja's son) "Serbia was internationally recognised" (Božić, 1972/1984, p. 159) and goes on to hail the dynasty, as does Nešić (Nešić, 1966, pp. 109-145).

Currently, there are 10 officially approved textbooks for history in the 6th grade (Ministarstvo prosvete, n.d.). The textbook by Mitrović and Vasin (2020), by the national textbook publisher, seems to be an attempt to circumvent the Medieval triumphalism of Serb expansion and assertion. The Serb Medieval Empire is contextualised, with less space attributed to it than in other textbooks; rulers of the Empire parts like Doclea and Macedonia are not directly claimed to be Serb ones (Balšići, Mrnjavčevići, respectively, Mitrović &Vasin, 2020, p. 94).

The Mihaljčić (2021) textbook, published by the same national publisher, continues from the previous period into the present one, devotes a lion's share of the book to the local history of Serbs and Serbia (Mihaljčić, 2021, pp. 85-140, 155-170). Its tone is also more celebratory. "Rulers of the Nemanyić dynasty were ascribed divine properties by their contemporaries... during their rule, the Serb state had expanded significantly... the Byzantine Emperor acquiesced to the loss of territory... Serbia was on the way to becoming a leading power in the Balkans (Mihaljčić, 2021, pp. 89-90). Finally, all the achievements of Emperor Stefan Dušan are hailed (Mihaljčić, 2021, pp. 91-93). Only his death cut short his conquest of Constantinople (Mihaljčić, 2021, p. 93).

It is discernible that for the period prior to Ottoman domination favourable positions are expressed, whereas under Ottoman domination adverse issues are stressed like Islamization, *devshirme* (never regarded as possibility of social advancement, but only as brutal seizure of boys by merciless Ottomans, "Parents not only hid their children, but also mutilated them...parents ran behind the caravan" (Lopandić & Petrović, 2021 p. 189) and destruction of cities (Lopandić & Petrović, 2021, p. 188).

In the second period, a celebratory manner of writing can be clearly observed: the title of the chapter, "Serbia was the greatest power in the Balkans", although it related only to a few decades (Bubalo & Bečanović, 2018, p. 134). The splendour of King Milutin's garments and decorations was envied by foreigners (Komatina et al., 2022, p. 101; Lopandić & Petrović, 2021, p. 101). Food at the court was served with exotic spices (Lopandić & Petrović, p. 135).

The Serb Medieval state did last longer than any of the other considered, and it did achieve large proportions during Emperor Dušan (although Samuil's and Tvrtko's may have been larger), but still it was a temporary, unstable Medieval construction. The rupture of almost more than four centuries until the 19th century Serb state was established, casts much doubt whether it is admissible to hold there was only a long break in Serb statehood and in Serb nationhood, after which same Serbdom continued, as would transpire from all Serb textbooks – or whether the modern state and nation were a completely new reality.

Slovenia

Slovenia, once Yugoslavia's westernmost republic, can claim to have disposed of the first such textbook after World War II (Binter, 1947). Binter's textbook for the 6th grade was titled *History of South Slavs,* and it dealt with Slovenes, Croats, Macedonians and Serbs, but not with Montenegrins and Bosniaks. Binter went into details of alleged ceremonies of Slovene dukes being enthroned at Krn in Carynthia and even into purported variants of the ritual, which was to have eventuated as of the 8th century (Binter, 1947, pp. 50-54). This story was often repeated in later textbooks, along with the "early loss of independence" by misfortune (Božič & Weber, 1984, p. 45). Rituals of ducal investiture, which the dukedom would soon disappear, seemed like a shooting star in the sky, a golden age to Slovene children.

For the period after Slovenia became independent, no traces of Slovene early Medieval investiture are to be found in textbooks, although erroneous statements on Medieval Slovene linguistic unity were maintained (Janša-Zorn & Mihelič, 1998, p. 149; Janša-Zorn et al., 2018, p. 76), although there was no linguistic standard. The focus is no longer on political history, but urban and rural differences, religious movements (Bregar-Mazzini et al., 2019, pp. 134-147).

Conclusion

The golden age idea was built into most textbooks, with socialist Montenegro and post-socialist Slovenia being stark exceptions. In the first case, it was about nationalism not yet maturing, in the latter, it was rejecting such nationalism (plus a lack of facts to the effect). But, by and large, the idea of a golden age appears prevalently. The idea of a Medieval golden age in domestic history took a more pronounced status in the textbooks in the post-1991 period, as nation-building was more pronounced. Croatia is a special case, as beginning with the 12th century it was subjugated to Hungary. However, most Croat authors try to speak of further achievements, "golden moments" however questionable they may be like Birin et al. who write, beside what is referred above, of "the first university in the area of Croatia was in Zadar/Zara in the 14th century" (Birin et al., 2020. p. 134), although it was only a Dominican college, not using Slav language (Vereš, 1999).

Of course, we always encountered "national" golden ages, not a Yugoslav one, even during the Yugoslav period. So, even then, golden ages were products of national intelligentsias, not of Yugoslav communism.

What Pohl notes (2013) as historiographic would be national legitimations in one century earlier Austria-Hungary, now appears again, although usually stated less deterministically so and now relating to republics, subsequently independent states: we were first to have settled the area (Rexhepi & Frashër, 2018, p. 23), we were there to civilise and Christianise it (Croat and Serb textbooks), our military valour and might shined and prevailed, at least for part of the time (FB&H, Croat, Serb, Macedonian and recent Montenegrin textbooks). The size of our state is added to some greatness formulas. What Pohl noted about ethnic "achievements" is now even more reified with independent states, and Illyrian, Yugoslav and regional identities are out of the question. National identifications were to have been unquestionable in the Middle Ages (except, possibly, in Slovene textbooks). Hence, ideas of Medieval grandeur are related to national exclusiveness or domination of contested regions.

In both periods, we encountered claims in FB&H that Bosnia was the Medieval largest state in the Balkans (Omanović, 1975; Pelidija & Isaković, 1994), in contrast to Mihaljčić (Mihaljčić, 2021, pp. 182, 80), and

Milivojević (Milivojević, Lučić & Stojkovski, 2020, p. 130), whereas Bubalo (Bubalo & Bečanović, 2018, p. 134) and other Serbian authors depict Serbia approximately the same size as today at its Medieval largest, but also the mightiest, "the greatest power in the Balkans" Macedonian authors usually illustrate their respective grandeur by the alleged span of Samuil's empire from the Adriatic to the Black Sea and from River Sava to Mount Olympus (e.g., Boškoski et al., 2010, p. 44), Croat books are inclined to consider Croatia a Western European country with an enviable military in the 10th century. Most such details need not be individually wrong, but they go beyond cherry picking of some short period spans. They are part of state ideological strategies to claim national greatness and possibly to claim certain territories now belonging to other states. Slovene textbooks make no such claim. Montenegrin post-socialist textbooks, a latecomer in nation-building, satisfy themselves mainly by claiming Medieval structures were "Montenegrin" in national substance, without grounding such claims in facts. The Kosovo Albanian book is a modest example in every way, although it also does not fall short of golden age-type claims. Croat textbooks in the second period make valiant attempts at depicting Croat endurance and continuity, attempting to extend the golden period of "national kings" to later times.

The most important finding is that nationalist proclivities were not absent, in the majority of cases, in the socialist period, where they slowly grew. In fact nationalist idealisations in some form of golden age were present in the late socialist period everywhere, but in Montenegrin ones. The last case is probably directly related with general weak nation building at the time.

Hence, authors insisted on "their" golden ages and other forms of nationalist idealisation during the socialist period or the latter part of the period. This idealisation became even more pronounced in the post-socialist period, where we encounter that Kulin Ban and Tvrtko, Domagoj and Tomislav, Nemanja, Milutin and Dušan, Samuil, and even Skenderbey are treated almost as "paragons of nationalist virtues", putting such textbooks definitely among celebratory texts. This presence of nationalist proclivities in the first period may come as a surprise to those who hold that Yugoslavia was under the spell of authoritarian socialism and a single narrative of Yugoslav brotherhood was imposed. This means that socialist authorities tolerated, consented to, or even stimulated a certain national romanticism on the part of their intelligentsia (again with the exception of Montenegro), either considering it true or instrumental, or both. Short-lived political Medieval edifices and questionable achievements are celebrated as major national achievements already then. This was part of what

Malešević called operational ideology of the time, in contrast to the high-flown internationalism in the ideology's upper stratum. This is a strong indicator that Yugoslavia was culturally not unified, and cultural elites could produce nationalist meaning and identity far back, before explicit signs of dissolution became evident. We also surmise that cultural elites were very important in the end game. In this sense, this paper is one more pebble of support to the claim that the Yugoslav break-up was no coincidence. The constituents of Yugoslavia, their cultural elites, if not reflecting different realities during the socialist period, certainly constructed them, although at different paces. Other contested issues in textbooks, like the identity of certain historical figures and the identity of certain lands, have been omitted, as not directly relate to "golden age" issues, although they supplement the picture of textbooks being at odds.

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Dejan Bursać[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

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

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

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

Fantomska pretnja: novi pogled na desnicu u Srbiji

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

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

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

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

Introduction: A Perpetual Threat of the Far-Right Threat

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

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

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

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

In such a context, the far-right often serves as a tokenized threat, invoked to generate leverage in Serbia's relations with the West. The suggestion that the radical right could ascend to power functions as a geopolitical deterrent, reinforcing regime's nominal pro-European orientation and regional position as strategically valuable. In the early years of his political transformation, President Vučić frequently warned Western partners that nationalists could regain power if he were not supported (Karnitschnig, 2016), despite little evidence to suggest this was a credible scenario. The SNS approach to both democracy and foreign policy illustrates its evolution into a catch-all party that has repeatedly adapted its programmatic orientation to the political moment. Scholars argue that the SNS's dominant electoral position has contributed to the blurring of ideological boundaries in Serbian politics (Tournois, 2021): nominally occupying a center to center-right space allows the SNS to shift as needed toward incumbent populism, or even deploy nationalist rhetoric for domestic voter mobilization. By projecting a pro-European image abroad while selectively deploying nationalist narratives at home, the regime has presented itself as the bulwark against a hypothetical return of the nationalists, while at the same time undercutting the far-right.

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

Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Far-Right and Their Voters

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

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

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

There are several theoretical approaches that seek to explain patterns of electoral support for the far-right. Early theories emphasized programmatic alignment between voters and parties, beginning with the influential study by Inglehart & Klingemann (1976), which found that respondents' positions on the left–right scale were a reliable predictor of party identification. Subsequent debates questioned whether the individual's orientation truly correlates with party affiliation, or whether it reflects broader value orientations that may not be easily translated into party support. In other words, scholars began to explore whether there are mediating factors, including cultural or socioeconomic status (see: Freire, 2006), as well as broader structural conditions (Evans, 2017).

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

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

In this context, supply and demand models have also emerged to explain the relationship between voter attitudes and far-right preferences by emphasizing the existence of demand for such politics within the electorate. Drawing on the sociological group-based approach, they posit that certain social groups (typically the losers of modernization, globalization, or post-socialist transition) develop a specific demand for far-right policies at particular historical moments. Hence, the rise of radical right parties is driven primarily by shifts in public opinion (see: Mudde, 2007). In other words, when a strong public impulse emerges in favor of a certain type of politics, some political actor will eventually rise to occupy that space – and the right is often successful at doing so, given its communicative style and ability to simplify complex societal issues. Indeed, the very origin of the term populism, now associated with right-wing parties, is rooted in this understanding of politics in which the electorate shapes party supply, not the other way around.

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

Numerous studies have attempted to identify the drivers of voting patterns for populist and radical right parties across Europe, generally finding that such support comes from the so-called "losers of globalization", particularly within advanced Western democracies: social groups occupying lower socio-economic positions (see: Lubbers, Gijsberts & Scheepers, 2002). These groups tend to generate demand for anti-immigration, anti-EU, and anti-elitist platforms (see: Santana, Zagórski & Rama, 2020). Sociodemographically, these are often defined as the unemployed or manual laborers, individuals with lower educational attainment, and younger or middle-aged men (Betz, 1993; Minkenberg & Perrineau, 2007). Norris (2005), by contrast, frames this constituency as the lower middle class – not necessarily underprivileged, but deeply anxious about their social status, particularly in times of crisis. For instance, Krekó & Juhász (2017) found that the typical voter for Hungary's ultra-far-right Jobbik is a younger, well-educated male who may even be economically better off than average, but exhibits a strong perception of threat to his perceived status and way of life. With the exception of this outlier, the key dividing line in many studies is the level of education, with lower educational backgrounds consistently associated with a greater propensity to support far-right options (see: Ivarsflaten & Stubager, 2012).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Data and Methods

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

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

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

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

Findings and Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

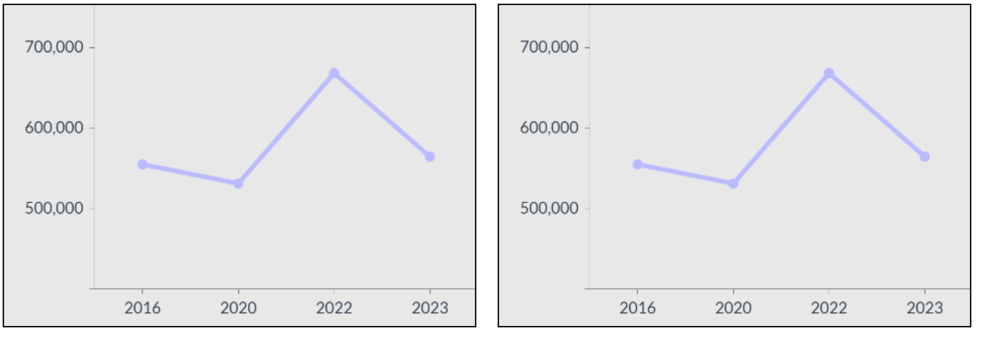
	2016	**2020**	**2022**	**2023**
Total votes	555 060	531 222	668 430	564 596
Total vote %	14.68%	16.50%	18.10%	15.21%
Total seats	35	11	35	26

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

While in the first cycle analyzed (2016), the majority of the right-wing's success was attributable to the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which secured 8.10% of the votes riding the wave of its leader's return from trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the accompanying perception of a recovery from the earlier split with the ruling SNS, this party never again surpassed the threshold. Instead, new actors assumed primacy on the right spectrum. However, even these newcomers failed to establish themselves, especially considering the relatively favorable socio-political context: the 2020 elections with a lower threshold than before (3%), boycotted by many opposition parties (which resulted in lower turnout and fewer votes required for parliamentary entry), and held during a pandemic – which is generally considered favorable to right-wing platforms (Klačar & Đorić, 2021). This was reflected in the party supply, with as many as nine right-wing lists, but not in the electoral outcome, as only one of them managed to pass the threshold.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

Despite these constraints, the findings open several important avenues for future research. As the Serbian political landscape enters a period of flux, renewed attention should be given to voter behavior, both in terms of demand and the potential for new party supply. While current far-right parties appear weak and fragmented, the electorate is not without anxieties. Should the ruling party's grip weaken, or should a more strategically capable actor emerge, voters could reorient themselves rapidly.

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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICAL MOBILISATION

Jelena Pešić[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Tamara Petrović Trifunović[2]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Ana Birešev[3]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

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REAFFECTED, REENGAGED? EXPLORING NEW POLITICAL MOBILIZATIONS IN SERBIA

Abstract: In recent years, we have witnessed the advancement of political disaffection and disengagement processes across nearly all European countries. Research indicates that this trend is also present in Serbia (Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). Findings from a 2018 study (Pešić et al., 2021) reveal a relatively low level of external and internal political efficacy among Serbian citizens, a low level of institutional trust, and moderate levels of political participation compared to other European societies.

Building on these findings, this study aims to examine whether, five years later (2023), there have been changes in the level of protest-related political participation among Serbian citizens. The hypothesis underpinning this inquiry is that new forms of political mobilizations, involving emerging issues, such as environmental risks or pleas against violence, and a higher degree of emotional engagement, have led to an increased willingness among citizens to engage in direct political action.

The analysis is conducted on the European Social Survey data (rounds 9 and 11), drawing on descriptive methods.

Keywords: protest participation, trust, efficacy, resources, emotions, political opportunity structure

1 pesicj@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4352-6689
2 evena304@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9999-4721
3 ana.biresev@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7877-8777

Ponovo angažovani? Istraživanje novih političkih mobilizacija u Srbiji

Apstrakt: Tokom proteklih godina svedočili smo napredovanju dezangažmana i otklona od politike u gotovo svim evropskim zemljama. Istraživanja ukazuju da je sličan trend prisutan i u Srbiji (Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). Kada je reč o građanima Srbije, nalazi iz 2018. godine (Pešić et al., 2021) upućuju na relativno nizak stepen interne i eksterne političke efikasnosti, nizak stepen institucionalnog poverenja i umeren intenzitet političke participacije u odnosu na građane drugih evropskih zemalja.

Polazeći od pomenutih nalaza, cilj ove studije je da ispita da li je, pet godina kasnije (2023), došlo do promena u stepenu protestne participacije građana Srbije. Hipoteza koja je u osnovi ovog istraživanja je da su novi oblici političkih mobilizacija, koji uključuju povode poput ekoloških rizika ili apele protiv nasilja, i veći stepen emocionalnog angažovanja, doveli do povećane spremnosti građana da se uključe u direktnu političku akciju.

Analiza je sprovedena na podacima Evropskog društvenog istraživanja (runde 9 i 11) i počiva na deskriptivnim metodama.

Ključne reči: protestna participacija, poverenje, efikasnost, resursi, emocije, struktura političkih mogućnosti

Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed the advancement of political disaffection and disengagement processes across nearly all European countries. Research indicates that this trend is also present in Serbia (Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). Findings from a 2018 study (Pešić et al., 2021) reveal a relatively low level of external and internal political efficacy among Serbian citizens, a low level of institutional trust, and moderate levels of political participation compared to other European societies. However, despite these findings, we are also witnessing an increase in the number of protest events, both globally (Ortiz et al., 2022) and locally in Serbia (Kralj et al., 2024; Pollozhani & Bieber, 2025), as well as a diversification of causes and triggers leading to protest and other non-institutional forms of political contestation.

Research on various forms of collective and individual engagement in the political arena draws on two strands of literature. The first relates to theories of social movements and collective mobilization, while the second focuses on the study of political participation. Building on these theoretical perspectives, this paper explores the dynamics of the recent collective mobilizations in Serbia. Specifically, we examine the extent to which readiness for protest engagement is shaped by factors such as internal and external political efficacy, social and political trust, and satisfaction with the functioning of the system. Additionally, given that the number of protests has increased in recent years, contributing to what could be described as a state of permanent protest, we suggest that this willingness of the people to engage could be interpreted both as the consequence of the growing importance of emotions in collective mobilizations and as an effect of political opportunity structure that enabled flourishing of protest initiatives triggered by causes close to lived everyday experiences. Finally, drawing on the resource mobilization and relative deprivation approaches, we seek to assess to what extent factors such as age, gender, level of education, employment status, and socio-economic position influence individuals' willingness to participate in street politics.

The focus of the analysis will be on data for Serbia collected within European Social Survey at two points in time: 2018/19 and 2023/24 (rounds 9 and 11).

Theoretical Framework

For a long time, scholarship on social movements was dominated by theories that emphasized factors such as the nature of the political system or its socioeconomic characteristics (the political opportunity structure approach; see: Tilly, 1978; Tarrow, 2011), in understanding different forms of collective mobilization. However, contemporary approaches acknowledge the importance of these structural characteristics, while also striving to incorporate cultural dimensions, such as emotional drivers of collective mobilizations (Jasper, 1998; 2011; Goodwin et al., 2000).

"The grand return" to emotions has emerged as a growing trend in social movement theory in the past decades. This research agenda has explored the role of specific emotions, and instigated empirical studies that examine how emotional factors "help or hinder mobilization efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements" (Jasper, 2011, p. 286) and "help explain individuals' trajectories in and out of movements and protest participation" (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022, p. 1106). Some authors suggest that we may be witnessing the rise of a new, distinct type of protest that recently gained political importance. These "new emotional protests" may emerge when acts of random violence or other "pain and loss events" (Jennings, 1999) occur, mobilizing previously politically disengaged social actors, as emotional identification becomes forceful enough to overcome the pervasive distrust in politics (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2006).

The second strand of literature focuses on political participation and its correlates – political efficacy (internal and external), political and social trust, satisfaction with the functioning of the political system and life as a whole, as well as with different socioeconomic characteristics. Within this framework, interpersonal trust is usually defined "as the actor's belief that, at worst, others will not knowingly or willingly do him harm, and at best, that they will act in his interest" (Newton, 2001, p. 202). Trust constitutes the foundation of social capital, serving as a fundamental characteristic of a community or society that facilitates cooperation, social cohesion, and collective action (Putnam, 2000, pp. 16, 18-19). Institutional or political trust, on the other hand, is related to the confidence citizens place in political institutions to act competently and fairly in ways that are beneficial or at least not harmful to citizens (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political efficacy entails an individual's expectation that it is possible to alter policies through political engagement (Craig & Maggiotto, 1982) and has two subdimensions: internal and external efficacy. External political efficacy is associated with institutional trust, pointing to the extent to which individuals believe that their actions can influence government or that political authorities are responsive to citizens' needs (Craig et al., 1990). It is closely connected to the citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of the system, which, alongside other relevant factors, can play a crucial role in determining whether individuals engage in institutional or non-institutional forms of politics. Finally, internal political efficacy is defined as an individual's sense of competence in understanding politics and participating in political activities (Craig et al., 1990) and is not necessarily linked to trust in political institutions or to the perception of the political system's responsiveness (Fiket & Pudar Draško, 2021, p. 406).

The study of protest participation, within the political participation strand, draws broadly upon three major approaches. The first approach relies on the theory of grievances and its assumption that economic inequality and a sense of relative deprivation spur protest participation (Grasso et al., 2019). The second pathway draws upon resource theory, arguing that resources (such as money, skills, and time) are necessary for participation in protest activities (Brady et al., 1995). Finally, the third approach builds on the relative power theory, proposing that concentration of power and capital enables control over discourses on the legitimate political realm and issues, driving the poor away and leaving politics to the rich, powerful, and organized (Solt, 2015).

This strand is significantly empirically oriented and focused on factors ascertaining different levels and forms of political participation. The studies show that institutional trust does not function as a sufficient pre-condition for political behavior (Hooghe & Marien, 2013); rather, in combination with political efficacy, it helps structure the modalities of conventional or unconventional actions. While trust has either a positive or negligible effect on institutionalized participation, distrust combined with a high level of political efficacy tends to encourage unconventional forms of engagement (Eder & Katsanidou, 2015). Unconventional participation is also associated with high internal and low external political efficacy. Accordingly, the low responsiveness of political institutions tends to reorient individuals away from traditional and toward non-traditional forms of participation (Prats & Meunier, 2018, p. 4). A low level of internal and external political efficacy results in political passivity or apathy, whereas high levels push individuals toward engagement in institutional politics.

Dissatisfaction with the policy performance of the government (within sectors such as economy, education, or health services) or with the political system increases the likelihood that the citizens will turn to extra-representative forms of action. Whether citizens express their discontent through protest also depends on the political configuration of a given country. Protests are more likely to occur when the opposition effectively channels dissatisfaction by initiating protest activities between elections and mobilizing non-regime voters. However, protests can also result from generally inadequate representation or the presence and diffusion of more radical, anti-system beliefs (Quaranta, 2015).

When it comes to other factors shaping political participation, resources, skills, and access to recruitment and mobilization networks play a key role. Their unequal distribution is largely determined by class and socioeconomic status (Dalton, 2017). Political activity tends to increase along the social hierarchy, with middle-class individuals generally more engaged than those from lower or working-class backgrounds. Gender and age have also been identified in numerous studies as predictors of political participation. Conventional participation tends to rise with age, reaches its peak in mature years, and then declines: the oldest cohorts tend to be less involved in political activities due to fewer resources, while younger generations display lower levels of institutional involvement due to the lack of political experience (Quaranta, 2015). Largely disinterested in party politics, young people tend to be more open to involvement in social movements, direct action, and other forms of non-institutional engagement (Grasso & Smith, 2022; Petrović & Stanojević, 2020). In recent decades, women tend to be more active in contentious politics, in comparison to earlier periods (Tarrow, 2011), yet they remain less present than men in both conventional and non-conventional politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

Although protests constitute a standard part of the non-institutional repertoire of participation, they tend to mobilize only a small percentage of citizens (Quaranta, 2013). The factors contributing to protest participation include embeddedness in formal and informal networks, a sense of collective efficacy, strong interpersonal trust, a high level of political interest, political knowledge, and awareness (Mercea et al., 2024). In the context of a dramatic economic crisis, the sense of relative deprivation plays an important role in the motivational structure (Grasso et al., 2019), becoming, alongside post-materialist values, a key driver of protest behavior among the middle class, which is increasingly facing the threat of social decline. Contentious collective actions (like protests or social movements), once considered as the only effective mechanism of political action of economically disadvantaged groups lacking conventional political resources (Cloward and Piven, 1977), have over time adjusted to socioeconomic status models of political participation (Dalton, 2017). Certainly, the share of specific socioeconomic categories in the protest population varies with the type of protest, protest claims, aims, and overall social context.

Contextual Framework

For the most part, the "post-2008 Great Recession" period in Serbian society is characterized by authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff, 2014), rooted in austerity politics and general democratic backsliding, the shrinking of civil rights and freedoms, electoral manipulation and strict control over media, which enabled unhindered implementation of restrictive economic policies. This resulted in state capture, enforced through large-scale government investment projects characterized by non-transparent financial arrangements with domestic and foreign capital, and accompanied by the consolidation of ruling elite's control over public institutions, extensive patronage networks, rampant corruption, weakening of labor legislation and degradation of working conditions, as well as an increase in social inequalities, and dissatisfaction among citizens.

Some of the first reactions to illiberal tendencies expressed in protest mobilizations were "We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own" protests against the urban project "Belgrade Waterfront" (2016-2017) and a short, but diffuse, and largely uncoordinated wave of "Against Dictatorship" protests in 2017. In the years that followed, the structural insecurity generated by the authoritarian neoliberal regulation model, together with other events, both global and local, has brought Serbian society into a multi-crisis. The subsequent event that mobilized the popular contention against the government was the physical assault on the leader of the minor opposition party, The Serbian Left (Vukelić & Pešić, 2023). Initially focused on political violence, this “One of Five Million” protest wave (2018-2020), which diffused across the country to 71 cities and municipalities (Kralj et al., 2024), saw a more prominent role of the opposition parties. Although the protest had not officially ended by the time the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, it largely dissipated by June 2019. However, the protests were followed by the opposition parties’ withdrawal from the parliament in 2019 and translated into the 2020 parliamentary elections boycott campaign (Kralj et al., 2024). In July 2020, a new wave of protests started, triggered by the government’s announcement of the weekend curfews to curb the spread of COVID-19. These protests were characterized by ideological diversity of the participants, spontaneity, and lack of formal political articulation (Simendić, 2022).

The multi-crisis in Serbia also brought a diversification in the protest repertoire and ignition of some of the previously disengaged segments of the population. One major strand in this regard was the mass protests against the lithium mining project in Jadar Valley by a multinational corporation, Rio Tinto (2019-2022, 2024), which raised issues of displacement of inhabitants, forced expropriation, and environmental degradation. Although not without environmental predecessors (such as grassroots-led protests against the construction of small hydro-power plants), by 2021, the anti-mining protests grew considerably and “became one of the most important political questions in Serbia” (Pešić & Vukelić, 2025, p. 109). Environmental initiatives outline a tendency of protests articulating “earthly” issues, closer to the everyday experience of populace, resulting in effective mass mobilization (Kojanić, 2022; Stuehlen & Anderl, 2024), in large part by “channeling fear and anger into righteous indignation and political activity” (Jasper, 1998, p. 409).

Another “moral shock” (Jasper, 1998; 2011) that provoked an unprecedented emotional reaction and set off a series of mass protests, spread when, in May 2023, a shooting in a Belgrade elementary school occurred, followed by a shooting spree in the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje. Mass mobilizations induced “by brutal, non-war and non-political violent acts resulting in deaths of private persons” (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2006, p. 278) are not uncommon and depict the powerful mobilizing role of emotions prompted by identification with victims, particularly in the politically disaffected landscapes. Although organized by opposition parties, the "Serbia Against Violence" protests mostly remained nonpartisan. The protests waned by the summer and reemerged in December 2023, after elections characterized by severe irregularities and suspicion of electoral fraud. The summer of 2024 saw the new wave of protests against lithium mining, extending almost a decade-long protest streak, as "there has not been a year without large-scale mass protests since 2016" (Pollozhani & Bieber, 2025).

To sum up, political and economic deterioration, deprivation, and discontent reflected on recent participation in political life in Serbia in two ways – on the one hand, studies point to political disaffection and disengagement (Pešić et al., 2021), while on the other hand, there is a move towards non-institutional forms of political participation (Fiket & Pudar Draško, 2021). The landscape of active resistance to the regime has also changed. While the mobilization potential of party-organized protests is decreasing, dissatisfaction is directed towards new demands and initiatives (environmental issues, violence, etc.), often led by diffuse and unorganized actors – youth, local grassroots initiatives and other nonpartisan claim-makers. Even though the number of protests is increasing, together with diversification of issues involved, this has not resulted in a durable political and organizational infrastructure and solidarity networks. Dissatisfaction is not clearly articulated in political terms and translated into institutional structures; it appears as if it is expressed again and again and more massively through protests, yet every time, "from scratch", only with new issues added to the protest repertoire. At the same time, we should bear in mind that the threshold for future engagement might become lower for protest participants who's personal (emotional) experience of activism influenced the way they view politics and that "the sense of confidence and agency that comes with protest often goes on to inspire further protest" (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022, p. 1116–1117).

Data and Methods

The analysis is based on data from the European Social Survey for Serbia, specifically from rounds 9 (conducted in 2018/19) and 11 (conducted in 2023/24). In our study, we focus on protest-related activism, specifically participation in public (lawful) demonstrations. The analysis is limited to descriptive statistics, without addressing causal inference, as the aim is not to test specific theoretical models or hypotheses, but rather to provide a snapshot of the situation to assess whether the data anticipate the mass protests that erupted in 2024 and are still ongoing. Although the general population is in focus, particular attention is given to data concerning young respondents (under the age of 30), who emerged as the main, and perhaps unexpected, protagonists of the 2024/25 student and civic protests in Serbia.

Drawing on the earlier research (Pešić et al., 2021), in the first step of the analysis, we aim to identify whether any shifts in the prevalence of the examined form of participation have taken place over the observed period. Moving forward, our goal is to explore changes in the development of the correlates of political participation, internal and external political efficacy, interpersonal and institutional trust, and the level of satisfaction with the system, during the observed time frame. In the third step, we compare protest participants and non-participants in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics: gender, age, education, material position, and employment status.

Internal political efficacy is measured using several indicators, including interest in politics (*How interested would you say you are in politics?*), perceived ability to participate in political action (*How capable do you think you are of taking an active role in a political group?*), and confidence in one's own political competence (*How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?*).

External political efficacy is assessed through perceptions of the political system's responsiveness to the citizens' political involvement by using the following items: *To what extent does the political system allow people to have a say in what the government does?*, and *To what extent does it allow people to influence politics?*. The level of satisfaction with the functioning of the various public domains (such as government, economy, democracy, education, health services, and life as a whole) is also included in the analysis.

Political trust is operationalized through a set of items measuring trust in national institutions such as the parliament, politicians, political parties, the legal system, and the police. In contrast, social (interpersonal) trust is assessed using the following items: *Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*, *Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?* and *Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?*

Data are weighted by pspweight.[4]

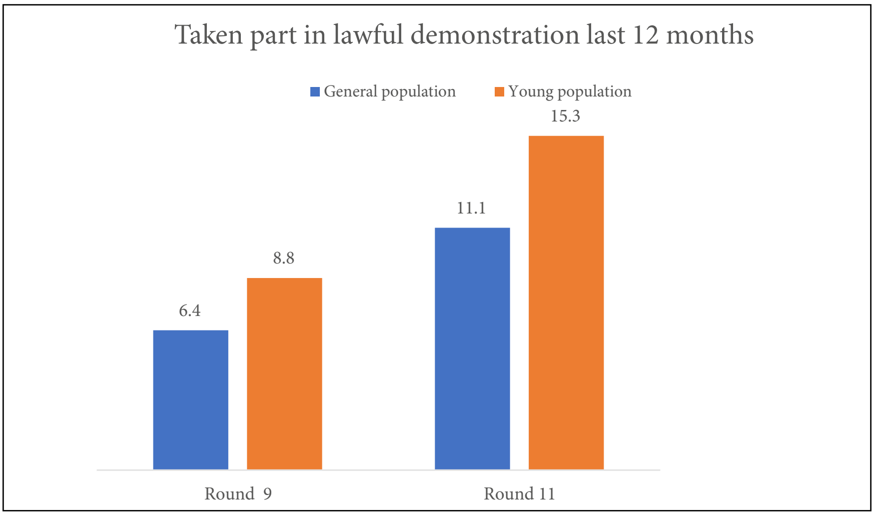
4 More on that, see in: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess-methodology/data-processing-and-archiving/weighting

Results of the Analysis

Trends

As a first step of the analysis, we aim to examine the trends in protest participation within the time frame encompassing two rounds of ESS (2018-2023). Data presented in Figure 1 show that protest participation is increasing, with the proportion of citizens involved in legal demonstrations doubling during the observed period (ranging from 6.4% in 2018 to 11.1% in 2023). This trend draws attention to a shift in the modes of political engagement, signalling that protest activism is becoming a more prominent form of participation, especially among younger generations (in 2023, 15.3% reported having participated in some form of protest during the previous year, compared to 8.8% in 2018). Further, this very dynamic may serve as one of the potential indicators of what followed less than a year after the 2023 ESS data were collected, i.e. a wave of the largest youth protest mobilizations in Serbia over the past 30 years manifested through ongoing student struggles against the corrupt system, deterioration of the rule of law and failures of representative democracy. Of course, it should be kept in mind that despite the aforementioned growing trend in 2023, protest participation remains limited to a minority segment of the population. Nonetheless, this finding is in tune with the results from other European societies (Quaranta, 2013).

Figure 1: Trends in protest participation,
general population and young people (2018-2023)



To explain the observed trend indicating rise in the participation in public demonstrations, the following section of the analysis seeks to shed light on the dynamics of key correlates of political participation: internal (IPE) and external political efficacy (EPE), and institutional (INT) and interpersonal trust (IPT).

Across both observed years, all three items measuring IPE consistently display low levels, indicating weak internal capacities of Serbian citizens to actively participate in the political arena. If we look at the trends, we can observe that the level of political interest within the general population shows an increase in the proportion of those who are very interested in politics (rising from 4.9% to 8.7%)[5], although they still constitute a notably small segment of the population. It is also noteworthy that there is a slight decrease in the share of those who are not at all interested in politics (from 38.6% to 35.9%). In contrast, if we focus only on young people, the trend is reversed: in this group, we observe a decline in political interest, with almost half of the young respondents being completely disinterested in politics (Figure 2).[6] Further, when it comes to perceived ability to take an active role in a political group, we notice a somewhat different pattern compared to the previous indicator. The general population shows modest signs of growth in perceived ability to participate, while the increase is slightly more pronounced among young people. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect sample fluctuations rather than real change (the Pearson Chi-Square test indicates that differences in the two survey waves are not statistically significant).[7] Similarly, in terms of the confidence in their ability to participate in politics, we observe a slight increase within the general population (which is not statistically significant),[8] whereas young people show no increase. To conclude, findings provide insufficient evidence to support the claim that IPE increased during the observed period and that this factor alone can account for the rise of protest activism.

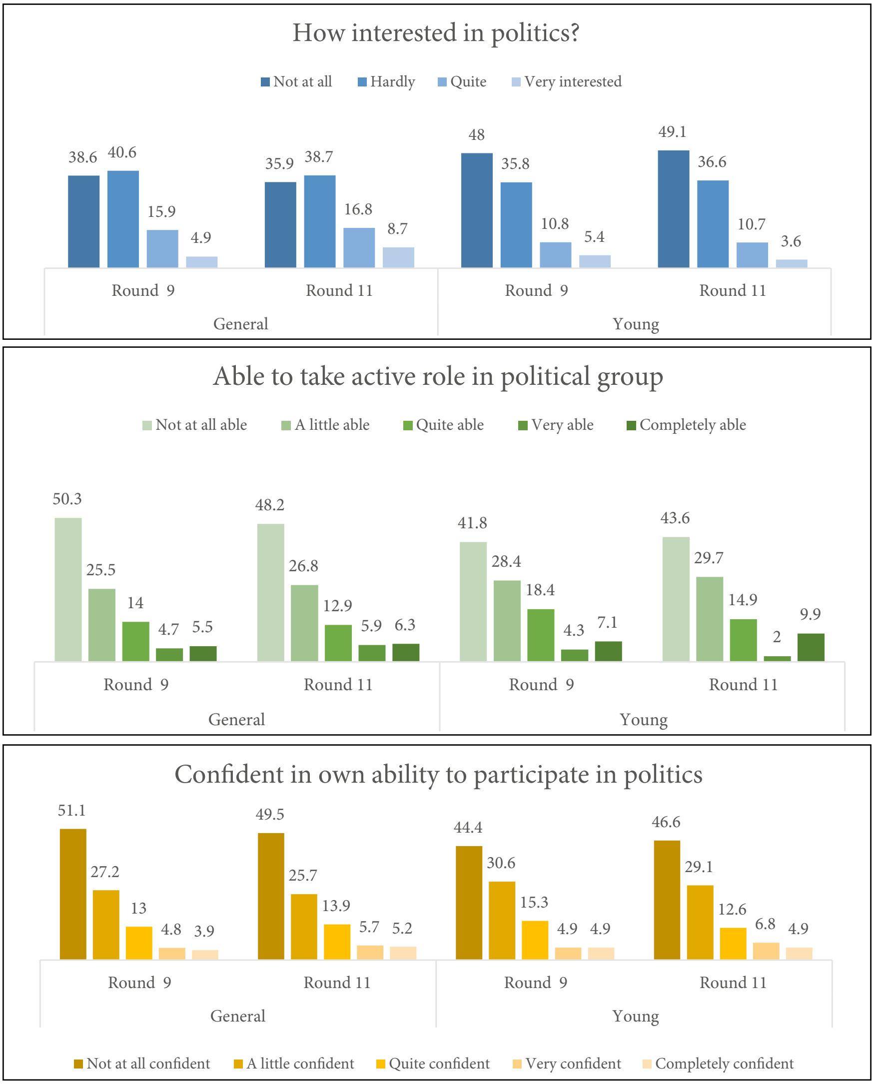
5 Chi-Square: 22.457; p: 0.000.

6 Chi-Square: 1.998; p: 0.573.

7 Chi-Square for the general population is 6.044 (p: 0.196), and 4.298 (p: 0.367) for the youth.

8 Chi-Square for the general population is 5.903 (p: 0.207), and 1.678 (p: 0.795) for the youth.

Figure 2: Internal political efficacy among the general population and youth (2018-2023)

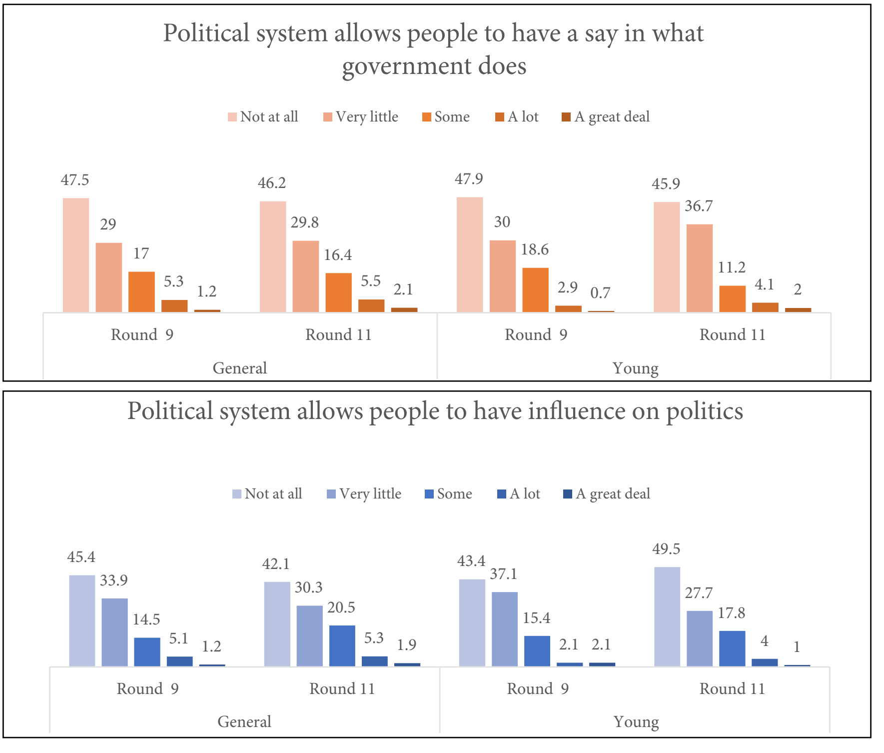


Let us now examine the trends related to external political efficacy. On both items measuring EPE, most people consider the government and the political system as a whole highly unresponsive to citizens' demands (Figure 3). Furthermore, the changes observed during the 2018-2023 period are inconsistent: marginal and statistically insignificant for the item *Political system allows people to have a say in what government does*,[9] and significant

9 Chi-Square: 5.443; p: 0.245.

for the statement *Political system allows people to influence politics*,[10] when it comes to the general population. Some shifts are also present among young people, who in 2023 perceive the system as unresponsive to a greater extent than five years earlier, although caution is welcome here as well, since the difference between the results obtained in two rounds is significant when it comes to only one of the two statements. Similar to internal political efficacy, which was somewhat higher among the general population than among young people, external political efficacy is more pronounced in the general population, while young people are more likely to perceive the system as insensitive to citizens' political involvement.

Figure 3: External political efficacy among the general population and youth (2018-2023)

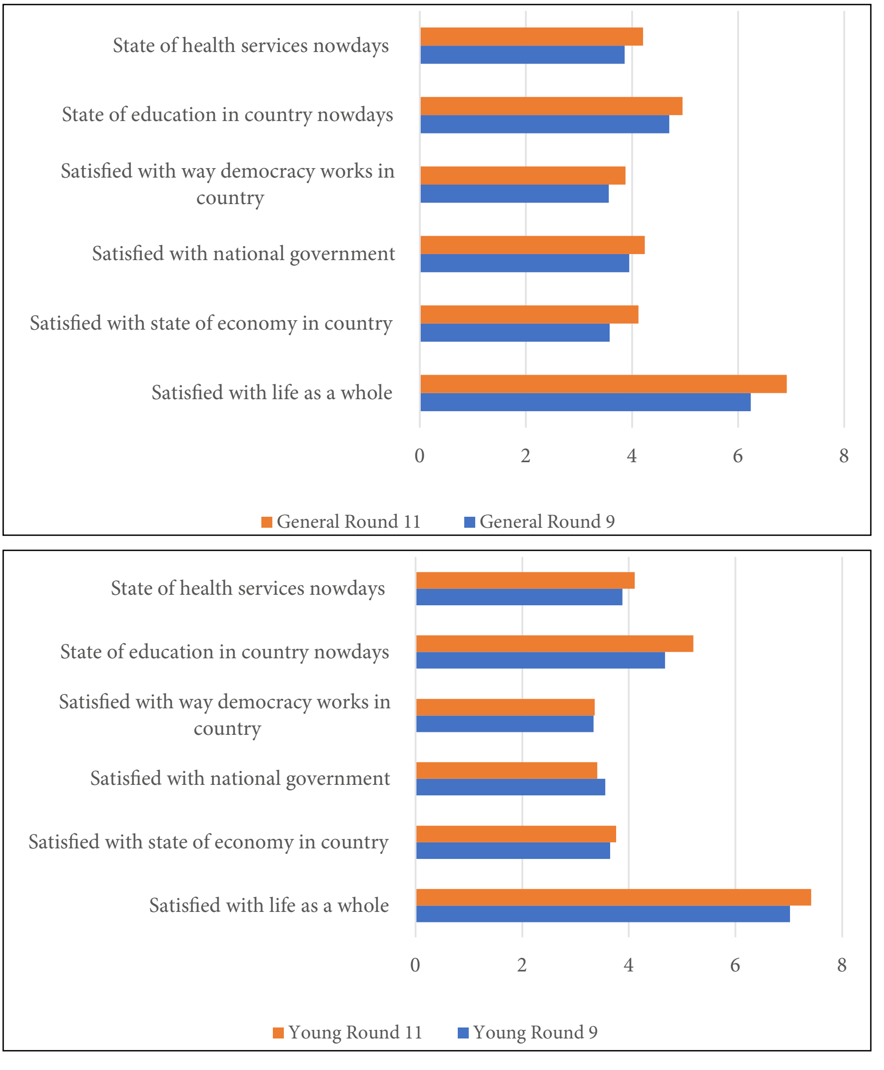


When it comes to the level of satisfaction with the functioning of different domains and subsystems, as well as with life as a whole, the data indicate that satisfaction is relatively high (above-average) only with life as a whole. For all other subsystems (except for education), a low level of satisfaction is recorded, particularly concerning the economy, national gov-

10 Chi-Square: 26.573; p: 0.000.

ernment, and democracy. Also, in these three subdomains, young people report somewhat lower scores than the general population, testifying to a sense of powerlessness among youth, accompanied by concern about their life prospects. What is also evident is that, over the observed period, there were fluctuations in responses in both directions; however, the magnitude of these changes remains relatively modest and not substantial enough to suggest that a significant shift has occurred (Figure 4). To put it differ-

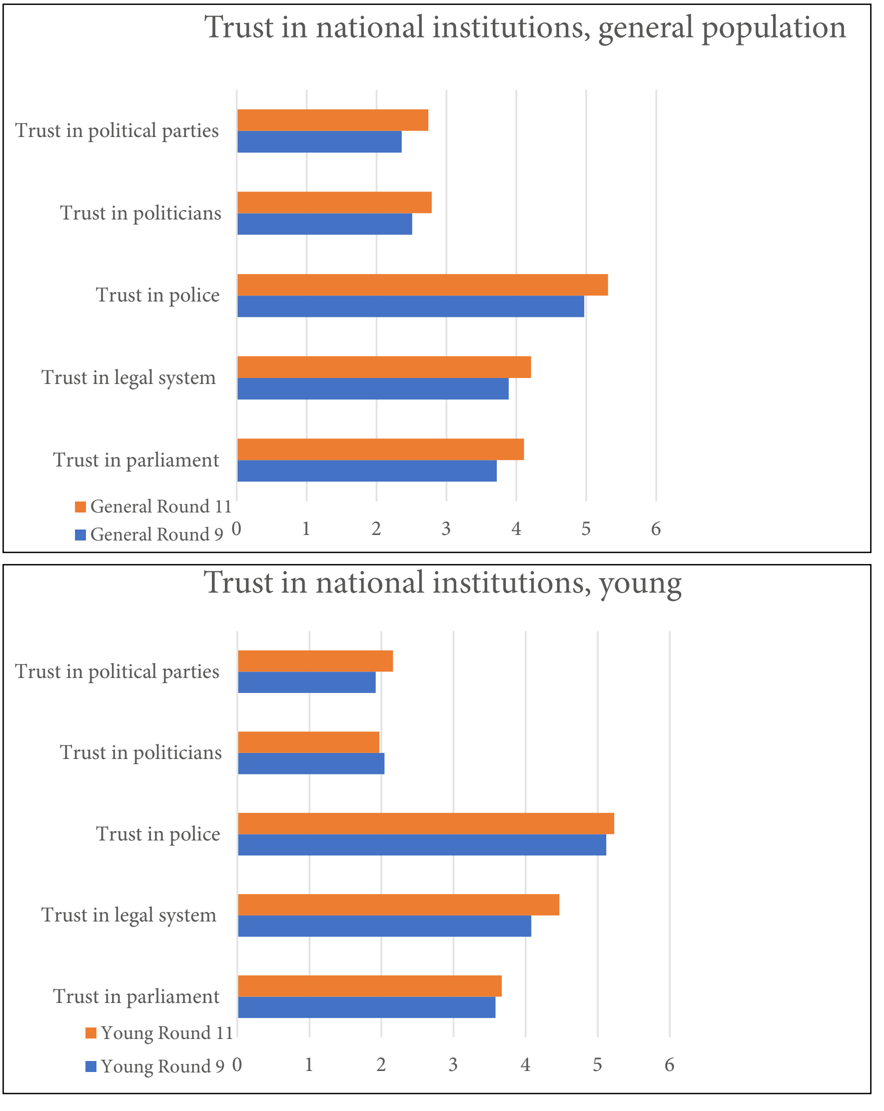
Figure 4: The level of satisfaction with the functioning of various public domains and life as a whole, mean scores for general population and youth (2018-2023)



ently, there is no evidence that any clear trend emerged during this period that could help us illuminate the changes in protest activism.

If we now turn to the other two dimensions, institutional and interpersonal trust, we observe that both remain notably low. The only exception is the police, which consistently stands out as the only institution whose average trust score surpasses the theoretical mean in both observed

Figure 5: Political (institutional) trust, general population and youth (2018-2023)

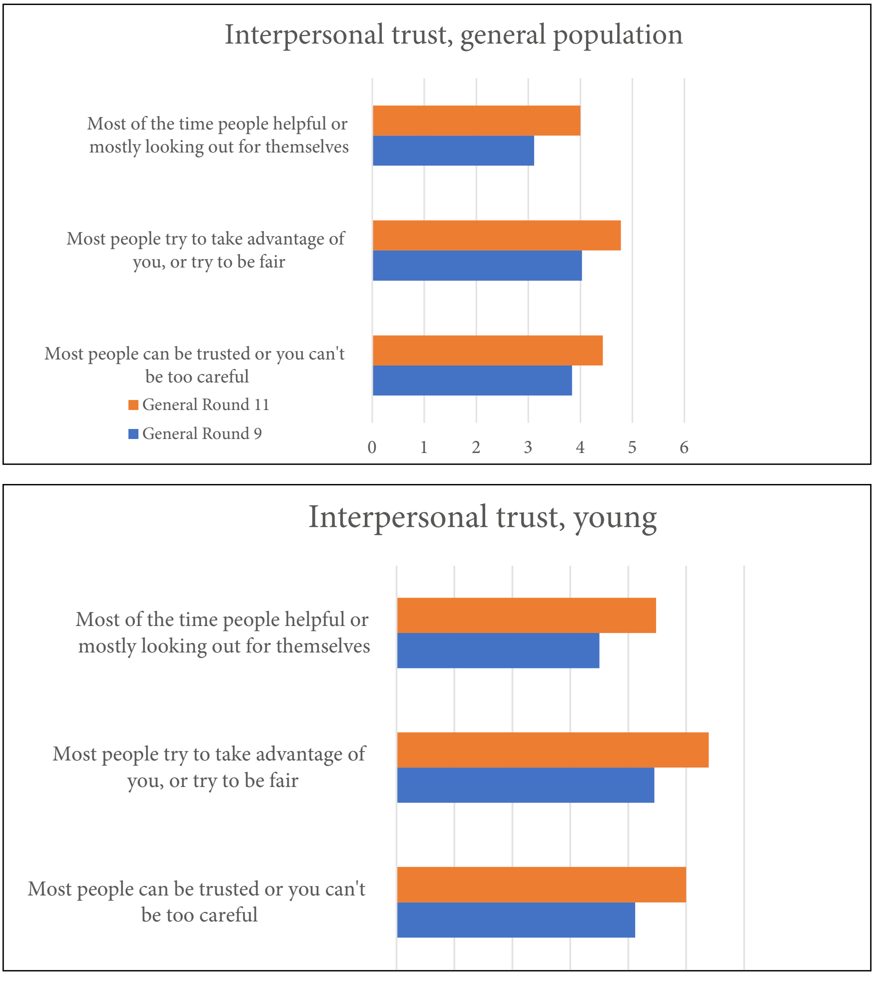


years (Figure 5). Political parties and politicians, on the other hand, record the lowest levels of trust, compared to other institutions, particularly among young people, whose level of political trust is lower than that of the general population. This is consistent with findings related to low levels of EPE and points to a sense of disappointment and disaffection with politics and institutions of representative democracy. Finally, when examining trends across the two observed years, the results indicate a relatively small increase in trust levels, although only some of these changes, primarily those related to trust in political parties and parliament, display statistical significance (Figure 5). These changes could be interpreted as an effect of the emergence of new political parties and the re-entry of opposition parties into parliament (after two years of boycott), which undoubtedly contributed to the rise in trust in both the parliament and political parties. The question, however, remains whether this has propelled the rise in non-institutional political engagement.

When it comes to interpersonal trust, three key findings emerge. First, its overall level is relatively low. Second, it is higher among young people compared to the general population, indicating a reverse pattern relative to INT. Third, IPT has increased over the observed period, which is an important finding for explaining the rise in protest-related activities (Figure 6). Overall, although we record only emerging and underdeveloped trends, when it comes to young respondents, it can be concluded that growing protest engagement is accompanied by low and declining levels of both internal and external political efficacy, as well as low satisfaction with the functioning of different public domains, alongside relatively low but increasing levels of institutional and interpersonal trust. When it comes to the general population, once again, the trends are rather modest and insufficiently discernible to allow for strong conclusions. Still, we observe a slight increase in both IPE and EPE, as well as in INT and IPT, although these indicators remain at relatively low levels.

If we were to shift the analytical focus now, in search of the explanation of expanding protest engagement, and compare protest participants and non-participants, pertaining to the examined correlates of political participation, some interesting findings emerge. First of all, protest participants exhibit a greater interest in politics compared to non-participants, along with a significantly higher overall level of IPE. Furthermore, unlike non-participants, they display a noticeable increase in IPE throughout the observed period (Table 1). Secondly, the level of dissatisfaction with the openness of the political system to citizens' engagement is somewhat higher among protest participants than among non-participants, although in both cases it shows either a declining or stagnant trend over the observed period. INT and sat-

Figure 6: Social (interpersonal) trust, general population and youth (2018-2023)



isfaction with the functioning of different public domains are notably lower among protest participants than among non-participants. Furthermore, an upward trend on both scales is visible among non-participants during the observed period, while a decline is recorded among those who participated in protests (Table 1). Finally, the level of IPT is higher among participants than non-participants, displaying an increase in both categories during the observed period (Table 1). In other words, those who display higher levels of IPE and IPT, alongside low levels of INT and high dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political and other systems, are more likely to be engaged in non-institutional or street politics.

Table 1: Characteristics of the protest participants vs non-participants in terms of political efficacy and trust (2018-2023)

	2018		**2023**	
	Protestors	Non protestors	Protestors	Non protestors
% of quite and very interested in politics	43.2	19.4	55.5	21.8
% of very and completely able to take active role in political group	27.5	8.9	29.6	9.8
% of very and completely confident in ability to participate in politics	18.9	7.9	25.4	8.8
% of respondents stating that political system allows very little or does not allow at all people to have a say in what government does	84.2	76.4	82.5	75.2
% of respondents stating that political system allows very little or does not allow at all people to have influence on politics	82.1	79.3	82.2	74.0
average score on the scale of trust in national institutions (ranging from 0 to 50; theoretical mean: 25)	14.23	17.49	11.75	19.95
average score on the scale of interpersonal trust (ranging from 0 to 30; theoretical mean: 15)	11.85	10.94	13.84	13.19
average score on the scale of satisfaction with different subsystems (ranging from 0 to 60; theoretical mean: 30)	20.38	26.35	18.84	29.39

Factors

The next step of the analysis aims to determine whether sociodemographic characteristics indicate which individuals are more prone to protest activism, and whether there have been any changes in this regard over the observed period. Therefore, we use the same analytical procedure as in the case of trust and efficacy, and compare protest participants with non-participants.

Let's start with gender. The data for both rounds are consistent with the trends identified in other studies (Tarrow, 2011), indicating that men dominate among protest participants. However, as the protest participation rises over the observed period, the share of women joining the demonstrations increases. The results of the Chi-square test for 2023 data indicate that as women's engagement in protest activities grows, gender gradually ceases to be a statistically significant predictor of this form of activism[11] (Table 2).

11 Chi Square for 2018: 4.354 (p: 0.037); Chi Square for 2023: 1.487 (p: 0.223).

In the previous section, we have already seen that the share of young people who were active in the protests increased in the 2018-2023 period. If we now look at the age structure of protest participants and non-participants, we see that the percentage of young people is higher among participants, in both observed years. However, even among protest participants, their relative share declines in 2023, as middle-aged categories increasingly join the protests (Table 2). In 2018, the proportion of protest-active individuals among the youngest respondents was 5.87 times higher than among the oldest. By 2023, this ratio had decreased to 2.55. As shown by other studies (Quaranta, 2015), in addition to young people, respondents in mature age groups have also become more susceptible to protest mobilization.

An opposite trend is recorded among the highly educated and those in the highest income categories (the top three deciles of household income brackets), whose share increases in both groups from 2018 to 2023, although remaining significantly higher among protest participants. Viewed from a different perspective, the data indicate that the likelihood of a highly educated respondent engaging in street activism in 2023 was 20 times higher than that of a respondent with the lowest level of education. Simply put, protest participants tend to have greater material and cultural resources compared to their counterparts who are not involved in such forms of activism (Table 2). Further, the data on educational attainment and material status, as proxy indicators of class position, suggest that protest forms of engagement are more strongly associated with members of the middle class than with other social groups. This finding aligns with data from the earlier research conducted among protest participants in Serbia (Vukelić & Pešić, 2023). Finally, unlike gender or age, the effect of education on protest activism has increased over time, emerging as a significant factor in explaining differences in protest participation across the two observed rounds.[12] On the other hand, the effect of material position was not strong enough in any round to be considered a significant independent predictor of protest engagement.[13]

To complement the data on education and material position, we also include an indicator related to the material dimension – having a paid job. Specifically, we assess whether having paid employment increases the likelihood of protest engagement (Brady et al., 1995). A paid job is related to a greater sense of autonomy, economic security, and access to resources. Literature suggests that, taken together with education, this factor significantly enhances the probability of individuals becoming involved in contentious political actions. Our findings on the effect of this indicator are telling and may point to one of the possible explanations on the trend of growing rates of protest mobilization: namely, the share of those with paid

12 Chi-Square for 2018: 10.372 (p: 0.110); Chi-Square for 2023: 20.275 (p: 0.002).

13 Chi-Sqaure for 2018: 9.639 (p: 0.380); Chi-Sqaure for 2023: 10.720 (p: 0.295).

employment among protest participants decreases over the observed period, while it increases among non-participants (though it remains higher among participants overall) (Table 2).

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of the protest participants vs non-participants (2018-2023)

	2018		**2023**	
	Protestors	Non protestors	Protestors	Non protestors
% of females	34.2	51.7	44.4	52.6
% of younger than 30	33.3	24.0	27.4	19.0
% of those holding BA+ level of education (ES-ISCED V1, V2)	28.2	12.8	40.3	18.9
% of those having paid work last 7 days	68.4	40.0	60.3	45.2
% of those in the 3 highest income categories	42.8	23.4	53.7	33.3

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the increase in protest activism in Serbia during the 2018-2023 period cannot be readily explained by the individual effect of standard correlates of participation, IPE, EPE, IRNT, IPT, and satisfaction with the functioning of different domains of public life. Rather, it is about their specific combinations, which, together with socio-demographic characteristics, indicate the probability that political engagement will be expressed through protest action.

The resource mobilization approach indicates that resourceful social groups are more susceptible to political mobilization. Thus, our data show that members of the middle class, those who possess material resources, cultural and symbolic capital, are more numerous among the protest participants than social groups that lack these resources. They are joined by young people, who do not necessarily possess all the listed resources, but have free time, certain cultural capital, and aspirations towards future jobs and social positions, which make them more motivated to join the protest acts of contestation. Possession of the resources and higher levels of interpersonal trust lead to an increase in internal political efficacy, facilitating political engagement. Combined with low institutional trust, low external political efficacy and low satisfaction with different public domains, this political engagement is more likely to be non-institutional, including street politics. Our data support this scenario: respondents who display relatively high IPE and IPT, low EPE, INT and satisfaction, were more likely to engage in protests.

Relative deprivation theory could also help us explain why middle classes and young people, despite the possession of resources, are more active on the streets: they are faced with the poorer prospects and possible social decline, especially in the clientelist systems or when the mechanisms typical of (liberal) capitalist societies (such as education, class origin, etc.) are not sufficient to ensure social promotion or maintenance of the achieved social position. The declining number of those with paid jobs among protestors testifies to that. Furthermore, the relative power approach accounts for the weaker presence of lower classes among protesters: namely, extreme social inequalities and the symbolic dominance of the ruling class contribute to their political passivity and absence from the politics of contestation.

The political opportunity structure approach explains why the shift away from purely political motives and claims, and the proliferation of issues rooted in everyday experience, represents an opportunity to mobilize a broader range of ideologically diverse groups into protests. This opens up the possibility for new movements, parties, or groups that engage citizens beyond established political and symbolic frameworks to emerge. In Serbian contemporary context, a favorable political opportunity structure is characterized by a rise in the number of protest events that are not strictly tied to traditional political issues but take on a broader, more universal character, especially with the growing importance of issues such as environmental protection or the increasing incidence of violence in schools. Furthermore, they articulate grievances in an inclusive manner that bridges diverse ideological positions and serves as a platform that enables the overcoming of existing divisions within Serbian society, whether they are class-based, regional, or symbolic, such as the long-standing division between the so-called "First" and "Other" Serbia (Spasić & Petrović, 2012). Despite the lack of a more stable protest infrastructure and the absence of explicit political articulation, often remaining within the bounds of depoliticizing moralistic discourse (Spasić & Birešev, 2012), these protests illuminated the deep-seated, systemic origins of citizens' discontent. This discontent proved to be readily translatable into new collective mobilizations, once a new trigger emerged, as was unfortunately the case with the collapse of the canopy and the death of 16 people in the autumn of 2024.

Newer cultural approaches emphasize the emotional charge that protest initiatives often carry. This affective aspect is not only helpful in overcoming existing social divisions and in mobilizing previously disengaged groups, but also highlights the potential of protests to boost individual political efficacy and a sense of agency. At the same time, this effect is amplified when the issues triggering the protests offer an opportunity to reset society and redefine the values on which it is based.

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Nemanja Zvijer[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Marija Radoman[2]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Aleksandra Marković[3]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

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THE FORMAL FEATURES OF PROTEST SLOGANS AS AN ELEMENT OF SYMBOLIC STRUGGLE IN SERBIA'S FACULTY BLOCKADES (2024–2025)

Abstract: This paper examines the visual and formal characteristics of student protest slogans that emerged during the wave of university blockades and mass demonstrations in Serbia that played a pivotal role in shaping Serbia's socio-political landscape from late 2024 through 2025. As a continuation of previous research focused on slogan content, this study shifts the analytical focus to the visual dimension of protest communication. The analysis is based on a dataset of 929 photographs of protest banners collected between December 2024 and February 2025 across 35 faculties at five universities in Serbia. Using a deductive coding approach, the study explores features such as script type, language, text-image interplay, and the distinction between internal and external banners. Findings show that most slogans were written in Serbian and predominantly used Cyrillic script, often combining text with visual elements to enhance symbolic impact. The use of national script functioned both as an identity marker and as a strategy of symbolic resistance. Visual stylisation, multimodal composition, and emotional vocabulary played a crucial role in shaping public perception and internal group solidarity. Protest slogans thus operated as multimodal forms of symbolic struggle, linking visual design with political critique in a context of shrinking democratic space.

Key words: student protests, slogans, symbolic struggle, Serbia.

1 nzvijer@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6401-2460
2 marija.radoman@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1589-3393
3 aleksandra.markovic@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5219-4220

Formalne karakteristike protestnih parola kao elemenat simboličke borbe tokom blokada fakulteta u Srbiji (2024–2025)

Apstrakt: Rad analizira vizuelne i formalne karakteristike studentskih parola nastalih tokom talasa blokada univerziteta i masovnih protesta u Srbiji, koje su imale ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju društveno-političkog pejzaža zemlje od kraja 2024. i tokom 2025. godine. Rad predstavlja nastavak prethodnog istraživanja sadržaja studentskih slogana, a ova studija pomera analitički fokus ka vizuelnoj dimenziji protesne komunikacije. Istraživačku građu čini baza podataka koja obuhvata 929 fotografija protesnih transparenata, prikupljenih u periodu između decembra 2024. i februara 2025. godine, na 35 fakulteta sa pet univerziteta u Srbiji. Korišćenjem deduktivnog pristupa, kodna shema je primenjena na karakteristike poput vrste pisma, jezika, odnosa teksta i slike, kao i razlike između unutrašnjih i spoljašnjih transparenata. Rezultati pokazuju da je većina parola bila ispisana na srpskom jeziku, pretežno ćiriličnim pismom, često u kombinaciji sa vizuelnim elementima radi pojačavanja simboličkog efekta. Upotreba nacionalnog pisma funkcionisala je i kao marker identiteta i kao strategija simboličkog otpora. Vizuelna stilizacija, multimodalna kompozicija i emocionalni vokabular igrali su ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju javne percepcije i unutrašnje grupne solidarnosti. Protestne parole su se, stoga, ispoljile kao multimodalni oblici simboličke borbe, koji povezuju vizuelni dizajn sa političkom kritikom u kontekstu sužavanja demokratskog prostora.

Ključne reči: studentski protesti, parole, simbolička borba, Srbija

Introduction

The student protests that began in late 2024 and extended well into 2025 represent one of the most prolonged and symbolically charged civic mobilisations in Serbia's recent history. Sparked by the tragic collapse of a newly renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad, which claimed sixteen lives, and by the violent assault on students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) as they paid tribute to the victims, the protests quickly grew from localised student blockades into a nationwide movement. In the absence of timely institutional accountability, students initiated demonstrations characterised by faculty occupations, public actions and protest marches, and most prominently, slogans displayed on banners. These slogans emerged not only as tools of resistance but also as expressive acts of political and symbolic communication.

This paper builds on the previous study by Zvijer, Marković, and Radoman (2025), titled *Svi u blokade! An Analysis of Slogans during the*

Student Occupations in Serbia 2024/2025, and serves as its continuation. While the earlier research focused on the content and thematic dimensions of protest slogans, the present study shifts attention to their visual and formal features, aiming to uncover how these contribute to the broader communicative and symbolic functions of protest. By analysing slogans through the lens of multimodality, symbolic struggle, and collective identity, the paper explores how language, form, and visual design intersect to convey layered political messages. These slogans—whether internally directed to mobilise peers or externally addressed to the public and government —operate as powerful carriers of meaning in a context where traditional channels of democratic dialogue have been eroded. Through the use of national scripts, emotional vocabulary, and creative visual forms, student protesters have claimed visibility, challenged dominant narratives, and articulated a shared sense of injustice. In doing so, they reshaped and enriched the landscape of political expression in contemporary Serbia.

Theoretical Framework

One of the central features of the student faculty blockades, which later took the form of a protest movement, was banners with slogans.[4] Looking at protest slogans from a broader perspective, it can be said that they are a very efficient and even effective way of communicating. Slogans are usually defined as pointed terms, phrases or expressions, fittingly worded, which suggest action, loyalty, or cause people to decide upon and to fight for the realisation of some principle or decisive issue (Veg, 2016, p. 675). Essentially, the slogan conveys the message in a short, clear and quick way and, as can be seen from the previous statement, has a certain action potential. Although this type of communication has its limitations (Sardoč & Prebilič, 2023), this does not diminish the communication potential of slogans, which is particularly suitable in the modern social circumstances of fast, short and short-lived information. This is especially true for the characteristics of slogans such as expressiveness embodied in the "writing act" which allows emotional and personal connection, as well as the diversity embodied in the different ways of creating slogans (handwritten, coloured, printed...) and in their various themes and content (Van de Velde, 2024).

Communication through protest slogans used by a particular social group can be directed inwards, to the members of their own group, or out-

4 Banners and slogans are not considered synonyms. Slogans represent the content in the form of a symbolic message, which is transmitted by banners as a medium, i.e. as a means of this transmission.

wards, to the wider society. The direction of communication, internal or external, determines the content of the slogans, their meaning and function. In addition to the basic functions of slogans such as transforming perceptions of reality, altering self-perceptions of protestors, legitimizing the movement, prescribing courses of action, and mobilizing for action (Veg, 2016, p. 674), slogans created specifically for internal communication can have additional integrative and solidarity functions, as well as functions of encouragement, strengthening morale within the group morality etc. Similarly, slogans intended for external communication may have additional informational functions aimed at wider recognition of the protesters themselves and the goals they are fighting for. There are some variations within this type of slogan communication, such as using the English language as a *lingua franca* to convey the message beyond the local setting into a wider global context and to a broader audience (Веќar, 2015).

In addition, external communication can also have a corrective function. This function is seen here in the light of Habermas's theory of the public sphere (Habermas, 1969), according to which public opinion is a corrective and critical factor in relation to normatively postulated political authorities. By going out in public, on the streets and squares, the students with their banners and slogans critically point out different aspects of the political government (its decisions, actions...) and the characteristics of the social system as well, thus forming a specific form of critical publicity with other citizens who support them. This type of communication through slogans is particularly important in situations where public expression of criticism (e.g. through the public media services) of the ruling discourses is impossible.

The students' protest activities, which include the public expression of critical views through banners and slogans against the centres of political, legal, economic, cultural and any other established power, introduce them to the field of symbolic struggle. Since slogans operate through language and express their criticism through it, such type of communication implies relations of symbolic struggle, because language rarely functions exclusively as a means of communication in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1992). Outside of the communication perspective, language as the main medium of the meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination (Thompson, 1984), and is a channel through which power relations are manifested. Of particular importance is official or legitimate language, which is the basis for the dominance of political power and one of the conditions for symbolic dominance (Bourdieu, 1992: 24). On the other hand, language can serve to shake and challenge dominant positions of power. Such resistance can be based on a deliberate antagonistic interpretation of the meanings derived from official language (Hall, 2006), as well as on the meaning inversion and parody of common cultural or political references (Alhasnawi & Mizhir Radhi, 2023). It is through the relations between symbolic domination and symbolic resistance that the terrain of symbolic struggle is constituted, in which language and communication are the channels for its manifestation.

In the case of slogans, the expression of a critical or other attitude and the perception of this expression depend largely on their formal structure, i.e. their appearance. This implies the importance of the denotative level in the context of the well-known distinction between denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1979). The denotative level refers to the formal character of slogans (their appearance) and therefore to what is directly accessible to the senses, in this case, the sense of sight. Therefore, denotation is often based on a description. The connotative level, on the other hand, comprises associative meanings that are much more flexible, can change and can be interpreted more freely. Nevertheless, the denotative level should not be regarded as meaningless, because denotation can also convey meanings and meaningful messages (Hall, 2006). In the case of student slogans, the denotative level would include the size of the letters, the type of font, the combination of pictorial and textual content, their positioning on the banner, the use of colours and the like. In the broadest sense, the appearance of what is written is important, so in the case of slogans, the way the text is designed and styled can significantly affect the meaning of what is written as well as its interpretation (Philipps, 2012). In this way, certain meanings were conveyed through the formal features of the slogan, and thus the form possessed a certain kind of symbolic potential.

Although student protest slogans predominantly appeared in written form, this was not the only form. In addition there were slogans that included a combination of text and pictorial elements, as well as those that were entirely in the form of an image. The predominance of written slogans did not imply a neglect of the visual dimension. On the contrary, textual elements were often visually stylised through the use of colour,[5] varied font sizes, graphic symbols, and other visual enhancements that merged text with pictorial features. This interplay between textual and visual elements aligns with the concept of "imagetext", which denotes composite, synthetic works that combine image and text (Mitchell, 1994, p. 89). The notion of imagetext challenges the binary opposition between image and text, recognising that many protest slogans represented a kind of amalgam of textual and pictorial elements. Such different ways of

5 The formal composition of the image (Philipps, 2012) is very important when it comes to slogans, especially those where different letters are emphasized through different colours.

expression that are present in student slogans can also point to multimodality as their intrinsic characteristic. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple semiotic modes – most commonly textual, visual, and graphic elements – to produce meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In this way, multimodality enhances the communicative potential of slogans, enabling them to convey complex messages more effectively and affectively.

Contextual Framework

To understand the student wave of protests and the slogans that were an integral part of it, it is necessary to consider the broader contextual framework. The collapse of the canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad, in which 16 people lost their lives and an assault on the students of the FDU, was merely a trigger, while the roots of growing discontent can be traced to the socio-political environment in which Serbian citizens have lived for decades, with varying degrees of continuity. The regime in Serbia can be characterised as *creeping authoritarianism* (Hasanbegović, 2020), *networked autocracy* (Petrović, 2018), or *(new) competitive authoritarianism* (Milutinović, 2022; Spasojević & Lončar, 2023). Features of such systems include unfair electoral conditions, tight media control, and the use of demagoguery and populism (Vladisavljević & Krstić, 2023), as well as a fragmented and weak opposition (Laštro & Bieber, 2021), where ruling parties operate as machines supported by clientelist networks (Günay & Dzihic, 2018).

This also highlights the close link between the level of democracy and the prevalence of corruption. According to Transparency Serbia, the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) places Serbia 105th out of 180 countries—its worst ranking since 2012.[6] One major consequence of widespread corruption, government opacity, and the poor state of public institutions in Serbia has been the recurrence of scandals, the most notorious being the 2016 Savamala affair (Backović, 2019), involving illegal demolitions tied to the “Belgrade Waterfront” project—now a symbol of political corruption and abuse of power. Several major protests followed, including those against Belgrade Waterfront (2016), the “Protest Against Dictatorship” (2017), and the “1 of 5 Million” movement (2018–2020) (see Pešić et al, 2018; Jovanović, 2019). The most recent and largest protest was “Serbia Against Violence,” which followed the school shootings in Belgrade and village shootings near Mladenovac on May 3 and 4, 2023, raising serious questions about government accountability (Fridman, 2024). These

6 https://www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/Saop%C5%A1tenje_CPI_2024.pdf (accessed February 25, 2025)

events are important for tracking major protest movements and showing the continuity that led to today's student protests. They did not arise suddenly, but are the result of long-standing dissatisfaction, electoral frauds, and systemic failures.

Although civic discontent has persisted through protests, the Serbian regime adopts a strategy of passive tolerance, allowing demonstrations to occur while ignoring them, expecting they will eventually die out. This did not happen with the student protests, which, sparked by the tragic incident on November 1, 2024, and the government's response to public demonstrations, have continued for over six months.[7]

Method Notes

The banners featuring students' slogans and visual elements that emerged during the student blockades and protests form the primary focus of this study. The main objective is to identify key visual patterns and interpret them within the broader socio-political context of the country, as well as in relation to the characteristics of the student movement itself. This goal leads to the central research question, which analyses the formal aspects of the banners: language, the use of scripts (Cyrillic or Latin), the combination of narrative and visual elements (symbolism, design, composition) and direction of communication through banners (internal or external). To address this question, the study utilises an analysis of photographs of student banners, collected due to the impracticality of directly observing the numerous banners. The collection process, lasted from December 2024 to mid February 2025, involved elements of visual and photographic documentation (Zvijer, 2022).[8] While the data consists of photographs of the banners, the core focus of this study remains on the visual expression of the slogans and their role in conveying the students' messages.

The analysis in this study is based on a photographic database of student protest banners collected by the authors (Markovic et al., 2025). The dataset comprises 929 photographs of protest materials gathered during visits to 35 faculties across five universities in Serbia.[9] The initial

7 At the time of writing, student-led faculty blockades and broader student and civic protests are still ongoing.

8 The data was collected within the project „The Wave of Student Revolt in Serbia: University Blockades 2024–2025" of the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade.

9 University of Belgrade, University of Arts in Belgrade, University of Niš, University of Novi Sad, University of Kragujevac. For a complete list of faculties, see the archive Markovic et al., 2025.

organisation of the visual data involved sorting the photographs according to their place of collection, facilitating a contextual understanding of the material. The selection of images for analysis was guided by the researchers' subjective judgment,[10] reflecting a purposive sampling approach rather than aiming for statistical generalisation. This decision acknowledges the fluid and dynamic nature of the protest environment, where banners were continuously produced, removed, or destroyed. Field observations indicated a phenomenon of banners *hyperproduction*, and the fact that many banners photographed in December 2024 might no longer have been present by February 2025. Hence, no claim of exhaustive coverage can be made.

A significant methodological consideration was the treatment of images featuring the bloody hand symbol, which serves as a prominent emblem of the larger social movement that emerged at the end of 2024 in Serbia beyond the student blockades.[11] Given that many posters and documents displaying only this symbol were discovered within and on university buildings, and recognising that not all were documented, we opted to exclude photographs showcasing solely the bloody hand in order to maintain analytical clarity.

In contrast to our previous study, which utilised an inductive approach for coding slogans and banners, allowing themes to emerge from the data through open coding (Zvijer et al., 2025), the current study employed a deductive coding process guided by predefined variables. To address the research question focused on the visual aspects of protest banners, we established a coding scheme in advance, informed by theoretical considerations and specific visual features of interest. These features included language, script type (Cyrillic or Latin), the presence of narrative elements versus purely visual elements or their combination, and the distinction between external and internal banners. The photographs were systematically coded according to these established categories. Furthermore, all narrative slogans were systematically transcribed from the photographs to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the most frequently occurring words. This structured approach facilitated a consistent analysis of the visual data, enabling comparisons across the dataset while maintaining alignment with the study's specific objectives. Furthermore, the coding process was conducted collaboratively to ensure reliability. This deductive coding method

10 The analysis excluded the following items: duplicate photos, lists of student demands, logistical notices, three-dimensional banners, banners displayed by employees in their offices, and messages of support received by students from various social actors.

11 The bloody hand symbol used during the protests conveyed the message 'you have blood on your hands' alluding to corruption blamed for the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on November 1, 2024, which caused multiple fatalities.

complements the inductive approach of our earlier work by shifting the analytical focus from content meaning to visual form and function. The research material was coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2022.

The Form of Protest Slogans

The visual form of protest slogans and banners plays a vital role in amplifying the messages conveyed during student protests and faculty blockades, adding layers of meaning beyond the textual slogans themselves. This section analyses key visual and formal aspects of the slogans, including the language and script type (whether written in Cyrillic or Latin), the presence of purely narrative elements (text), purely visual elements (image), or a combination of both (imagetext), as well as the distinction between external and internal banners. Examining these features reveals how students use language, design, and symbolism to communicate and engage a broader audience. By focusing on these formal characteristics, this analysis complements previous content-based analysis of student slogans (Zvijer et al., 2025) and deepens our understanding of how form and function intertwine in the visual rhetoric of student protest.

Script type

As many as four-fifths of slogans (80%) were written in Cyrillic, while only 20% were in Latin script. Notably, among the faculties in Novi Sad (the capital of Vojvodina autonomous province), Cyrillic appeared in 56% of the sampled slogans, with 44% recorded in Latin. Although the Cyrillic alphabet is the official state script and a significant aspect of national identity – evident in laws that promote its use in official communications – Vojvodina's multinational community includes a substantial presence of national minorities that utilise the Latin alphabet.[12]

The utilisation of the Cyrillic alphabet could serve as a deliberate symbolic practice that expresses the collective national identity of students while engaging in the political struggle for the legitimacy of their protest. This practice gains particular significance amid the intense delegitimisation of protests by authorities, who frame students as "foreign mercenaries", "foreign agents", "an extended arm of the Croatian services"

12 Most national minorities in Serbia live in Vojvodina, an area known for its ethnic diversity, which includes communities such as Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Romanians, Roma, Bunjevci, Ruthenians, Macedonians, Ukrainians, and Germans (RZS, 2023).

or "anarchists".[13] In this light, writing slogans in Cyrillic can be seen as a *counter-discursive act*, aimed at emphasising the impotance of national identity and national as such. The Cyrillic alphabet may thus embody "true" patriotism, signalling to a broader audience that students' actions are free from "foreign influence". Consequently, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet can be interpreted as a *discursive delegitimisation strategy of delegitimisation itself*, as a means of subverting the dominant narrative by reclaiming the very symbols that typically serve to legitimise authority. In this sense, the Cyrillic alphabet transforms into a *multi-faceted symbol*: an expression of internal unity and shared identity, as well as a weapon in a symbolic battle.

Language

Given this context, it is not surprising that a significant majority of slogans (97%) are written in Serbian, while other languages are represented at a negligible level. Among the latter, the highest numbers of banners were in English (12), followed by Latin (6), and a total of 8 in various other languages, primarily from the Faculty of Philology. The predominant use of the Serbian language further indicates that these slogans were intended to communicate with a broader audience "within the state," addressing either government representatives or citizens, rather than targeting the wider international community.[14] A different example can be found in the student protest in Belarus in 2020 against the authoritarian Belarusian government and President Alexander Lukashenko, when slogans were often written in English, university student performances were in English, and playwrights wrote in English in the hope that European theatres would organize readings in solidarity with the Belarusian people (Brown, 2023; Korosteleva & Shadurski, 2025).

The most frequently used words, as can be seen on Image 1, are: students (71, studenti), for (61, za), blockade (59, blokada), we (46, mi), justice (39, pravda), system (37,), all (33, svi), us (32, nas), you (25, vi), corruption (25, korupcija), now (23, sad), state (22, država), RTS (19, The national radio and television broadcaster of Serbia).

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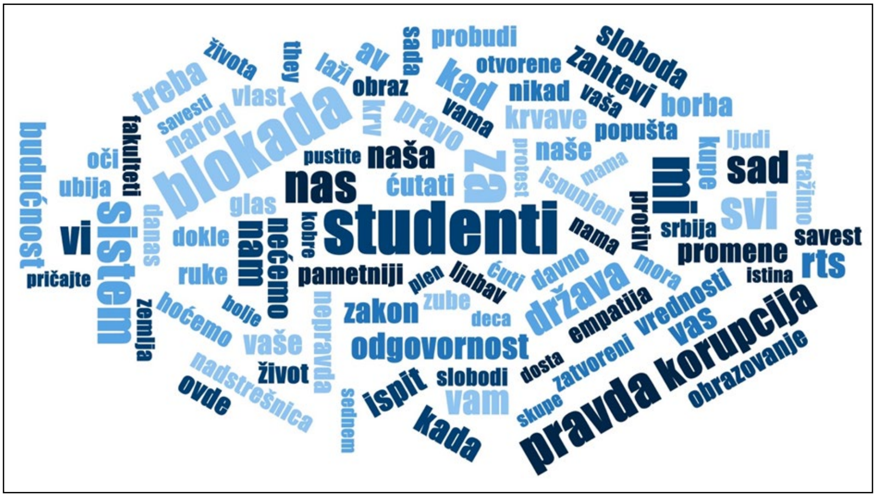
13 Report on the situation and threats to human security, human rights and freedoms in the Republic of Serbia (Reporting period: January 15 - March 31, 2025), accessed 22.05.2025.

14 This does not imply that there were no strategies for engaging the international community. For instance, one initiative involved a bicycle tour to Strasbourg, which is home to the headquarters of the Council of Europe, while another featured a relay marathon of students from Belgrade to Brussels to deliver a letter to the European Parliament.

Image 1. Word cloud, the most frequently used words (in Serbian)



The most frequently used words – such as students, we, justice, system, and blockade – not only highlight the dominant themes of the slogans but also serve as condensed signifiers in a broader symbolic struggle regarding the meanings of protest, legitimacy, and social order. These commonly used terms reveal a distinct emphasis on the collective identity (students, we, all, us, you), central demands and targets (blockades, justice, system, corruption, state, RTS), as well as a sense of temporal urgency (now, when, until when, today, tomorrow). Furthermore, many of these key words reflect emotional intensity and moral engagement, encapsulating concepts such as freedom, fight, justice, accountability, injustice, conscience, empathy, life, blood, and truth.

Words like justice, accountability, and freedom are not neutral descriptors. They are invoked to challenge the moral legitimacy of dominant institutions, to reframe the public narrative, and to lay claim to ethical superiority. Especially salient is the strong collective register: the repeated use of we, all, us, and students constructs a solidaristic "we", positioning students as a unified moral subject. This discursive collectivisation can be seen as a *performative enactment of solidarity*, not only among students but with a broader imagined community that includes "the people" (narod), the "oppressed", or the "just". The slogans thus do not merely call for solidarity – they do solidarity, linguistically and symbolically.

The performative repetition of specific terms such as "justice", "system", and "we" serves to entrench the values of protest within a shared group. These keywords not only carry descriptive significance but also embody normative weight, delineating the distinctions between those "on the right side" (justice, students, solidarity) and those "on the wrong side" (corruption, lies, state power).

What is particularly interesting in this corpus is the simultaneous presence of institutional critique (system, corruption, state, government) and affective vocabulary (love, empathy, life, heart, conscience). This juxtaposition points to a *dual register of protest*: rational–structural and emotional–moral. In this way, slogans serve to connect personal and political realms, mobilising not only arguments but also deep–seated attachments.

Visual dimension of slogans

The interplay between textual and visual elements represents the multimodality of banners. It's essential to grasp the significance of symbols and signs while also examining the iconic characteristics of an image (Imdahl, 1994, as cited in Philipps, 2012). Unlike texts, images communicate through the constellation of elements within a single frame, where the position, proportion, and interaction of visual components generate meanings that often exceed what language alone can convey. Therefore, in analysing protest banners and slogans, it is not enough to interpret slogans at the semantic level.

Hence, one of the basic and most noticeable visual characteristics of slogans is whether they were in narrative (text), visual (image) or combined form (imagetext). Narrative or textual form was recorded in 48% of cases, the other half (49%) was in a combined format. We recorded an exclusively visual form in only 3%. Despite the kind of dominance of the text, the visual aspect was still not negligible. Even with those slogans that were in text form, the text itself was in many cases stylised in different ways, most often through the specific shaping of letters, their colouring or combining and mixing with different visual and graphic elements. This directly points to the importance of the visual plane, which was also contributed to by the fact that such slogans were carried on banners that resembled a picture in their two-dimensional form.

The text itself was structured in a specific way and its presentation, as well as its reception, were influenced by the composition, size and type of letters, spacing between lines, etc., which means that the way the text was designed must also be taken into account (Philipps, 2012, p. 8). Accordingly, it could be noted that most of the banners were individualised and handwritten (Van De Velde, 2024, p. 578), which means that they were not made serially and mechanically, but a personal effort was made during their creation. These forms of personal creativity correspond in a broader sense to folk art, or what de Certeau calls folk culture (de Certau, 2002).

Image 2. – Narrative, combined and visual slogans

In the textual slogans the predominant colours were black and red. The use of black and red colours in protests carries deep symbolic meaning rooted in a long tradition of social movements since the late nineteenth century. Red became associated with the labour and socialist movements, serving as a visual marker of solidarity and workers' rights. Black, on the other hand, has a strong political history linked to anarchism as a symbol of resistance and opposition to established power. These colours not only function as visual identifiers but also help foster a sense of community and collective identity within the movements (Sawer, 2007).

Direction of communication

The communicative function of the slogans was particularly evident, indicating that the banners served as a form of communication. During the collection of slogans, it became clear that one part of this communication process was inward-facing; that is, certain slogans were intended for communication within the student group, which resulted in banners placed inside the faculty that were not visible from the outside. In addition to this internal communication, there was also an external aspect, as some banners were displayed on the faculties where they could be seen from outside, along with those carried by students during public protest marches. This allowed for both formal and substantive communication with the broader audience.

The analysis revealed that 68% of the slogans were designed for external communication purposes, while those aimed at internal communication constituted 32% of the sampled corpus. This indicates a predominant focus on external messaging in the overall distribution of slogans.

The previous study focused on the thematic analysis of slogans that emerged during the student protests, identifying and analysing the most common thematic codes. The most frequent codes in the overall sample were: agency (calls for action and systemic change, motivation), professional identity (identification with specific faculties), quotations (references to pop culture, literature, and proverbs), systemic critique (criticism of the system and corruption), and humour/parody/inversion (humour used as a means of critique) (see Zvijer et al., 2025).

Upon examining the distribution of codes in internal versus external slogans, distinct differences in their functions and communicative orientations become apparent. The slogans designed for internal communication predominantly feature codes related to professional identity, agency, youth/student identity, and allusions to popular culture. These slogans primarily aim to mobilise and affirm identity: they encourage student proactivity, reinforce a sense of collective belonging, and bolster both generational and professional identity. In contrast, among the external slogans dominant themes include not only professional identity and agency, but also humour and parody, the “us-them” distinction, and references to current political events. These slogans actively engage with the wider social sphere and align with what Jürgen Habermas terms “critical publicity” – they address the public and institutions, often employing irony or satire to challenge authority and critique the system, alongside a focus on the media[15]. Notably, nearly all slogans directed at the president of the Republic are classified as external, further underscoring their outward–focused nature (see Chart 1).

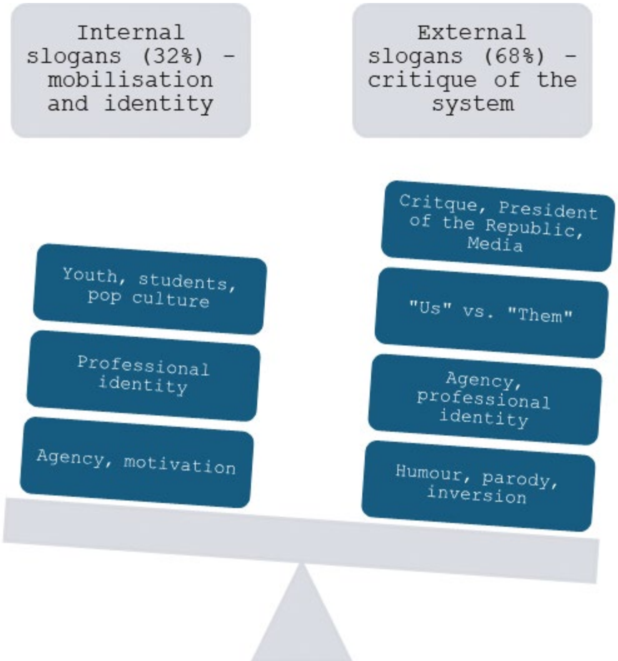
In other words, while internal slogans act primarily as tools for internal mobilisation, solidarity, and identity reinforcement, external slogans, in addition to these functions, assume the role of public discourse, directed beyond the student community, with strong critical and at times subversive potential.

Conclusion

The student faculty blockades and protests of 2024/2025 demonstrated a clear level of political articulation and symbolic power through the use of slogans and banners. This study analysed the formal features

15 The national radio and television broadcaster of Serbia (RTS) emerged as a principal focal point for media scrutiny regarding the slogans utilized by students.

Chart 1. Internal vs. external slogans



of protest slogans that emerged during university blockades, focusing on their visual and communicative dimensions. Slogans were not only tools of political messaging but also vehicles for expressing collective emotions, identity, and values. The predominance of the Serbian language and Cyrillic script indicated a conscious effort to position students within a national framework, challenging the dominant narrative that portrayed them as "foreign agents".

The form of student slogans possessed a particular symbolic potential; they were not merely a form of communication but embodied a powerful means of resistance and identity construction. Through the interplay of text, image, and symbolism, the slogans conveyed key messages of the movement while reinforcing internal group cohesion. Their content reflected a dual register of protest: rational-political (critique of the system, corruption, institutional failure) and emotional-moral (calls for justice, empathy, conscience). In doing so, the slogans enacted resistance and solidarity, symbolically constructing a shared subjectivity among protesters.

Although students were the central actors, their slogans had the capacity to resonate far beyond academic institutions, influencing broader public discourse. In this way, they redefined and enriched the terrain of political expression in contemporary Serbia. Moreover, language itself proved to be a potent medium of resistance; it did not merely communicate dissent but also challenged and disrupted dominant power structures. Thus, protest slogans emerged as sites of symbolic struggle, where meaning, power, and identity were negotiated in real time.

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Milena Jakičević[1]
Independent Researcher,
United Kingdom

Professional paper
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RECLAIMING SOLIDARITY: THE INTERPLAY OF EDUCATION AND RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Abstract: The contemporary geopolitical landscape reflects the urgent need for sustainable networks of solidarity and action in light of global crises, from genocides in Palestine and Sudan to students' protests in Serbia and the EU's crackdown on migrant solidarity. Following the events of October 7th, 2023, students worldwide have mobilised to reclaim their campuses, demanding divestment from arms companies and an end to complicity in the genocide of Palestinians. Government responses have been marked by violence, including police brutality and unlawful detentions, yet a collective call for a new social paradigm is emerging against the backdrop of late-stage capitalism. Furthermore, there has been a historical neglect of social unrest in South-East Europe by both Western media and academia, especially regarding the ongoing student protests in Serbia and the subsequent events that unfolded after the tragedy in Novi Sad on November 1st, 2024. University and secondary school students in Croatia and Bosnia have shown strong solidarity with their Serbian peers, with public support for their demands steadily rising. The involvement in protests of Serbian secondary school students, farmers and other workers' groups indicates a widening of support-base for these movements and the wide breadth of the student movement which has reached wider society both within and outside the country.

This paper aims to investigate the critical relationship between education and resistance in fostering networks of solidarity, particularly in the context of recent global social movements. It critiques the forces that commodify education, undermining spaces for collective and critical thinking, and raises important questions such as: what opportunities exist for sustainable organising that brings alternatives, both in theory and practice? What lessons can be learnt across international and interconnected struggles, that aim to dismantle existing power structures? Integrating data gathered from interviews, media coverage, and the cultural practices of students, researchers, professors, and the community in Serbia and the UK, the paper will assess progress in community organising and reimagining educational spaces.

Key words: solidarity movements, cultural resistance, commodification of education, state violence

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1 m.jakicevic123@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3802-1055

Ponovno osvajanje solidarnosti: interakcija obrazovanja i otpora u savremenim društvenim pokretima

Apstrakt: Savremeni geopolitički kontekst odražava hitnu potrebu za održivim mrežama solidarnosti i akcije u svetlu globalnih kriza – od genocida u Palestini i Sudanu, preko studentskih protesta u Srbiji, do represije EU prema inicijativama solidarnosti sa migrantima. Nakon događaja od 7. oktobra 2023. godine, studenti širom sveta mobilišu se kako bi ponovo osvojili univerzitetske prostore, zahtevajući povlačenje ulaganja iz industrije oružja i prekid saučesništva u genocidu nad Palestincima. Reakcije država obeležene su nasiljem, uključujući policijsku brutalnost i nezakonita pritvaranja, ali se uprkos tome oblikuje zajednički poziv za novi društveni poredak, naspram realnosti kasnog kapitalizma. Uz to, društveni nemiri u jugoistočnoj Evropi dugo su potiskivani i zanemareni, kako u zapadnim medijima, tako i u akademskim krugovima – naročito kada je reč o studentskim protestima u Srbiji i događajima koji su usledili nakon tragedije u Novom Sadu 1. novembra 2024. godine. Studenti univerziteta i srednjih škola u Hrvatskoj i Bosni snažno su izrazili solidarnost sa svojim kolegama u Srbiji, uz sve veću podršku javnosti njihovim zahtevima. Učešće srednjoškolaca, poljoprivrednika i drugih radničkih grupa u protestima ukazuje na širenje baze podrške i na to da je studentski pokret zahvatio šire društvene slojeve, unutar i van granica zemlje.

Ovaj rad ima za cilj da ispita kritičnu vezu između obrazovanja i otpora u stvaranju mreža solidarnosti, posebno u kontekstu savremenih globalnih društvenih pokreta. Tekst kritički razmatra sile koje komodifikuju obrazovanje i potiskuju prostore kolektivnog i kritičkog mišljenja, te otvara važna pitanja: koje su mogućnosti za održivo organizovanje koje nudi stvarne alternative, u teoriji i praksi? Koje lekcije možemo naučiti kroz međunarodne, povezane borbe koje teže razgradnji postojećih struktura moći? Na osnovu podataka prikupljenih kroz intervjue, medijsko izveštavanje i kulturne prakse studenata, istraživača, profesora i šire zajednice u Srbiji i Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu, rad analizira dosege zajedničkog organizovanja i mogućnosti za osmišljavanje novih obrazovnih prostora.

Ključne reči: pokreti solidarnosti, kulturni otpor, komodifikacija obrazovanja, nasilje države

Introduction

The contemporary geopolitical landscape reflects the urgent need for sustainable networks of solidarity and action in light of global crises, from genocides in Palestine and Sudan to students' protests in Serbia and the EU's crackdown on migrant solidarity.

Government responses have been marked by violence, including police brutality and unlawful detentions, yet a collective call for a new social paradigm is emerging against the backdrop of late-stage capitalism. Furthermore, there has been a historical neglect of social unrest in South-East Europe by Western media, academia and the wider Western community, especially regarding the ongoing student protests in Serbia and the subsequent collective actions that have been ongoing since the tragedy in Novi Sad on November 1st, 2024 (Balkan Insight, 2024).

In the context of unprecedented global transformations, we are witnessing today, the importance of understanding how university campuses and spaces are used for resistance and solidarity has never been more urgent. The potential to harness these spaces for building alternative futures offers a unique opportunity to impact societal change. As I reflect on this phenomenon, I am inspired not only by the possibility of advancing our collective understanding of such practices but also by the potential for scholarly work in sociology, as well as other disciplines, to proliferate knowledge about their significance, their utility in fostering resistance, and the ways in which they can be amplified.

Whose streets? Our streets! – Whose Campus? Our Campus!

This study critically explores how culture and education shape solidarity and resistance within global social movements. At its core, it critiques how institutional forces commodify education and culture, eroding spaces for collective, critical thought. The US/UK-driven marketisation of higher education has gained traction across the EU, directly affecting Serbia: Western-backed funding serves to promote a corporate model in Serbia's higher education, silencing dissent and shrinking spaces for critical and radical thinking (Karaulić, 2025). Following the collapse of Yugoslavia and authoritarian regimes in the Balkans, Western Balkan countries had to re-build their higher education systems from the ground up—creating new legal frameworks, funding models, governance structures, and quality mechanisms. Simultaneously, these countries committed to European integration through the Bologna Process and the EU's Lisbon Strategy, creating tension between national realities and international demands (Hackl, 2014).

In addition to the familiar tension between local legacies and EU aspiration, the issue of implicit rules and structures that shape students' access and progression within higher education affects the Ex-Yugoslavian HE scene, just as much as the EU and UK ones. Karaulić (2025) highlights how Serbia's government has implemented policies that undermine university autonomy, such as reducing research hours and increasing teaching hours, which financially destabilise public universities and hinder international collaboration. These reforms have led to the silencing of academic dissent, with professors and students facing threats, salary cuts, and legal actions for opposing government policies.

Bernstein, as cited in Donnelly (2018), informed the approach to inequalities within HE in this paper. Bernstein's theoretical lens shed light on hidden inequalities—notably, cultural expectations and norms that are rarely examined in widening-participation initiatives. Donnelly compellingly argues that current debates on widening access in UK higher education often overlook underlying cultural codes that privilege certain groups. What this study looked at, as part of its analysis of the dynamics at play in the reclaiming of both UK and Serbia's university spaces, are the implicit gatekeeping mechanisms at play—which university management is keenly aware of and uses to silence dissenting student voices and their supporters.

Vukasović & Sarrico (2010) provide an insightful definition of 'inequality' in the context of higher education spaces: a multidimensional view, which understands inequality as not just socio-economic status, but also cultural, demographic, gendered, and geographic divides. They reiterate the importance of viewing inequality in HE not only as an access issue, but as a complex puzzle involving *who enters*, *who succeeds*, and how institutions and systems contribute to ongoing social stratification. Understanding the incredible student-led actions across both Serbia and UK cannot be done without a critical analysis of the exclusionary nature and dynamics of the marketised higher education sector, which students have openly rejected, as well as the expectation that they simply accept the repressive nature of management and local governments. Investigating how these spaces are being repurposed by students and their supporters and what they signify in terms of collective imagination for systemic change, can offer valuable insights into how marginalised voices reclaim agency in times of crisis within the context of an increasingly securitised society under the growing influence of right-wing extremism.

The paper begins by briefly reviewing the timeline of events that have unfolded since October 7th, 2023, in the UK and since November 1st, 2024, in Serbia. '*Mixed Methods within Ethnographic Designs*' section introduces the research design and analytical lens, propounding the framework of why and how students and the wider citizenry took the lead in this research.

In '*Disclose, divest! We will not stop; we will not rest! // Svi u blokade! Napali su studente, svi na ulice!*' section, I substantiate my argument by highlighting preliminary findings from both research locations, addressing similarities, differences and lessons learnt. I do so by centring the voices of my research partners, whose words and ideas help with understanding the interconnectedness of these struggles. In the conclusion, I outline how these preliminary findings feed back to the discussion on building solidarity networks in the context of global crises, while also identifying key takeaways from both data collection sights and outlining the next stage and goals of the project.

Encampments and *blokade*: a Timeline of Protests and Resistance

Following the events of October 7th, 2023, students worldwide have mobilised to reclaim their campuses, demanding divestment from arms companies and an end to complicity in the genocide of Palestinians. The student-led mobilisation in the UK was met with violence, including police brutality and unlawful detentions, and with many encampments being served eviction notices and orders of removal, leading to their dismantling. Nevertheless, students and community members that have rallied behind them persist with many still holding liberated zones and spaces on their campuses and with graduates from 2024 and 2025 disrupting graduation ceremonies and marking them with display of Palestine solidarity, including chants and visible keffiyehs.

Here is a timeline of the student encampments across UK university campuses:

Late 2023 – Early 2024: Foundations & Early Actions

- Open letters and petitions at Cambridge and Oxford (~1,400–1,900 signatures) demanded ceasefire statements, divestment, and protection of students.
- Academic calls for university accountability grew and the international BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement gained traction with staff members starting campaigns and responding to their Palestinian peers' call for ending all collaboration with Israeli institutions and denouncing the *scholasticide* in Palestine (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

Spring – Summer 2024: Encampments & Occupations

– Students swiftly begin setting up encampments, reclaiming on-campus spaces and setting up 'liberated/free zones', from Goldsmiths to Leicester University, and Manchester, UCL, SOAS, and many more follow suit (Hall & Gohil, 2024).
– Legal actions begin—Birmingham (May 14), Queen Mary (QMUL) & Birmingham face court cases, while students at Swansea and Imperial voluntarily end encampments by mid-/late June 2024 (Chen, 2024).
– Only ~12 of the ~36 encampments remain active (Birmingham, Bristol, QMUL, SOAS, Nottingham, Newcastle, Oxford, Reading); legal orders force closures at London School of Economics (LSE), Birmingham, Nottingham, QMUL; Bristol ends mid-July; UCL evicted Aug 6 (Adams & Abdul, 2024).

The encampments set up across UK university campuses were met with violence and aggressive repression, both from academic management and local authorities, with police allowed on university premises and police brutality being encouraged under the guise of ensuring on-campus safety. Nevertheless, student encampments emerged as a robust form of protest blending direct action, solidarity, and institutional critique. They confronted university governance, confronted UK Higher Education legacies tied to arms companies and Israeli partnerships, and navigated a fraught environment marked by competing free speech imperatives and rising tensions around antisemitism.

The unrest prompted some institutions to shift ethical investment approaches and revealed deep-seated challenges in balancing protest, state surveillance and violence, and community trust. There were some concrete wins for students who pushed management to partially concede —Goldsmiths, Swansea, Reading, York are among the universities that divested or pledged policy reviews; University of the Arts' (UAL) encampment witnessed the resignation of Vice-Chancellor James Purnell. Furthermore, the encampments served as grassroots educational spaces, reinforcing activist identities and critical thinking reclaiming and reframing the purpose of university spaces. Much like in the case of university campuses across the US, external condemnation (BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom, 2024) of violent crackdowns and silencing of students did not deter UK Universities who, ultimately, succeeded and shut down the encampments. Despite the fear and hostility demonstrated by security and management on campuses, students and staff alike have persisted in their mobilising by participating in peaceful Palestine solidarity rallies and actions. Their steadfast commitment is not rooted in safety, but rather in the moral obligation and commitment to the Palestinian cause.

The state-sponsored tragedy of November 1st, 2024, when the canopy of Novi Sad railway station collapsed, murdering a total of 16 people, marked the beginning of public outrage and unrest, in response to yet another blatant example of state corruption and negligence by authorities (Savanović, 2025).

Here is a timeline highlighting the key moments of the student-led, mass mobilisation that took over across Serbia:

November–December 2024: From Vigils to Blockades

- 22 Nov: Students at Belgrade's Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) were attacked while holding a vigil. In response, they initiated a faculty blockade on 25 Nov, sparking nationwide action (Savanović, 2025).
- By early Dec, blockades had spread to over 60–85 university faculties, as well as multiple high schools. Around 75% of state-run faculties joined, suspending classes and occupying buildings (Krstić, 2025).
- The movement was self-organised, with decentralised plenums (plenary assemblies) and no formal leadership or political party affiliation.

January 2025 – ongoing

- Actions reached 276–419 towns and cities (Centro di Ateneo per i Diritti Umani "Antonio Papisca", 2025; Leofreddi, 2025).
- Large-scale assemblies took place:
  - 22 Dec 2024: ~100,000 people in Belgrade's Slavija Square
  - 15 Mar 2025 (Mašina, 2025): Harnessed 100s of thousands (200k–350k+) in Belgrade, with citizens gathering in the capital after travelling from all across the country.
- April 2025: After an arduous 13-day bike ride from Serbia, about 80 student protesters met members of the European Parliament and Council of Europe in Strasbourg to tell them about their ongoing demonstrations for official accountability (Baletić, 2025). This marks the students' movement and moment moving beyond national borders and mobilising many members of the Serbian diaspora across Europe.
- Similarly to their UK peers, students and the wider community faced government's attempted to suppress dissent: arrests of protesters, sporadic police and pro-government groups violence, de-

nials of transparency, and media framing of dissent as foreign-supported agents and domestic terrorists.
– Despite direct threats to their safety, disruption to their daily lives and academic journeys, combined with the historical neglect of social unrest in South-East Europe by Western media, academia and the wider Western community, the student-led social uprising is still going strong with another large-scale protest held on Saturday June 28th, 2025 with students reiterating their call for elections (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The unwavering commitment to societal and systemic change shown by Serbia's students, who have rallied and awaken the country's wider society, is another example of a collective call for a paradigm change against the backdrop of late-stage capitalism, whose cracks and faults are particularly visible in a society dealing with post-socialist legacies, domestic abuses of power and foreign-sponsored state corruption. Milosavljević (2025) highlights how horizontal coordination, absence of political party leadership, and direct democratic plenums mark a activism model particularly visible in Serbia's current student movement. Radical protest tactics are understood as responses to regime violence and repression.

In addition, decentralised, plenum-based organisation among students (some 80+ faculties), supported by educators and workers, seem to have fostered direct democracy, solidarity networks, and collective social learning. Cvetković & Knežević (2025) frame it as a transformative "rupture" that models new forms of social organisation.

Through a comparative and contrastive analysis, this research aims at addressing the following key questions:

– What opportunities exist for sustainable organising that brings alternatives, both in theory and practice?
– How can society oppose the silencing of radical voices by state powers and compliant mainstream media?
– What do the actions of student organisers across Serbia tell us about contemporary civil unrest and the need for systemic change?
– How can we ensure that our struggles do not create new divisions and tensions that reinforce existing power structures?

As this is a fully self-funded project, it is very much at a preliminary stage and as such the data collection and analysis are both still ongoing and the finding presented later in this paper should be understood as preliminary.

Mixed Methods within Ethnographic Designs

The research design for this study is mixed in nature, comprising of classic ethnographic methodologies, such as anonymised questionnaires and one-to-one interviews, content analysis of national and international media sources and field observation of protests, rallies and student-led actions.

In line with principles of ethnographic research in at-risk contexts, the study was conducted with a strong emphasis on anonymity and informed consent, using clear and accessible language to explain its aims and confidentiality limits. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no mandatory responses.

The research design included indirect questioning grounded in specific, context-based examples from the UK and Serbia, and relied on encrypted digital tools to ensure data security. The aim was to triangulate data collected through observation, interviews, and questionnaires, taking into account the dispersed nature of actors and overlapping cultural fields that characterise contemporary social movements.

Open-ended and semi-structured formats were used, alongside content analysis of national and international media, in accordance with ethnographic methodology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Bernard, 2017; Murchison, 2010). Research partners included students, teaching staff, alumni, and campus security officers.

Data collection involved field observations (mainly protests, some co-organised by the researcher), one-to-one interviews, and a survey with all research participants. The survey focused on the experiences and reflections of the London– and Oxford-based university community, particularly in relation to protests and encampments following October 7, 2023. The research period covered both observational involvement (February 2024–ongoing) and interviews and survey implementation (March–May 2025).

Due to a lack of access, I was not able to involve other university labourers, outside of the academic group, besides security guards and as such, this is to be considered a limitation of my research. My intention had initially been to treat the university 'community' as an entity that expands beyond the classroom and the standard university spaces, but I was ultimately only able to include alumni and security staff, in addition to current students and staff members. The university campuses were in Oxford (1 university) and London (3 universities). In total, I was able to interview and speak to 6 research partners across London and Oxford universities.

Data collection in Serbia relied primarily on survey responses, media analysis, and community engagement, given the absence of field observations. Research partners were Serbian citizens, predominantly based in Belgrade, with a few from the diaspora across Europe. Notably, all but two were not affiliated with academic institutions.

Due to geographical distance and limited funding, it was not feasible to conduct repeated field visits to Serbia, which limited in-person observation. Media reporting focused on independent and radical outlets, both domestic and international, and the researcher also contributed to one such outlet as a Serbian-to-English translator.

The Serbian-language survey gathered insights into experiences, reflections, and concerns of those involved in student-led and broader organising efforts that followed the uprisings beginning on November 1, 2024.

My positionality for both data collection locations is relevant as it informed both my access to research partners as well as my ability to engage with local sources on the ground in Serbia. Being a London-based researcher, with an activist and community organiser background, and being Italian – Serbian, i.e.: born in Italy to Ex-Yugoslavian parents, with my mother's side of the family being based in Belgrade, I was not able to directly interact with current students across Serbia, which should be considered as a limitation to this particular data collection set, but I was able to follow personal connections who have been involved with the protests since they first started. As such, I had to slightly pivot and refocus my research on a different set of partners, namely members of older generations (born between 1959 and 1985), witnessing and participating in this historic moment. They added a comparative perspective to my ethnographic data collection and analysis: they remember and lived through the 1996-1997 protests, and through their insights, they brought together their past, lived experiences, and their current hopes, concerns, and admiration for what this generation of students has been able to achieve.

As a Serbian–English translator myself, I was in direct contact and communication with journalists and reporters working on the ground and continuously made the effort to break through the wall of silence on the student-led movement in Serbia that I witnessed in the UK and across Europe as well, by translating articles. I did the latter both as a way of reaching the international solidarity movement scene and as a research practice. More specifically, I wish to explore what alternative techniques, for archiving and reporting on social uprisings and protests, if any, does our collective society have to the rise of fascist tech moguls and the use of AI to further misrepresent and erase social uprisings.

Disclose, divest! We will not stop; we will not rest! // Svi u blokade! Napali su studente, svi na ulice!

As previously stated, the findings presented below, together with their analysis, are to be considered preliminary and initial. The project is ongoing, and the aim is to expand on the data collection and fieldwork, by carrying out work on the ground in Serbia, engaging with the latest organising led by students and engaging with the university community in the UK. Albeit less active than last year, the latter is still mobilising the wider community and is supporting the actions of other Palestine solidarity groups and collectives, despite state repression and silencing.

UK preliminary findings

Preliminary findings from the UK highlight the intensification of state and institutional violence, disproportionately targeting racialised, migrant, and Muslim students, activists, and university staff—both academic and on-campus. University security management has reportedly travelled to and from the United States, where, according to one research participant, "they have learnt from peers additional and more violent strategies to suppress protesters and stop students from actively organising encampments" (Research Partner 1). Another participant noted that London and Oxford university leadership "do not uphold their mandate to keep all their students safe, nor do they prioritise the wellbeing of students that are affected by their complicity in genocide" (Research Partner 4). In addition, there is a concerning lack of advocacy for the increasing number of political prisoners in the UK who are part of the university community, with little support from leadership, teaching staff, or trade unions.

With regards to the lack of advocacy and outspoken support for political prisoners who are also members of the UK University community, Research Partner 2 identified the "*members of the Filton18, like Q, a first-year undergraduate student who has not received any visible, institutional support from their London University*" as an example.

What emerged during both field observation and one-to-one interviews with research partners in the UK was the perceived need for a broader critique of the economic status quo, of which the elitist university is a product, to push for divestment from arms companies and any other complicit entities.

The multi-dimensional inequality embedded in the UK HE sector also transpired, mainly as all research partners highlighted how, as a result of repression and silencing, "*Racialised students will continue to be forced* *to take a step back and adopt inactive roles in organising, out of fear for their safety*. The intersectional nature of on-campus organising also clearly emerged, as migrant and racialised students and staff are those whose precarious position means they are less likely to be able to "*vocalise their support for the Palestinian cause out of fears of legal reprisals and immigration consequences*" as multiple research partners observed.

Despite a lack of reporting and attention to the student-led uproar in Serbia, research partners in the UK demonstrated, for the most part, a good, albeit basic, understanding of the situation. It is worth noting how they drew parallels between the two contexts, as the following exchanges reveal "*Strategic targeting of corridors of power as seen in Serbia, where students across the country flooded Belgrade and even pushed pressure beyond Serbia by going to Strasbourg*" Research Partner 2; "*Cross-solidarity is vital. The student struggle within institutions shaped by elitism and inaccessibility must be linked to the struggle of workers*." Research Partners 2 & 3.

Serbia preliminary findings

There has been swift civil society support, with student-led actions reaching beyond Serbia to the international stage. Students also secured unprecedented, peaceful engagement with EU leaders by taking their demands directly to Strasbourg and Brussels. However, more visible and broader support of student protests is needed at the national and international levels. The students' demands have been widely supported, and most of Serbia's citizenry has recognised the necessity to fulfil those demands.

All research partners claimed that the intensity and severity of today's protests are similar to those of the mid/late 90s, which were caused by the election thefts of Slobodan Milošević's regime. The swift and overwhelming civil support granted to the student movement, which expanded beyond Serbia and onto the international stage, is what truly sets this *moment* apart.

As confirmed by the latest protest on June 28th, 2025, students' demands have been widely supported, and all research partners highlighted how most of Serbia's citizenry has recognised the necessity to fulfil them and for an overarching systemic change to come as a result. According to my Serbia-based research partners, the government's response and reaction to the student-led actions, as well as the international community's lack of condemnation of Vučić's crackdown on both protesters and anti-regime media, undeniably show how the EU's support for Vučić's regime is closely tied to lithium production, unsafe mineral mining, and ecologically harmful technologies. In other words, Serbia is seen as the EU's literal and metaphorical landfill—used for hazardous waste dumping and illicit practices that violate the very same 'core principles' the EU utilises to justify its complicity with corrupt and genocidal allies, i.e.: Isreal.

Students across Serbia, from Novi Pazar, to Niš, to Beograd have shown a rejection of ethno-nationalism, questioning the discourse around ethno-nationalism locally and internationally. "*Thanks to their struggle, we can see what is happening in Novi Pazar, we can see Bosniaks, Slovaks, Vlachs, Roma, not as caricatures of their political representatives, nor as "minorities", but as equal members of society*". However, this is also seen as a delicate and ongoing process, with which not only students but the wider population across Serbia must actively and continuously engage with. "*I think it is positive that the students show that they notice the diversity of national and religious affiliations in their country... This does not diminish the fact that nationalist characteristics can be seen among the protesters... but some progress has been made in people's consciousness*" (Research Partner 8).

Conclusions and New Questions

Findings from both locations seem to suggest that organised and focused escalation are needed for all aspects of collective organising, student-led and civil society-led. Similarly, both movements-moments need to confront key questions and challenges, both in terms of internal structure and vision, to work out a sustainable way forward. The issues of positionality, power dynamics and sustainable organising were highlighted by research partners across the groups.

Despite being about their personal on-campus experience, Research Partner 2's words resonated with research partners in Serbia: "*While groups often claim to operate non-hierarchically, which was the case on my campus along with many others, informal hierarchies tend to emerge. These discrete power dynamics have marginalised racialised members, especially in decision-making situations that require the recognition of positionality and the diverse range of perspectives and lived experiences of members*". Equally, the undeniable shift brought about by the student-led mass-mobilisation was recognised by all research partners, both in the UK and in Serbia, as per Research Partner 7's words when asked about what is next for the students and the country: "*Systemic changes have already begun...they have already taken place at the level of consciousness of a large number of individuals. How long it will take to articulate it as a collective consciousness that has the strength and mechanisms for systemic changes in the work of institutions cannot be predicted precisely. But the process has already started, and there is no going back*".

This preliminary study set to investigate the student-led occupations, actions and encampments within and outside university spaces in the UK and Serbia reflects a growing trend in which educational spaces are reimagined as sites of resistance, care, and pre-figurative politics. This preliminary study has used Bernstein's (2000) sociology of education, which offers a valuable lens for analysing these developments, particularly through his concepts of classification and framing, which highlight how students in these movements disrupt traditional boundaries and reconfigure what counts as legitimate knowledge and authority. In such spaces, the weakening of strong classification allows for more horizontal and collaborative learning arrangements, directly opposing the hierarchical structures of formal education. Donnelly (2018) complements this analysis by drawing attention to the affective and embodied nature of student protest, arguing that acts of occupation should be understood as "experiences of critical pedagogy" (Donnelly, 2020, p. 530), where emotion, risk, and collectivity produce meaningful learning outside the classroom. These perspectives align with literature on autonomous learning spaces, which sees student protest not simply as oppositional but as a generative force—constructing alternative educational imaginaries that resist neoliberal and securitised university models (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Haworth, 2012; Neary & Winn, 2017). Such spaces foreground the agency of marginalised voices, offering what Holloway (2010) describes as "cracks" in capitalism—zones where students rehearse radical democratic futures, often in direct defiance of institutional and political norms.

The completion and further expansion of this research could take a multitude of forms, but one aspect I am keen to retain is its epistemological grounding in people's personal accounts and first-hand experiences. This applies to their accounts of both individual and collective stories, as they are both part of societal and cultural archive practices, the same way media content analysis encompasses national and international perspectives.

Future subjects this research may touch include: engaging more closely with the Serbian (and the wider Ex-Yugoslavian) diaspora and its reception of the social movement-moment initiated by students back home; reflecting on the need to reimagine the reporting and archiving of societal and historical moments, to stand up to the silencing of radical voices and reporting, perpetrated by the powers that be and the complicit, mainstream media apparatus.

* This paper is part of an ongoing study the researcher is still conducting and is an entirely self-funded project, and is not the recipient of any grants, public or private. The researcher has applied for funding, with

which she hopes to expand and complete this project and is currently waiting for the application's outcome. The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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LABOUR, MIGRATION, SOCIAL INEQUALITIES, AND RIGHTS ON THE PERIPHERY

Aleksandra Marković[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Željka Manić[2]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

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PRECARIOUS WORKING CONDITIONS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IN SERBIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE ARTICLES FROM DAILY NEWSPAPER *DANAS* ABOUT THE LINGLONG FACTORY

Abstract: This study aims to analyse the precarious working conditions experienced by migrant (foreign) workers in Serbia at the Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin. It seeks to elucidate the nature of these conditions, particularly for labourers from Vietnam and India, in the context of foreign direct investment and the already spotted violations of regulations, abuse of public authority and blatant disregard for human rights at the Linglong factory. Due to limitations in directly collecting data from the foreign workforce, a content analysis method was utilized to examine 156 articles published on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* from January 2021 to October 2024. This period coincided with heightened media coverage of the challenges faced by migrant workers during the construction and inauguration of the factory. The categories of analysis are themes and concepts related to precariousness, including economic dimension, organisational, social, political, and living conditions, but also interpersonal power imbalances and migrant vulnerability. The findings reveal that precariousness among migrant workers is not confined to poor working conditions but is deeply embedded in a broader institutional and political context. The articles published on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* predominantly depict negative portrayals of working and living conditions, highlighting issues such as passport confiscation, inadequate living conditions, lack of labour rights, and systemic neglect by political actors. The analysis indicates that migrant vulnerability exacerbates these precarious conditions, facilitating severe forms of exploitation.

Keywords: precarious work, migrant workers, Linglong factory, daily newspaper *Danas*, content analysis

1 aleksandra.markovic@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5219-4220
2 zmanic@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8538-3474

Prekarni uslovi rada migrantskih radnika u Srbiji: Analiza sadržaja *online* članaka iz dnevnih novina *Danas* o fabrici Linglong

Apstrakt: Cilj istraživanja je analizira prekarne uslove rada migrantskih (stranih) radnika u Srbiji u fabrici guma Linglong u Zrenjaninu. Nastoji da razjasni prirodu ovih uslova, posebno za radnike iz Vijetnama i Indije, u kontekstu direktnih stranih investicija i već uočenog kršenja propisa, zloupotrebe javnih ovlašćenja i očiglednog nepoštovanja ljudskih prava u fabrici Linglong. Zbog ograničenih mogućnosti direktnog prikupljanja podataka od strane radne snage, metodom analize sadržaja proučeno je 156 članaka objavljenih na sajtu dnevnog lista *Danas* od januara 2021. do oktobra 2024. Ovaj period se poklopio sa pojačanim medijskim izveštavanjem o izazovima sa kojima su se suočavali radnici migranti tokom izgradnje i otvaranja fabrike. Kategorije analize su teme i koncepti koji se odnose na prekarnost, uključujući ekonomsku dimenziju, organizacionu, socijalnu, političku i životne uslove, ali i odnose moći i ranjivost migranata. Nalazi otkrivaju da prekarnost radnika migranata nije ograničena na loše uslove rada, već je duboko usađena u širi institucionalni i politički kontekst. Članci objavljeni na sajtu dnevnog lista *Danas* pretežno oslikavaju negativne prikaze uslova rada i života, ističući pitanja kao što su oduzimanje pasoša, neadekvatni uslovi života, nedostatak radnih prava i sistemsko zanemarivanje od strane političkih aktera. Analiza pokazuje da migrantska ranjivost pogoršava ove nesigurne uslove, olakšavajući teške oblike eksploatacije.

Ključne reči: prekarni rad, radnici migranti, fabrika Linglong, dnevne novine *Danas*, analiza sadržaja

Introduction

The concept of precarity is particularly pertinent to migrant populations, who constitute a substantial portion of the global precariat (Standing, 2011) and who, due to the interplay of institutional environment, ethnicity, race, gender, class, and migrant status, often encounter *unexceptional precarity* (Anderson, 2007). Migrant workers' employment is commonly linked to *3D jobs* (dirty, dangerous, demeaning), in sectors such as service (including sex work), domestic work sector, construction, or agriculture, characterised by a lot of maltreatment – such as long working hours, low wages, limited access to benefits, sometimes falling victim to human trafficking, poor living and working conditions. Moreover, migrant workers are particularly vulnerable due to language barriers, discrimination, and limited professional networks. These factors increase the risk of unfair treatment, harassment, and exploitation, especially among undocumented migrants who do not possess work permits (Filipek &

Polkowska, 2020; Kaytan et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2015; Marković, 2018; Ornek et al., 2022; Porthé et al., 2010).

Empirical research on precarious work and precarious employment published from 2011 to 2018 mainly focused on disadvantaged groups such as women, youth, the poor, and immigrants, but more studies are needed on vulnerable populations (Kaytan et al., 2024, p. 20). Additionally, there is a critical need to explore migrant working conditions in semi-periphery and periphery countries (Wallerstein, 2004), as most research has concentrated on advanced capitalist economies (Betti, 2018; Waite, 2009), leaving gaps in understanding South-South migration and issues like Chinese labour dispatch and unfree labour (Crawley & Teye, 2024; Matković, 2021; Sambajee & Scholarios, 2023). This paper aims to make a contribution to this gap, exploring the precarious working conditions of (seasonal) migrant workers from Vietnam and India in the Chinese tire site factory Linglong in Zrenjanin, Serbia. It will do so within the context of foreign direct investment (FDI), which is important because FDI significantly shapes labour markets on the capitalist (semi)periphery.

We employ a content analysis method, focusing on secondary sources due to constraints in direct data collection from the foreign[3] workforce. The empirical material of the research is articles accessed through a targeted query "Linglong workers" on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas*. The temporal scope of the analysis extends from January 2021 to October 2024, coinciding with significant media coverage of migrant workers' hardships during the construction and inauguration of the factory.

Definition of Precarious Work

In scholarly discussions on the concept of precarity, three significant authors often referenced are Pierre Bourdieu (1999), Guy Standing (2011), and Judith Butler (2004), and based on their concepts, the most notable and influential authors on precarious labour, tried to operationalise the notion of precarity (Betti, 2018; Millar, 2017). Precarity is a broader condition that extends beyond the concept of precarious work, serving as a fundamental element in the reproduction of capitalism. Operationalising the concept of precarious work presents several

3 In this paper, the terms *migrant workers* and *foreign workers* are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who come from other countries to work in Serbia. However, foreign workers is more commonly used in local public and media discourse, while migrant workers is the preferred term in international and academic contexts, especially in studies addressing precarious labour conditions, labour migration, and migrant rights.

significant challenges, including the lack of a precise statistical definition, the inability to equate certain existing statistical categories with precarious work directly, and the difficulty in capturing a considerable amount of precarious work in surveys (Kalleberg, 2014), making the notion of precarity an elusive concept (Mai, 2017). Various theories have been proposed to explain precarious employment, including segmentation theories, efficiency wage theory, insider-outsider theory, contract theory, queuing models, and factors like declining union power and labour market deregulation. However, no single theory adequately accounts for all dimensions of precarious employment or the differences observed across countries (Duell, 2004).

The literature on precarious employment highlights two main characteristics: uncertainty and instability, affecting various aspects such as employment duration, social protection, remuneration, workplace relationships, and career paths. Most researchers focus on employment contracts or types of employment situations (non-standard/atypical employment), look at employees' income, working and surrounding environment, negative outcomes of precarious work, organisational processes, or focus on groups most likely to be in precarious work (Pósch et al., 2020; Puig-Barrachina et al., 2014). However, whether one analyses employment relations or individual risk of precariousness, using either the contracts approach, choice approach, or the quality of work approach (Broughton et al., 2016), there is a consensus that precarious employment should be operationalised as a multidimensional concept, with different degrees (Duell, 2004; Vosko, 2014) or like the continuum of exploitation (Pósch et al., 2020).[4] Recent analyses of migrant labour highlight that precariousness extends beyond mere work arrangements to include broader institutional and social contexts, where vulnerability becomes a systemic issue. Boese et al. (2013) suggest an analytical distinction between the *sites* where precarity manifests and the *sources* that generate it. They emphasise that migrant precarity is intricately tied to market regimes, migration policies, and social hierarchies. This framework is particularly relevant in the context of foreign direct investments, such as Chinese investments in Serbia, which raise the question of the relationship between economic development and the systemic production of precarity.

In the late 1980s, Gerry and Janine Rodgers (1989) offered the most impactful and enduring conceptualisation of precarious work (see Betti,

4 Despite the consensus, many academic and public studies continue to use one-dimensional definitions or indicators, primarily concentrating on income levels or employment status, with long-term or full-time contracts often categorized as non-precarious employment (Kreshpaj et al., 2020, p. 242).

2018), identifying four dimensions of precarious employment: temporal (job security and the risk of unemployment), organisational (e.g. pace of work, working conditions); social (union representation, legal and social protection) and economic (adequacy of income). In examining precarious work among migrant workers, some researchers have employed a framework akin to EPRES[5] (Porthé et al., 2010), while others have utilised Rodgers' concept (Filipek & Polkowska, 2020). A meta-analysis of 20 qualitative studies on precarious migrant workers revealed that the most frequently analysed dimensions are organisational, followed by economic and temporal dimensions, whereas the social dimension has received comparatively less attention. The analysis also identified five new dimensions of precarious work that are particularly relevant to the migrant workforce. These include: 1) *precarity as a conceptual framework for analysing other issues* (health, informal workers...), 2) *strategies of dealing with precarity* (surviving strategies, precarious immigration status trajectories), 3) *individual experience of precarious conditions* (working conditions, which brings it close to the organisational dimension but analyses them only from an individual perspective and in relation to individual experiences), 4) *reasons for the emergence of precarity* (pathways to precarity, sites and sources of precariousness, causes of precarity), and 5) *political dimension* (political immobilisation, labour citizenship, actions that can be taken by governments, civil society organisations, trade unions and employers) (Polkowska, 2019).

While Polkowska conducted an analysis of qualitative studies, Ornek et al. (2022) performed a systematic review that integrated both quantitative and qualitative research on the relationship between precarious employment and the mental health of migrant workers, encompassing a total of 65 studies published from 2003 to 2022. The review identified six key dimensions contributing to precarious employment of migrant workers: 1) *temporariness* (unstable jobs, temporary or short-term positions, and a general lack of job and income security), 2) *low income* (wages that are insufficient to cover basic needs and unexpected expenses), 3) *lacking workers' rights* (lack of essential rights, including health insurance, maternity and sick leave, access to medical care, breaks, holidays, and social security, permission to perform basic rights such as to drink water or use toilet), 4) *disempowerment* (absence of unions, unpredictable salary schedules,

5 The Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES), initially developed in Spain in 2010 and subsequently revised in 2015, represents one of the most prominent summative measurement tools in the field (Vives et al., 2015). The EPRES is a 22-item six-dimensional scale (temporariness, disempowerment, vulnerability, wages, rights, and exercise rights).

lower payments than usual, barriers like language difficulties and inadequate knowledge of labour rights), 5) *imbalanced interpersonal power relations* (harassment, abusive treatment, authoritarian management, and unfair working conditions and treatment, physical violence), 6) *vulnerability* (fear of termination for voicing concerns, feel easily replaceable, work under inconsistent conditions, receive lower pay than non-migrants, and face discrimination and racism).

Chinese Factories in Serbia

Although the European Union is Serbia's leading economic partner, China ranks second in trade, loans, and investments. Between 2012 and 2020, Serbia attracted €21.165 billion in FDI, with significant Chinese acquisitions alongside French investments (Stanković, 2023). Since 2012, Serbia has actively promoted Chinese investment through the China-CEEC cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, with Chinese investments surpassing $3 billion from 2016 to mid-2022 (Ivanović & Zakić, 2023). Serbia's government has prioritised attracting Chinese FDI to create jobs and benefit elites, often overlooking environmental and labour rights issues. As Southeast Europe's top recipient of Chinese FDI (Marjanović et al., 2021), Serbia pursues these investments to maintain diplomatic ties with China (Krstinovska & Alexandris, 2023), promoting a narrative of "salvific aid" while deflecting scrutiny on human rights and environmental concerns (Prelec, 2020).

The arrival of Shandong Linglong Tire Company in Zrenjanin, the first Chinese tire manufacturer in Europe, highlights significant issues regarding FDI and labour rights (ASTRA, 2022). As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Linglong's operations have raised concerns about the treatment of foreign workers. The case illustrates systemic problems within China's labour dispatch system in Serbia. Strengthened Sino-Serbian relations through the institutionalisation of China's labour dispatch system in Serbia led to lifted visa restrictions and laws that negatively impacted workers' rights, including ratification of the Law on Confirmation of Agreement on Social Security with China in September 2018 that regarding social insurance contribution only Chinese labour law applies to Chinese migrant workers in Serbia for the first five years of their stay[6], and

6 While the Agreement indeed specifies that only Chinese regulations apply to Chinese workers for social insurance contributions during the first five years of their stay, it does not imply that Chinese labour law is the sole governing framework for these workers. The term *regulations* as defined in the Agreement pertains specifically to

that exempted dispatched Chinese workers from Serbian social security contributions, making Serbia unique in Europe in this regard (Matković, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). In late 2021, about 500 of 750 Vietnamese workers building the Linglong tire factory went on strike due to inadequate essentials like heating, electricity, food, and clean water. The situation received significant media attention (see Dragojlo, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2024) and condemnation from European Parliament members (ASTRA, 2022; Matković, 2021; Todić, 2023). The European Parliament passed a resolution addressing forced labour and potential human trafficking for labour exploitation in Serbia, focusing specifically on Linglong (Resolution on Forced Labour in the Linglong Factory and Environmental Protests in Serbia (2021/3020(RSP)), 2021).

The case of 750 Vietnamese workers clearly showed one of the employment archetypes used by Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs) to manage labour mobility. MNCs seek stable workforces by adapting to migrant labour changes and reducing turnover through internal transfers, agreements, and agency mediation. The "thin paternalism" archetype describes how companies control labour mobility through employment contracts that may sidestep European regulations, depending on state agreements. Matković (2021) reconstructed how and when the dispatching to Serbia took place in the case of 750 Vietnamese workers. The Vietnamese workers were not directly employed by Linglong but were dispatched through Chinese intermediary companies (Tianjin Electric Power Construction Company and Sichuan Dinglong Electric Power Engineering Co. Ltd – a well-established subsidiary of China Energy Engineering Group Corp., has operated in multiple countries, including Serbia, while Sichuan Dinglong was registered in 2020) that contracted Vietnamese labour agencies (Bao Son Labor Export Company and Song Ho Gia Lai International Company Limited). Linglong acted as an overseas contracting enterprise, engaging local Serbian firms, while the Vietnamese agencies operated as foreign labour service providers, not governed by Chinese law. The contracts provided to the workers were reportedly misleading and did not comply with either Serbian law or international labour standards. The lack of diplomatic relations between Serbia and Vietnam left them vulnerable while working in a poorly monitored duty-free trade zone in Zrenjanin. Around 500 workers went on strike, attracting media attention. Employers then moved them to five different sites in Zrenjanin, each with different conditions, after the original location was deemed uninhabitable by the labour inspectorate.

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social insurance matters, thus indicating that Serbian labour law remains applicable to other aspects of employment.

Since its establishment in Serbia in 2018, China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction (CEEG TEPC) has faced legal challenges and allegations of labour exploitation and lawsuits from Serbian companies for unpaid debts.[7] In January 2022, Serbia's Labour Inspectorate discovered that 318 Vietnamese workers were employed by CEEG TEPC without proper work permits. Additionally, while six Indian workers received permits in 2023 under a 'posted workers' arrangement, many others were misclassified (around 70), enabling the company to bypass legal employment protocols. Fourteen Indian nationals have formally submitted grievances to the relevant local authorities. Indian workers, like their Vietnamese counterparts, were lured to Serbia by recruitment agencies such as M&S International with promises of well-paying jobs, only to encounter poor working conditions marked by unpaid salaries and passport confiscation, often leading them into debt bondage. Linglong and its subcontractor deny involvement with Indian workers, claiming their contract with CEEG TEPC ended in September 2022. International companies, such as MAN Truck & Bus (a subsidiary of Volkswagen-owned commercial vehicle manufacturer Traton), have ended a tire supply and ties with the Linglong plant due to concerns over human rights violations, signalling a potential reputational risk for foreign investments in Serbia (Stahl & Dragojlo, 2024).

Methodological Framework

A content analysis method in quantitative form is used to investigate the precarious working conditions experienced by migrant workers at the Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin. The choice of content analysis method is primarily influenced by the challenging possibility of directly gathering data from the foreign workforce. The research's empirical material consists of articles that are published on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* from January 2021 to October 2024, i.e. in the period of media coverage of migrant workers' hardships during the construction and inauguration of the factory. Articles from online daily newspaper *Danas* were selected for analysis due to its frequent reporting on the research topic. Since its founding in 1997, *Danas* has inherited the tradition of independent media, which enables it to report on topics such as the precarious working conditions of migrant workers at the Linglong factory, which pro-regime media mostly do not report on and seldom published news are non-objective.

7 The factory is crucial to China's strategy in the European automotive supply chain, supported by the Serbian government.

The sample of analysed articles is non-probabilistic due to the researcher's choice of every population unit according to the research subject (Manić, 2017). The website of the daily newspaper *Danas* contains 221 articles obtained through a targeted query "Linglong workers". Initially, five texts were not included in the study since they were written before the period covered by the research. Of the remaining 216 texts published from January 2021 to October 2024, the analysis includes only those that (in) directly deal with the precarious working conditions of migrant workers in Linglong, not all of them. The themes of 60 texts are irrelevant. The research sample consists of 156 texts pertaining to the working conditions of foreign workers in Linglong, with 95 focusing on it directly and 61 addressing this issue indirectly. Direct texts are the primary focus of analysis, while indirect texts provide context of interest for the foreign workforce in the Linglong factory.

Units of analysis are themes and concepts. The theme indicates the topic of the article, and the concepts are dimensions of precarity that are referred to in the text. The articles' themes are defined inductively because of the impossibility of making their complete a priori predictions, particularly considering the expected differences between the topics of indirect and direct texts about precarious working conditions of migrant workers in the Linglong factory. Themes of indirect articles are media reporting about Linglong factory in Zrenjanin, labour rights in Serbia, Chinese investments in Serbia and others. Direct article themes discuss living and working conditions of workers, the government's attitude towards workers' living and working conditions, reactions of the non-governmental public to living and working conditions of workers, etc. (see Table 3).

Contrary to the inductive approach that was used to identify themes in the articles, the concepts were derived deductively from previous operationalisation of precarious work, considering the specificities of the precariousness of foreign workers, as well as secondary data sources about them (Table 1). Furthermore, the analysis aims to assess the value orientation linked to these themes, classifying them as positive, negative, or neutral.

Both authors coded the articles independently. The inter-rater reliability, as assessed by Scott's pi index of intercoder agreement, was 0.9 for themes of indirectly related articles, 0.86 for their value orientation, 0.92 for themes of directly related articles, 0.94 for their value orientation, and 0.94 for concepts (dimensions of precarity). The authors resolved disagreements through discussion.

Table 1. Conceptual categories used in the analysis of the dimensions of precarious work

Concept (dimensions of precarity)	Examples
Economic	Economic hardship, earnings, wage amount, regularity of payment
Temporal	Job (in)security, temporary or short-term contracts
Social	Labour rights: health insurance, sick leave, holidays, union representation, right to strike
Organisational	Workplace conditions: training, equipment provision
Imbalanced interpersonal power relations	Restriction of movement, passport confiscation, psychological/physical abuse
Political	Actors responsible for or involved in regulation: Serbian president, prime minister, ministries, inspectors, police, NGOs, trade unions, media, Linglong staff
Living conditions and consequences of precariousness	Housing, nutrition, clothing; extreme outcomes (e.g. suicide attempts due to poor conditions)
Migrant vulnerability	Language barriers, lack of rights awareness, fear/possibility of deportation, debt bondage
General	Mentions of poor working conditions without specific reference to some dimension of precarity

Precarious Working Conditions of Migrant Workers at the Linglong Factory

The analysis begins by exploring themes of 156 articles from the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* that (in)directly address the precarious working conditions faced by migrant workers at the Linglong factory in Zrenjanin. Content analysis of themes helps to identify the context in which interest in this issue arises. The articles that indirectly address the precarious conditions faced by Linglong migrant workers (n=61) predominantly emphasised themes such as (strained) media coverage of events that taken place at or were related to the factory (26.23%), labour rights in Serbia (22.95%), and broader issues related to Chinese investments in Serbia (9.83%) (Table 2). Within this group, a substantial majority of the articles (83.60%) conveyed a negative tone.

Table 2. Themes and value orientation of indirect articles on migrant workers' precarity at the Linglong factory (%)

Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Media reporting about the Linglong factory in Zrenjanin	6.56	1.64	18.03	26.23
Labor rights in Serbia	-	-	22.95	22.95
Chinese investments in Serbia	-	1.64	8.19	9.83
Legal aspects of the Linglong factory construction in Zrenjanin	-	-	6.56	6.56
Event or person of the year 2021	1.64	-	4.92	6.56
Arrival of migrant workers in Serbia	-	-	4.92	4.92
Foreign reactions to events related to the Linglong factory	-	-	4.92	4.92
Reactions of animal welfare societies	-	-	3.28	3.28
Other	3.28	1.64	9.83	14.75
Total	11.48	4.92	83.60	100

The most frequent themes in direct articles about the precarious conditions faced by Linglong migrant workers (n=95) included reactions of the non-governmental public to migrant workers' working and living conditions (30.53%), descriptions of workers' working and living conditions (27.36%), and the government's stance (22.1%) (Table 3). Direct articles were also very critical: 82.11% of them had a negative orientation. Taken together, these findings indicate that reporting by the newspaper *Danas*, both direct and indirect, was overwhelmingly negative in tone, reflecting widespread concern over labour exploitation, institutional silence, and the broader implications of foreign investment practices.

Table 3. Themes and value orientation of direct articles on migrant workers' precarity at the Linglong factory (%)

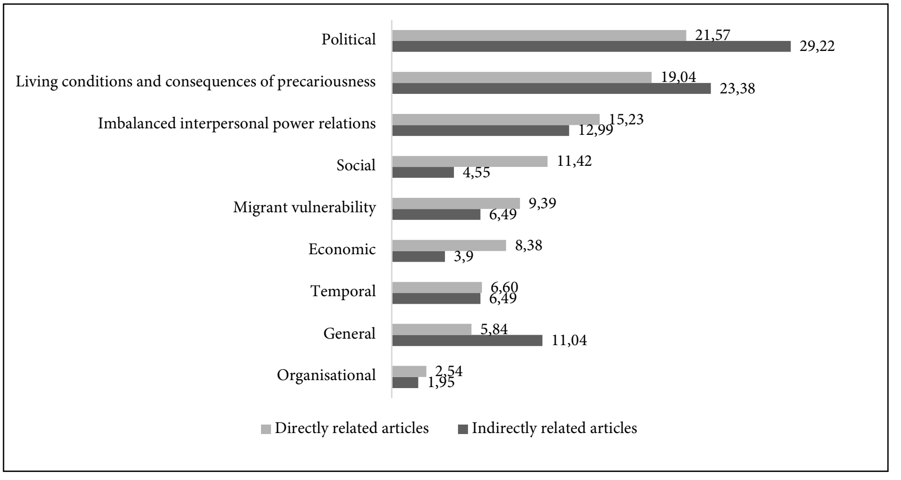
Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Reactions of the non-governmental public to migrant workers' working and living conditions	-	-	30.53	30.53
Living and working conditions of migrant workers	-	9.47	17.89	27.36
Government's attitude towards migrant workers' working and living conditions	-	1.05	21.05	22.1
Media reporting on migrant workers' working and living conditions	-	-	6.32	6.32
Migrant workers' strike	-	2.11	4.21	6.32
Humanitarian aid to migrant workers	1.05	3.16	1.05	5.26
Other	-	1.05	1.05	2.1
Total	1.05	16.84	82.11	100

Analysis of the directly related articles indicates the primary emphasis on Vietnamese labourers (74%). Workers from India are featured in 9% of the articles, 6% pertain to Chinese workers, and remaining articles discuss two groups of migrant workers. Analysis of the temporal distribution of articles published in *Danas* reveals a notable surge in media attention concerning the topic of precarity in November 2021, when over half of all articles (53.7%) were released. The majority of articles (more than 70%) were published in 2021, followed by a sharp decline in subsequent years. This sudden explosion of media interest at the end of 2021 immediately coincides with a protest by Vietnamese workers, who went on strike due to the lack of basic living conditions such as heating, electricity, food and clean water. Although there have been previous reports of poor working conditions in Chinese factories in Serbia, such as the January 2021 demonstration at the Bor gold and copper mine, the Linglong case has attracted much wider attention, not only from the domestic public and media, but also from international actors, including members of the European Parliament. At the end of 2021, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on forced labour and possible human trafficking in Serbia, aimed precisely at the Linglong case. This trend shows that the issue of worker precariousness briefly gained traction in public discourse in late 2021 due to exploitation at a previously unprecedented level. However, media interest waned quickly, despite migrant workers' unchanged working and living conditions, illustrating the "wave" reporting pattern where topics receive intense coverage for a short time before fading. This reflects a reactive media discourse on the precarity of migrant workers, lacking a sustained examination of labour exploitation in foreign investment projects, and highlights deeper patterns of political and social neglect regarding the rights of marginalised labour groups.

Dimensions of Precarity: Hyper-precarious Lives

Chart 1 illustrates the various concepts identified in articles from the newspaper *Danas* concerning the precarious position of foreign workers employed at the Linglong factory construction site. Each dimension of precarity is quantified based on its frequency of occurrence in the analysed articles categorised into two groups: those that explicitly address the precarity of these workers, focusing on issues such as working conditions, rights violations, and systemic challenges, and those that reference the topic indirectly, typically within the context of broader discussions about investments, political developments, or international relations.

Chart 1. Prevalence of precarity dimensions in newspaper articles that (in)directly address workers' precarity at the Linglong factory (%)



The political dimension and living conditions are clearly reflected in both sets of texts, with these themes appearing in 21.57% and 19.04% of directly related articles, and in 29.22% and 23.38% of indirectly related articles. This distribution suggests that the precariousness experienced by foreign workers is not solely viewed as a result of inadequate working conditions, but rather as a reflection of deeper structural issues, the intricate relationship between labour exploitation and the mechanisms of political power and institutional neglect.

A closer examination of the political dimension reveals the roles and actions of various actors responsible for regulating the working conditions of foreign workers. Discussions often highlight key figures, including the President, Prime Minister, ministers, labour inspectors, and international representatives like the Chinese ambassador in Serbia and European Parliament members. Critiques of institutional inaction are evident in phrases like "the state closes its eyes" and "no one reacted." Trade unions, NGOs, and the media also contribute to the discourse on accountability. This highlights that the conditions faced by foreign workers result not only from private business practices but also from a broader institutional context and political decisions, framing the migrant workers' positions as a systemic issue of neglect and complicity rather than an individual failure.

The dimension of living conditions and consequences of precarity highlights the severe material deprivation faced by foreign workers. Articles described inadequate and makeshift accommodations, such as barracks and containers, where workers often lack heating, basic sanitation, and essential infrastructure. The absence of necessary living conditions (insufficient food, inadequate clothing, and sleeping without mattresses) leads to dire consequences, including exhaustion, illness, mental breakdowns, and even suicide attempts. This precarity extends beyond work hours, merging living and working spaces into a cycle of hyper-precarious lives (Lewis et al., 2015).

The presence of dimension of imbalanced power dynamics is particularly pronounced in articles that focus on the precarious position of foreign workers (15.23%). Imbalanced interpersonal relations manifest in narratives detailing the confiscation of workers' passports, forced labour, restrictions on freedom of movement, prohibitions on communication with journalists, and instances of threats and psychological pressure. Workers are frequently portrayed as trapped in camps, without the ability to leave the area, even when they wish to return to their home countries. The management and security personnel of the Linglong factory are identified in asticles as key enforcers of this control, leaving workers in a state of complete dependence. These factors illustrate an extreme power imbalance in which foreign workers are not only subjected to labour subordination but are also physically and legally disenfranchised. The concept of precariousness cannot be understood solely as employment instability; rather, it signifies a form of discipline characterised by unfreedom, which places workers on the fringes of law and rights.

Furthermore, the social dimension of precarity, present in 11.42% of directly related articles, and in 4.55% of indirectly related articles, notably the lack of adherence to established legal and normative frameworks, suggests that the employment situations of migrant workers frequently occur outside of any institutional protection. The social dimension highlights violations of fundamental labour rights, including the practice of working without contracts or with invalid documentation (such as the absence of a start date), the inability to utilise sick leave, unpaid overtime, and limited access to healthcare services. The articles also include instances of dismissals linked to efforts to organise a union and attempts to reassign workers who voiced dissatisfaction to different construction sites.

Migrant vulnerability is evident in the 9.39% of directly related articles, and in 6.49% of indirectly related articles through various interconnected forms of insecurity. Workers do not know the language of the host country, are unaware of their rights, and do not know where to seek help. A number have incurred debts for employment in Serbia (some as high as 5,000 euros), placing them in debt bondage, and precarity of place – vulnerability to removal from a country (Banki, 2013). Cases have been reported where passports are withheld, visas expire, and workers find themselves "trapped" with no option for return. In other words, beyond legal insecurity, there are also emotional and existential concerns, characterised by fears of the unknown, repression, deportation, and financial devastation.

The economic, temporal, and organisational dimensions of precarity are the least represented in articles that explicitly address the precarity of migrant workers in Linglong factory, accounting for 8.38%, 6.6%, and 1.95%, respectively, and even less in indirectly related articles. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it may suggest an inadequate in-depth exploration of specific work arrangements, employment conditions, and workers' rights within the media, given that precariousness is a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends political factors and the poor living conditions often associated with migrant workers. Secondly, the limited representation of these aspects of precarity might indicate a normalisation of fundamental exploitation in public discourse, as if unpaid wages and lack of training and equipment are no longer perceived as a problem, but as an expected part of the work regime for this population.

Conclusion

The precarious working conditions experienced by migrant workers at the Chinese Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia, underscore a broader narrative of exploitation that characterises the intersection of global capital and local labour markets. This study has employed a content analysis of articles published in the online daily newspaper *Danas* to illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of precarity faced by these workers, particularly those from Vietnam and India. By analysing media coverage from January 2021 to October 2024, the research provides insights into the lived realities of migrant labourers within the context of FDI and the socio-political landscape of Serbia.

The analysis of media portrayals of foreign workers in Serbia shows that precariousness is not limited to working conditions but permeates a wider institutional, political, and social context. *Sites of precariousness* (see Boese et al., 2013) in this case are clearly recognised in the working and living conditions: the factory and accommodation function as closed areas of control, where the confiscation of passports, prohibition of movement, threats, but also extremely bad living conditions (cold, hunger, lack of basic hygiene) are manifested. Also, institutional passivity and exclusion from the labour and health protection systems point to legal and administrative structures as additional areas of vulnerability. The media reporting records attempts at resistance (workers' strikes), but also the rapid suppression of those initiatives, thus confirming the existence of a firm hierarchy of power within the labour regime.

On the other hand, the *sources of precariousness* include a combination of migration policy, market logic and the political economy of foreign investments. The role of FDI in the contemporary socio-political landscape of Serbia is crucial for understanding why and how the precariousness of these workers is naturalised and institutionally tolerated. The political elite in Serbia uses FDI as a means of economic legitimacy and foreign policy balancing, with foreign companies (in this case, from China) presenting themselves as partners in development, often while consciously ignoring labour standards and oversight. Such an economic-political alliance produces a situation in which labour rights are subordinated to the strategic interests of the state and political elites at any cost. In addition, migrant vulnerability (workers' indebtedness, legal insecurity, ignorance of language and rights) indicates that migration policies and their instrumentalisation by employers further deepen their subordination.

Finally, migrant vulnerability functions as a mediator of precarity, enabling deeper and more severe forms of exploitation. Migrant vulnerability operates both as a source, structurally rooted in migration regimes, debt cycles, and legal exclusions, *and* as a site, where these vulnerabilities are enacted and reproduced through spatial confinement, restricted mobility, and social isolation. In sum, the analysed articles show how precariousness simultaneously takes place locally (in physical, legal and social space), but is also a product of political decisions, market strategies and global economic relations.

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Ksenija Klasnić[1]
University of Zagreb, Croatia
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Anita Dremel[2]
University of Osijek, Croatia
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer
Krešimir Žažar[3]
University of Zagreb, Croatia
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Đurđica Degač[4]
University of Zagreb, Croatia
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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INVISIBLE HOUSEHOLD LABOUR AND DIGITAL SOLUTIONS: GENDER DIVISIONS IN MENTAL LABOUR AND THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Abstract: This study examines whether artificial intelligence (AI) tools can alleviate mental labour of employed mothers in Croatian society, predominantly traditional in terms of gender norms, and whether this technology reinforce or challenge existing gender inequalities. The research is anchored in multi-phase exploratory sequential mixed-methods design: phase one includes semi-structured interviews with AI experts to examine gendered assumptions in technology; phase two draws on a survey of 369 employed mothers to grasp perceptions and experiences with digital tools in household management; the final phase involves a qualitative quasi-experiment in which five highly educated employed mothers used ChatGPT for two weeks to assist with domestic tasks. Findings indicate that while AI supports organizing daily tasks, especially planning, scheduling, and tracking, it rarely redistributes mental labour within households. Participants use AI mainly to

1 kklasnic@ffzg.unizg.hr, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9362-6739
2 adremel@ffos.hr, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0526-8498
3 kzazar@ffzg.unizg.hr, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6133-8625
4 djdegac@ffzg.unizg.hr, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3718-2306

ease their own workload, not to shift task-sharing. Expert interviews revealed that AI design remains shaped by exclusionary, male-dominated structures, with some experts expressing biologically essentialist views that reinforce gender inequality. Survey results show that although most mothers were digitally literate and open to tech solutions, their usage has limited systemic impact. The quasi-experiment highlighted a gap between personal efficiency gains and persistent structural inequality, with AI seen more as a replicating tool than a genuinely transformative force. This study concludes that AI can support individual women in managing invisible domestic responsibilities, but without concurrent shifts in social norms and policy, its emancipatory potential remains constrained. It calls for feminist-informed, participatory design approaches that prioritize care, inclusion, and the redistribution of responsibility in both technological and social systems.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, mental labour, gender inequality, domestic work, feminist technology studies

Nevidljivi kućanski rad i digitalna rješenja: rodne podjele u mentalnom radu i uloga umjetne inteligencije

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad istražuje mogu li alati umjetne inteligencije (UI) ublažiti mentalni rad zaposlenih majki u hrvatskom društvu, koje je i dalje u velikoj mjeri obilježeno tradicionalnim rodnim normama, te pojačavaju li ove tehnologije postojeće rodne nejednakosti ili ih dovode u pitanje. Istraživanje se temelji na višefaznom eksplorativnom sekvencijalnom mješovitom metodološkom dizajnu: prva faza uključuje polustrukturirane intervjue s UI stručnjacima s ciljem ispitivanja rodnih pretpostavki u razvoju tehnologije; druga faza obuhvaća anketu s 369 zaposlenih majki kako bi se utvrdile njihove percepcije i iskustva s digitalnim alatima u organizaciji kućanstva; završna faza uključuje kvalitativni kvazi-eksperiment u kojem je pet visokoobrazovanih zaposlenih majki koristilo ChatGPT tijekom dva tjedna za podršku u obavljanju mentalnih kućanskih poslova. Rezultati pokazuju da UI može olakšati organizaciju svakodnevnih poslova, posebno u planiranju, rasporedu i praćenju obveza, ali rijetko dolazi do preraspodjele mentalnog rada unutar kućanstva. Sudionice uglavnom koriste UI kako bi olakšale vlastiti rad, a ne kako bi promijenile obrasce dijeljenja zadataka. Intervjui s ekspertima otkrivaju da dizajn UI-ja i dalje oblikuju isključujuće, muškim iskustvima dominantne strukture, pri čemu neki stručnjaci izražavaju biologističke stavove koji dodatno učvršćuju rodne nejednakosti. Rezultati ankete pokazuju da su majke u velikoj mjeri digitalno pismene i otvorene prema tehnološkim rješenjima, no njihova upotreba digitalnih alata ima ograničen strukturni doseg. Kvazi-eksperiment dodatno ističe jaz između osobnog povećanja učinkovitosti i trajne strukturne nejednakosti: UI se percipira više kao sredstvo ponavljanja postojećih obrazaca, nego kao istinski transformativan alat. Zaključno, iako UI može pružiti podršku pojedinačnim korisnicama u nošenju s nevidljivim obiteljskim obvezama, bez paralelnih promjena u društvenim normama i javnim politikama, njezin emancipacijski potencijal ostaje ograničen. Rad zagovara feministički informirano, participativno oblikovanje tehnologije koje stavlja u središte brigu, uključivost i pravednu raspodjelu odgovornosti u tehnološkim i društvenim sustavima.

Ključne reči: umjetna inteligencija, mentalni rad, rodne nejednakosti, kućanski rad, feminističke tehnologijske studije

Introduction

Despite the promises of progress and convenience, digital technologies often replicate and reinforce existing inequalities, particularly in domains traditionally considered private or gendered. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies has significantly transformed various spheres of social life, yet its impact on the domestic and private realm remains underexplored. In particular, questions about the effects of AI on the distribution of mental and emotional labour within households, especially for employed mothers, remain unfolded. These forms of labour (e.g. anticipating needs, organizing tasks, and managing family logistics) are often invisible, unpaid, and predominantly performed by women (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Dean et al., 2022; Klasnić & Degač, 2024). The domestic sphere remains a critical spot for examining modalities in which artificial intelligence interacts with, sustains, or challenges gendered norms. Although there is a growing body of literature on the impact of AI and automation on employment and political systems (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020; Dong & Guo, 2025; Boyd & Holton, 2017; Schippers, 2020), including a few sociological accounts about this general topic in Croatian context (Švarc, 2021; Žažar et al., 2022), the domain of private life and unpaid household labour remains under-researched. This paper investigates whether AI can genuinely alleviate women's mental workload or whether it merely reinforce existing gender inequalities in the socio-cultural context of Croatian society, within which traditional gender norms remain deeply embedded in everyday life (Galić, 2011; Klasnić, 2017; Klasnić & Degač, 2024).

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Perspectives on Technology and AI

Technologies do not emerge in a vacuum, but are rather are embedded within specific social structures that reflect and reproduce existing norms, power relations, and exclusions. Feminist theorists have long emphasized that technology is not a neutral tool, but an outcome of socio-political relations, as well as the cultural and institutional environments that form both its design and usage. Feminist critiques of technology have persistently called attention to the androcentric assumptions embedded in design processes and epistemologies of technological systems. Wajcman (2004) argues that technological artefacts are imbued with the values and social positions of persons creating them, often reproducing masculine norms of efficiency, control, and abstraction. This critique intersects with broader feminist standpoint epistemologies (Harding, 1991), pointing out to the lived experiences of marginalized users – such as employed mothers – to reveal the partiality of dominant technological narratives. In the context of AI, this means scrutinizing not only what problems technology is designed to solve, but whose problems are made visible in the first place.

Similarly, Noble (2018) highlights the modalities through which algorithmic systems perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes, coining the term "algorithms of oppression". These algorithmic biases are not accidental, but are rooted in broader societal hierarchies, thereby reinforcing rather than disrupting discrimination. Noble's work draws attention to a critical question for this study: Who designs AI tools, for what purpose, and from whose perspective?

In the domestic sphere artificial intelligence is increasingly presented as a potential solution to the burdens of household management. However, as Altman and Humberd (2023) argue, the promise of AI often remains superficial. Without genuine redistribution of household responsibilities, AI risks becoming a form of "technological cosmetic feminism", a veneer of innovation that masks persistent gender inequalities. Their work underscores the techno-optimistic perspective that AI might reduce the mental burden of managing household tasks, especially among women in the U.S. context. They distinguish between first-order effects: direct benefits such as time-saving for users of these tools, and second-order effects, where other household members may indirectly benefit. Nevertheless, these benefits do not necessarily lead to a more just distribution of labour.

The notion of mental labour is central to understanding how household responsibilities are gendered. As shown by Dean et al. (2022), Daminger (2019), and Ciciolla and Luthar (2019), mental labour includes the cognitive aspects of managing household life, such as planning, organizing, anticipating needs, as well as the emotional labour that accompanies these tasks. Mental labour is typically invisible, continuous, and socially undervalued. The recent qualitative study by Klasnić and Degač (2024) in Croatian households shows that mental labour is not only largely performed by women but also deeply embedded in traditional gender expectations and primary socialization. The emotional dimension, often tied to feelings of responsibility, worry, and exhaustion, is a core component of mental labour, yet frequently remains unacknowledged both in research and in domestic life (Hochschild & Machung 1989; Hochschild, 2003).

Different conceptualizations highlight various domains of mental labour. Daminger (2019) identifies four key cognitive processes: anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, and monitoring outcomes. Others, like Robertson et al. (2019), include long-term strategizing, meta-parenting, and managerial thinking. The study by Klasnić and Degač (2024) further differentiates between short-term and long-term mental tasks and introduces a distinction between mental labour as activity and mental load as its emotional consequence. Authors highlight that women often internalize mental labour as a normative obligation and source of maternal or household competence, even when it leads to overload and strain.

Although AI systems may assist with organisational components such as reminders, schedules, or lists, they neither address the fundamental issue of responsibility nor do they disrupt the symbolic and emotional structures that assign this responsibility to women. Feminist analyses conducted by Çırtlık and Coşar (2024) and Manasi et al. (2022) demonstrate that AI tools tend to reflect and reproduce gendered assumptions built into their design, data, and usage contexts. As such, they risk reinforcing rather than challenging unequal divisions of household labour.

Although there is a growing body of literature on the impact of AI and automation on employment and political systems (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020; Boyd & Holton, 2017; Dong & Guo, 2025; Schippers, 2020), and a very few sociological accounts about this general topic in Croatian context (Švarc, 2021; Žažar et al., 2022), the domain of private life and unpaid household labour remains under-researched. As Altman and Humberd (2023) note, the unequal burden of domestic responsibilities carried by women continues to be overlooked in mainstream technological discourse. The potential of AI to offer support in this domain is significant, but only if it is coupled with a critical understanding of its socio-cultural embeddedness. Vendramin (2024) argues for a feminist epistemology that recognizes the need for interdisciplinary and gender-aware approaches to AI development. Such an approach would challenge existing paradigms by ensuring that technological tools truly respond to the needs of diverse users, particularly those traditionally excluded from innovation processes. It also calls for greater attention to the social and relational dimensions of AI usage, particularly in the domain of unpaid domestic work.

Our theoretical framework integrates feminist critiques of technology and AI to explore how digital tools intersect with the gendered realities of household labour. It challenges techno-utopian narratives by highlighting the embeddedness of AI in existing structures of inequality and emphasizes the importance of inclusive, reflexive, and justice-oriented approaches to technological design and implementation.

Methodology

This study inquires whether AI tools can alleviate mental labour, perpetuate *status quo* or rather reinforce gender inequalities in household work instead, with a focus on the Croatian context. Two research questions guide the analysis: (1) Can AI tools reduce the mental burden on women or do they reinforce existing inequalities? (2) How socio-cultural conditions of Croatian society shape the usage and impact of these tools?

A three-phase exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. The first phase included five semi-structured interviews with Croatian AI experts (four women and one man), selected through purposive sampling. As this particular field is a male-dominated, women were intentionally prioritised to reflect underrepresented perspectives. Interviews were conducted from May 2024 to February 2025 with a focus on themes such as gender bias in AI design, exclusionary cultures, and barriers to inclusion.

In the second phase, an online survey was administered to a convenience sample of 369 employed mothers, collected via Facebook and WhatsApp in November and December 2024. The survey used a snowball sampling method, initiated through the researchers' networks and supported by influencers. The sample was largely urban, digitally literate, and socioeconomically stable. Most respondents were highly educated (89%), lived with a partner (90%), had at least one child under the age of 18 (85%), were from larger urban areas (79%) and reported average or above-average income (94%). The average respondent age was 43 years (SD = 7.1), with an average age of the youngest child being 9.5 years (SD = 7.4).

The final phase was a qualitative quasi-experiment conducted in January and February 2025. Five employed mothers used ChatGPT for two weeks to support their own household organisation. All participants were highly educated, living with a partner and had at least one child under the age of 16. They were purposely selected to represent varying levels of digital literacy and openness to technology. A preliminary questionnaire helped in ensuring diversity of a household task division, from traditional to egalitarian models. After a focus group session introducing ChatGPT, participants used this tool on a daily basis, and follow-up interviews grasped their experiences, perceived benefits, challenges, and reflections on mental labour redistribution.

Results

The presentation of findings begins with the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with AI experts, which constituted the first phase of the research. These interviews aimed to explore how those directly involved in the development and application of artificial intelligence technologies perceive gender, inclusion, and responsibility within their field. Particular attention to the questions how experts interpret existing gender disparities, what assumptions inform their views on women's participation in AI, and how they understand the social implications of the technologies they help shape, was paid. The subsequent analysis of collected data identified several recurring themes, which mirror both structural dynamics within the tech sector and broader cultural narratives about gender, technology, and progress.

Structural barriers for women were a recurring theme in the interviews with AI experts, highlighting how the development of AI technologies in Croatia, as elsewhere, takes place within closed, male-dominated professional networks that restrict access and marginalize women. These networks are exclusive both in terms of representation and in the ways knowledge is shared and decisions are made, often relying on informal and closed channels that tend to exclude women. One female interviewee articulated this clearly: "*Gender biases in technology and access to power and information often place women at a disadvantage.*" She emphasized that the core issue goes beyond numbers or representation, pointing instead to deeply rooted structural inequalities that restrict access to information, limit opportunities for advancement and generally participation in shaping technology. Another AI expert further specified: "*The problem lies in access to resources and information, especially through exclusive channels that are often inaccessible to women.*" This points to the fact that professional progress and inclusion in the AI sector are often not solely based on formal qualifications, but on access to informal resources (such as mentoring, project invitations, and insider knowledge) circulating within privileged male-dominated circles. In this context, women in AI sector encounter both individual challenges and systemic exclusion, rooted in the structural features of professional communities. These structural barriers limit women's visibility and influence while also shaping the broader direction of technological development in ways that often overlook women's specific needs and perspectives.

Biological determinism and the normalization of differences emerged as a concerning theme in the interviews, revealing how some AI experts justify gender inequalities by appealing to essentialist ideas about male and female nature. Such framing shifts the focus away from structural barriers and instead naturalizes inequality, presenting it as an inevitable outcome of biological differences rather than a product of social systems or institutional design. One female interviewee stated: "*Women simply have a different type of brain... They don't like risk – it's biology.*" Such claims reduce complex patterns of underrepresentation to supposedly innate characteristics, thereby undermining the need for institutional change or inclusive practices. Attributing women's lower participation in AI or tech-related fields to risk aversion or brain structure reinforces gender stereotypes and removes social responsibility from institutions and individuals. Another participant remarked: "*Women are more oriented toward relationships and people, while men are oriented toward technology.*" This binary logic reinforces traditional gender roles and helps sustain the idea that men are naturally better suited to technical domains, while women are inherently more attuned to caregiving or communicative roles. Such beliefs may seem benign or even complimentary, but in practice they justify existing imbalances in opportunity, participation, and recognition. By presenting gender inequalities as the result of biology rather than social inequality, these views contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in AI development. They shift responsibility away from systems of exclusion, ultimately hindering progress toward more inclusive and socially responsive technological design. This becomes particularly concerning when such views are expressed by AI experts themselves, individuals who directly influence the design, implementation and promotion of emerging technologies, since their assumptions shape the values embedded in technological systems and the priorities that guide future innovation.

The theme individualisation of barriers revealed a polarization in gender attitudes among experts. While some participants expressed gender-aware and constructivist views, acknowledging that inequalities are socially produced and require active intervention, others adopted more conservative or biologically essentialist positions. These views reinforced a narrative of personal responsibility and diminished the perceived legitimacy of structural critique. Some AI experts tended to overlook broader systemic inequalities and placed responsibility on women for their underrepresentation instead. Gender disparities were thus reframed as the result of individual failings, particularly women's supposed inability or unwillingness to "seize opportunities" that are assumed to be equally available to all. One interviewee captured this shift in responsibility while reflecting on the economic potential of AI and the concentration of wealth it already begins to generate. Speaking about how the AI sector is rapidly becoming one of the most lucrative fields, with the prospect of creating a new class of super-wealthy individuals, he said: *"There still won't be women. They'll say: 'we have lower pay, fewer rights...' But now it's your fault."* His quote illustrates how the discourse moves from acknowledging systemic gender inequality to blaming women for their own marginalization, suggesting that even in emerging and transformative sectors such as AI, where financial stakes are high and early participation may shape future influence, women are held accountable for their underrepresentation, despite enduring structural obstacles. By framing the absence of women in AI as a matter of missed personal opportunity, the expert dismisses the cumulative effects of exclusion and inequality, reinforcing the idea that the system is now fair and that any failure to thrive within it lies on individual women. This rhetorical move obscures institutional responsibility and makes it more difficult to justify targeted interventions or affirmative measures to address inequality in the AI sector. This is especially concerning given that such views are held by individuals in expert and often influential positions within the development of emerging technologies. When those leading innovations lack awareness of structural gender barriers, or even worse, deny their existence, there is obviously a severe risk of reinforcement of existing inequalities. Entrusting technological leadership to actors who individualize inequality and normalize exclusion undermines the potential for AI to serve as a socially transformative force. Instead, it risks entrenching historical injustices in new, algorithmic forms.

This logic ignores the structural and cultural barriers previously discussed, such as exclusion from information networks or biased workplace norms, and it also serves to delegitimize feminist critiques by suggesting that the era of inequality has passed and that any remaining inequalities are the result of individual failure rather than structural conditions. The result is a double burden for women: they remain disadvantaged, yet are expected to navigate those disadvantages without organisational and institutional support or recognition of the broader context.

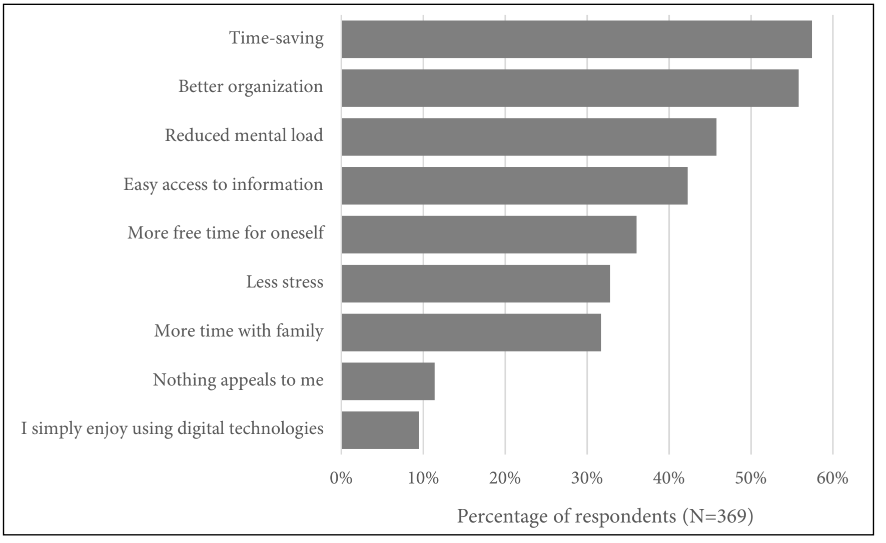
Scepticism toward technological optimism was expressed by several interviewees, who questioned the widely spread belief that AI will inevitably bring broad societal benefits. They emphasized that technological development is not inherently progressive or inclusive, but shaped by market logic which tends to prioritize profit over social needs, especially those of marginalized groups such as women. As one expert put it: *"Some think AI* *will solve everything – it won't. Technology has its limits."* She thus expresses a cautious stance toward over-reliance on technological solutions, particularly when these are celebrated without addressing the structural issues they are meant to alleviate. Her critique is not directed at technology per se, but at the uncritical optimism that surrounds it – a narrative that often blurs whose problems are being solved and whose are ignored.

Another expert was even more direct in naming the economic logic that drives technological priorities: *"Problems that can be monetized are solved, not real problems."* She pointed to a systemic misalignment between the incentives that guide AI development and the lived realities of many women. Needs related to care work, domestic labour, mental load, or everyday lack of time often fall outside the scope of profitable innovation, leaving them unaddressed despite their social significance. Without deliberate social and ethical frameworks, technological advances are unlikely to improve gender equity or redistribute power. On the contrary, they may reinforce existing inequalities if developed in ways that ignore or commodify users' needs. The scepticism voiced by interviewees thus serves as an important counterpoint to dominant narratives of AI as a universal solution, and as a reminder that justice-oriented design of technology must begin with the needs of those who are most often excluded.

The second phase of the research draws on an online survey with employed mothers, focusing on their everyday use of digital tools and perceptions of their usefulness in balancing work and family life. Building on insights from the expert interviews, the survey provides a broader view of how women engage with technology in the context of care, domestic responsibilities, and time management. The majority of employed mothers in our sample rated their digital skills as high or very high, with 74% expressing confidence in their digital competence. A strong openness to innovation was also evident, as 85% of respondents reported being moderately to extremely inclined to try new digital technologies. Furthermore, 64% indicated a moderate to very high willingness to use AI tools to support them in managing household and family responsibilities, suggesting a generally positive attitude toward the integration of such technologies in their everyday lives.

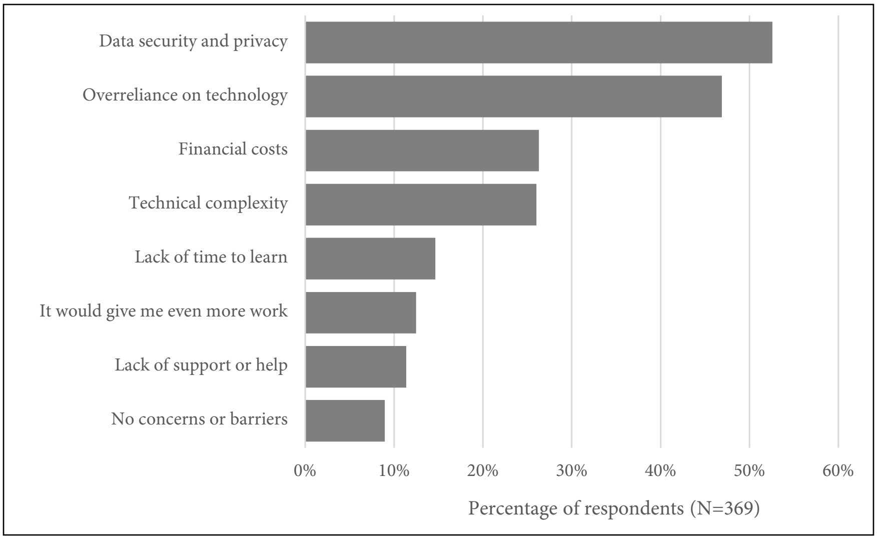
Since the survey focused specifically on tasks related to mental labour, respondents were asked about their current use of digital technologies in this domain. The three most common uses reported were tracking medical appointments (61.5%), planning travel (57.2%), and setting reminders for important upcoming events (52.3%). In terms of openness to adopting AI tools for similar purposes, participants expressed the highest readiness for using them to track household supply needs (58%), create shopping lists (54.2%), and plan travel (52.6%).

Figure 1. Perceived advantages of using AI tools in the private sphere



When asked about the perceived advantages of using AI tools in the private sphere (Figure 1), respondents most frequently cited time-saving (57.5%) and improved organization (55.8%) as key benefits. A substantial portion also mentioned reduced mental burden (45.8%) and easier access to relevant information (42.3%). Other notable responses included having more free time for oneself (36.0%), experiencing less stress (32.8%), and spending more time with family (31.7%).

Figure 2. Perceived barriers of using AI tools in the private sphere



In terms of perceived barriers (Figure 2), concerns about data security and privacy were most prominent, with 52.6% of participants identifying this as a major issue. Nearly half (46.9%) expressed worry about becoming overly reliant on technology. Additional obstacles included financial costs (26.3%), technical complexity (26.0%), and lack of time to learn how to use such tools (14.6%).

Among women in our sample, who were predominantly highly educated and digitally literate, the findings indicate that digital technologies currently offer some support in balancing work and family responsibilities, though the level of perceived benefit varies. While 29% of respondents stated that these tools help them a lot or very much, 35% found them moderately helpful, and 36% reported little to no support. A similar distribution appears in responses regarding the organization of household and family tasks: 29% reported that digital tools help quite a lot or very much, 28% said they help moderately, and 43% believed they help little or not at all.

When asked about the potential of AI tools specifically, employed mothers expressed a cautious optimism. While 29% believed AI could help significantly or very much in organizing household and family responsibilities, 38% thought it could help moderately, and 25% were sceptical, indicating it would help little or not at all. Despite these reservations, a majority (68%) either mostly or completely agreed that AI tools are likely to become an inevitable and integral part of digital technology use in the near future.

A notable finding is the significant correlation between perceived helpfulness of digital tools in managing family tasks and satisfaction with work-life balance. Women who found these tools useful reported slightly higher satisfaction ($r = 0.156$; $p = 0.003$), suggesting even limited tech support may enhance well-being.

To further explore the use of AI in everyday household management, a qualitative quasi-experiment was conducted focusing specifically on the use of ChatGPT. This particular AI tool was selected based on survey findings, which showed that although most surveyed employed mothers reported limited engagement with AI, ChatGPT was the only tool mentioned by name suggesting it was the most recognizable and accessible form of AI. From the interviews conducted after the two-week trial, two key themes were selected for this analysis because they most clearly reflect the tensions between technological potential and the persistence of traditional gendered dynamics that this study seeks to unpack.

AI as a tool for knowledge redistribution emerged as a recurring theme in participants' reflections, highlighting both the potential and the limitations of integrating AI into everyday household practices. Several mothers described how AI tools, such as ChatGPT, made practical knowledge more accessible, not only to themselves but also to their partners. This shift reduced dependence on the traditional "knower" in the household, who is often the woman, by offering quick access to information about tasks that were previously gendered in their allocation. One participant noted humorously: *"Men now have access to some things they used to ask us about, like how to start the washing machine* (laughs)... *We have access to things like how to fix the toaster..."*. Her remark highlights how AI can neutralize informal knowledge asymmetries in the household, potentially encouraging more shared responsibility. Another added: *"A lot of the things we as women know could maybe become more accessible this way."* Here, AI is framed as a tool for making often invisible or embodied "women's knowledge", ranging from routines to practical hacks more broadly available. However, participants were cautious about overstating the impact of this shift. While AI may facilitate access to knowledge, it does not guarantee behavioural change or actual redistribution of tasks. Many women used AI primarily to streamline their own responsibilities rather than to initiate a renegotiation of roles with their partners. In this sense, AI served more as a replicating mechanism than a transformative force, helping them manage the load rather than challenge its distribution.

Scepticism toward deeper transformation of gender relations characterized all of participants' reflections on their two-week use of ChatGPT in the household. While mothers generally expressed high satisfaction with the tool, frequently noting that it saved them time and eased their daily planning, this increased efficiency did not translate into a redistribution of mental labour within the household. The responsibility for organizing and managing family life remained largely in their hands. Although participants recognized the potential of AI tools, they were equally aware of the persistence of traditional gender roles, which technology alone cannot undo. As one participant put it: *"Nothing has changed. I think it will be a long time before a man stops being a man, and a woman stops being a woman."* Her quote captures a broader sense of resignation or realism: while AI may assist with tasks, it does not automatically lead to changes in the social norms, expectations, or power dynamics that shape who performs and manages domestic work.

Discussion

This study examined whether AI tools can reduce the burden of mental labour for women or instead reinforce existing inequalities, and how the socio-cultural context in Croatia shapes the adoption and effects of these technologies, particularly for highly educated employed mothers.

Findings from the expert interviews pointed to a technological field shaped by exclusionary practices and gender-blind assumptions. Development processes in AI are embedded within male-dominated networks, with little attention given to women's needs or care-related applications. Some experts adopted biologically essentialist views that normalize inequality, while others individualised structural problems by blaming women for not advancing. Overall, there was limited recognition of how technology might reinforce or transform social hierarchies. The survey with employed mothers showed that participants primarily used digital tools for routine organizational tasks like planning appointments, tracking shopping needs, or managing reminders. Many expressed openness to using AI for household management, and those already doing so reported slightly higher satisfaction with their work-life balance. However, the perceived impact remained low or in best case moderate. Most mothers saw AI as a way to better handle their own responsibilities rather than to allocate them across household members. The quasi-experiment with ChatGPT further confirmed this. While participants appreciated the tool's efficiency and found it useful for time-saving and task coordination, they did not report any redistribution of cognitive labour within their households. Two themes stood out: first, AI offered a mechanism for knowledge redistribution, giving both women and men access to information traditionally gendered, but this rarely led to deeper change. Second, participants were sceptical about AI's ability to transform entrenched gender norms, noting that real change would require broader cultural and institutional support.

In response to this study's first research question: *Can AI tools reduce the burden of mental labour for women, or do they reinforce existing inequalities?*, findings suggest that AI can ease the mental workload of employed mothers, especially through tools that support planning, scheduling, and daily organization. Many women were open to using such tools, and those already doing so reported slight improvements in work-life balance. AI provides practical, individual relief. However, redistribution of responsibility remains rare. Household roles and task division largely remained unchanged, indicating that AI supports coping rather than transformation. Without broader shifts in norms and expectations, AI risks reinforcing existing gender divisions by making women's invisible work more manageable, but still solely theirs.

In response to our second research question: *How socio-economic and cultural contexts in Croatia shape the adoption and impact of AI tools, particularly for employed mothers?* our data show that digitally literate and tech-open mothers primarily used AI as personal support. Broader systemic effects were limited by persistent traditional gender norms that still assign caregiving and household tasks to women. As a result, AI served to streamline individual effort rather than renegotiate household dynamics. Expert interviews confirmed this, revealing that AI design and implementation rarely reflect gender-sensitive or care-oriented perspectives. These findings echo Wajcman's (2004) argument that technology often reinforces rather than disrupts existing hierarchies. Despite participants' openness, AI functioned mainly as a coping mechanism for the double burden of paid and unpaid work, supporting feminist critiques that without structural change, individual-level technological adaptation risks concealing rather than addressing inequality.

Taken together, our findings reveal a critical disconnect between technological innovation and the social realities of users. AI tools show potential to ease cognitive burdens, but their transformative impact is constrained by the structural and cultural conditions in which they are embedded. To move beyond mere efficiency gains, it is essential to promote inclusive and participatory design processes that take seriously the lived experiences and needs of women, especially those managing multiple roles in both paid and unpaid domains. Without such shifts, AI will likely continue to optimize inequality rather than disrupt it.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the survey was conducted on a convenience sample of employed mothers in Croatia who were predominantly highly educated and reported average or above-average material status. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of mothers in Croatia, particularly those with lower levels of education, lower income, or those living in rural areas. Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample, incorporating women from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographic regions, in order to better capture the variety of experiences and needs related to digital and AI tool usage in the household.

Second, the quasi-experimental component involving the use of ChatGPT was relatively short in duration, spanning only two weeks. This limited time frame may have been insufficient to allow for meaningful changes in domestic routines or the redistribution of mental labour. Moreover, male partners were not actively involved in this part of the study, which likely constrained the potential for shifts in household dynamics. To address this, future experimental research should be designed to include both partners in a household and be conducted over a longer period of time, enabling more sustained engagement with AI tools and a more accurate assessment of their capacity to influence gendered divisions of labour.

In addition, the study focused primarily on self-reported perceptions and attitudes, which, while valuable, may not fully capture the complexity of actual behavioural changes. Longitudinal and ethnographic approaches could provide deeper insight into how AI tools are adopted and negotiated within everyday family life. Finally, as technological developments continue to evolve rapidly, future research should remain attentive to changes in both the design of AI tools and their sociotechnical context, particularly with regard to privacy, data ethics, and user agency.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence has the capacity to support women in managing mental labour, offering practical tools for scheduling, planning, and household logistics. However, without corresponding changes in social norms and institutional practices, these tools function primarily as individual coping mechanisms rather than catalysts for structural change. The persistence of traditional gender roles, combined with the exclusion of women from technology development, limits the broader emancipatory potential of AI. In this study, AI was not experienced as a transformative force, but rather as a useful yet limited aid, more a support mechanism than a driver of meaningful change. Without wider societal shifts, including policy interventions and cultural redefinitions of care and responsibility, participants expressed little confidence that AI alone could significantly disrupt gendered divisions of labour.

To move beyond superficial solutions, it is essential to integrate feminist principles into AI design and policy. This includes promoting inclusive participation, ensuring algorithmic transparency, critically examining market-driven logic, and advocating for the redistribution of domestic labour. AI can contribute to gender equality, but only as part of a comprehensive strategy that addresses both technological and societal dimensions of inequality. If artificial intelligence is to contribute meaningfully to gender justice, it must move beyond optimizing women's adaptability and begin to transform the conditions that make such adaptation necessary.

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Dunja Poleti Ćosić[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

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MIGRATION OUT OF NECESSITY OR SUFFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY OF CIRCULAR MIGRANTS FROM SERBIA[2]

Abstract: The concept of circular migration, much like the broader concept of migration itself, is highly diverse in its content and lacks a single, universally accepted definition. Scholars emphasize various facets, often linking it to temporary or return migration. While circular migration is not new notion in academic discussions, it has recently gained attention among policymakers, who now see it as a long-awaited solution to demographic and economic challenges. In political and public discourse, circular migration is often framed through the developmental lens of a "triple-win" model: individuals gain personal and professional opportunities; developed countries address labor shortages; and developing nations benefit from exporting surplus labor and strengthening global competitiveness through the return of citizens. This promising narrative has also reached Serbia. In this context, we explored key questions: what types of migration practices can be found among circular migrants, and do they engage in circular migration out of economic necessity or sufficiency? In order to elaborate on these questions, qualitative research was conducted with circular migrants originating from three medium-sized Serbian cities – Čačak, Užice, and Smederevo – as part of the Population Development Facility Programme, a joint initiative by the UNDP and the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography. This study aims to shed light on the motivation behind their decisions to leave and return, as well as on their circular migration practices. The concept of circular migration employed in this research is defined by two key dimensions: (1) engagement in temporary or permanent employment abroad, and (2) regular returns to Serbia for periods of residence. The research results indicate that, while the benefits of circular migration for participants are undisputed, the group is polarized in terms of their motives,

1 dunja.poleti@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3179-6147

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patterns of movement, and practices abroad. Moreover, many circular migrants face various forms of exploitation, which often go unnoticed by proponents of the triple-win narrative.

Keywords: Circular Migrants, Triple-win, Dual Labor Market, Serbia

Migracije iz nužne ili dovoljnosti: Studija slučaja cirkularnih migranata iz Srbije

Apstrakt: Koncept cirkularnih migracija, uostalom kao i širi pojam migracija, sadržinski je vrlo šarenolik i ne poznaje jedinstvenu definiciju. Autori u prvi plan stavljaju različite aspekte ovog fenomena, dovodeći ga u različite odnose sa privremenim ili povratnim migracijama. Iako cirkularne migracije nisu nov pojam u akademskim krugovima, relativno je novo oduševljenje donosioca odluka njime, koji su ga proglasili za dugo traženo rešenje demografskih i ekonomskih izazova. Naime, u političkom i javnom diskursu se na cirkularne migracije gleda kroz razvojnu perspektivu „trostruke dobiti“: pojedincima se daje mogućnost da se usavršavaju na ličnom i profesionalnom planu, u razvijenim zemljama popunjavaju se deficitarna radna mesta i zadovoljava potreba za radnom snagom, dok zemlje u razvoju mogu da izvezu višak radne snage, ali i da kroz povratak svojih građana jačaju konkurentske prednosti na globalnom tržištu. Narativ koji odiše optimizmom nije zaobišao ni Srbiju. Stoga je bilo važno odgovoriti na istraživačka pitanja: koje vrste migracionih praksi se mogu naći među cirkularnim migrantima i da li se oni upuštaju u cirkularne migracije iz ekonomske nužnosti ili dovoljnosti. Da bismo istražili ova pitanja, sprovedeno je kvalitativno istraživanje sa cirkularnim migrantima iz tri grada srednje veličine – Čačka, Užica i Smedereva – kao deo projekta Fonda za razvoj stanovništva, zajedničke inicijative UNDP-a i Ministarstva za brigu o porodici i demografiju. Koncept cirkularnih migracija koji se koristi u ovom istraživanju definisan je preko dve ključne dimenzije oslanja na ove dve važne dimenzije: (1) privremeno ili stalno radno angažovanje u inostranstvu i (2) redovni povraci u Srbiju gde se živi određeno vreme. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na to da, iako su koristi cirkularne migracije za učesnike neosporne, grupa je polarizovana u pogledu svojih motiva, obrazaca kretanja i praksi u inostranstvu. Štaviše, mnogi cirkularni migranti se suočavaju sa različitim oblicima eksploatacije, što često prolazi nezapaženo od strane zagovornika narativa o trostrukoj dobitku.

Ključne reči: cirkularni migranti, trostruka dobitka, dualno tržište rada, Srbija

Introduction

Population movement is recognized as one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary society. Therefore, the beginning of the XXI century is often referred to as the “age of migration” (Castles & Miller, 2009).

Circular migration, the specific form of migration which is the main interest of this paper, is not a new concept in academic circles. As Skeldon demonstrates, there is extensive research dating back many years on circular internal migration, which is defined as a short-term back-and-forth movement between villages and cities (Skeldon, 2012). However, taking into account that the entire spectrum of mobility in mainstream science has been reduced to international migration, movements that did not involve permanent migration across national borders received little attention. By recognizing solely "permanent" migrants as being the "true" ones, the dominant migration paradigm effectively extracted mobility from the migration itself (Dawson, 2016; Hui, 2016) and relegated circular migrants to the periphery of important research topics[3].

Several concurrent developments have contributed to the growing visibility and significance of circular migration. On the one hand, technological revolutions, transportation improvements, globalization, and innovations in communication have undoubtedly led to increased mobility and changes in movement patterns. On the other hand, the rise of transnational approaches and the emergence of the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2016) have shifted academic attention toward previously marginalized, non-standard forms of movement. Last but not least, circular migration was "discovered" and promoted by public policymakers who found in it a long-sought solution to the demographic and economic challenges. Rather than simply being the age of migration, the contemporary era might be more aptly characterized as an era of *super*– (Sirkeci & Yüceşahin, 2020, p. 328) or even *hyper*-mobility (Salazar, 2019, p. 18).

Circular migration is examined in the paper in the specific context of Serbia, a traditional emigration country whose proximity to the developed European region facilitates circular movements. The data were obtained from a qualitative study conducted with circular migrants coming from three medium-sized cities in Serbia: Čačak, Užice, and Smederevo. It was initiated and funded by the UNDP and the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography through the Population Development Facility Programme. This research aims to understand the particular characteristics of the local environment that encourage people to decide to engage in circular migration. Setting aside the role of the local community in deciding on mobility for further extensive analysis, my primary focus here will be twofold: to capture the variety of circular migration practices and to examine whether these movements are motivated by economic necessity or by opportunity.

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3 For a more detailed analysis on relationship between migration and mobility, see Poleti Ćosić, 2023.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of circular migration, much like the broader concept of migration itself, is highly diverse in its content and lacks a single definition. Scholars emphasize various facets of circular migration, often confusing it with temporary or return migration (Skeldon, 2012). Although the terms overlap, they are not identical, which makes interchangeable use problematic. According to The European Migration Network, temporary migration is limited to a single back-and-forth movement, with a time-bound stay in the country of destination (UNECE, 2016, p. 3). Circular migration is regarded as a type of temporary migration in which the temporary stay in a destination country is repeated. Similarly, circular migration also overlaps with the concept of return migration, as returning is a significant part of the circular movement, with the key difference being that return migrants have come back to stay, whereas circular migrants have returned in order to leave again. Hence, temporary and return migrations are understood more linearly and statically when compared to circular migration, whose essence lies in the mobility of the actors involved.

Triandafyllidou (2013a) in her study identifies four key dimensions in defining circular migration. The first being space. It is undeniable that circular movements also exist within the same country. However, most studies focus on international movements. Therefore, circular migration involves crossing international borders. The second dimension is time. As previously stated, circular migration involves stays of a limited duration. It is not about movements that span several years or a decade. The third dimension, the *differentia specifica* of circular migrations, is repetition. For mobility to qualify as circular mobility, the immigrant must have moved at least twice back and forth between the country of origin and the country of destination (Vertovec, 2007). And the last, equally important dimension, is scope. Circular migration is not limited to employment alone; rather, it encompasses a broader range of economic activities, including trade, investment, financial survival, higher earnings, socio-economic mobility, and improved working conditions. People who move to visit relatives or for tourist purposes are not circular migrants. So, for Triandafyllidou, "Circular migration is defined (...) as international, temporary, repeated migration for economic reasons" (Triandafyllidou, 2013a, p.13).

Within the normative framework, two additional dimensions merit closer examination. The first dimension concerns legality. According to the European Migration Network, circular migration is defined as "a repetition of legal migrations by the same person between two or more countries" (UNECE, 2016, p. 3). This dimension can be misleading particularly when regarded in the context of Serbia. A large number of circular departures abroad are neither fully legal nor entirely illegal but fall somewhere in between. For this reason, Kubal introduced the concept of semi-legality into migration studies (Kubal, 2013). This concept serves to highlight various "in-between" statuses and to avoid resorting to the notion of illegality whenever ambiguities arise regarding someone's legal status. Semi-legality can be understood as a set of interactions between migrants and the law, showing that legal status is not a binary (legal–illegal) category, but is rather constituted as a continuum. Viewing legal status through the lens of semi-legality contributes to the de-stigmatization of circular migrants, who travel legally but undertake informal and unregistered economic activities. It also offers valuable insights into the motives and decision-making processes of individuals from countries that maintain special migration arrangements with traditional immigration regions.

The last dimension emphasized by international institutions, bodies, and agencies is the level of regulation. A general distinction is made between two forms: one characterized by organized and regulated movement – such as labour migration governed by bilateral agreements between specific countries, posting of workers or formally organized academic programs – and the other understood as "spontaneous", naturally occurring, and largely unregulated cross-border mobility. European Commission documents (Triandafyllidou, 2013a, p. 5) conceptualize circular migration primarily as a form of organized mobility scheme, rather than as a series of individual decisions. If the focus were placed exclusively on regulated movements, the perspective would once again be drastically narrowed, and the numerous independent movements of workers would be overlooked.

By relying on the aforementioned dimensions of legality and regulation, both political and public discourses commonly frame circular migration through the developmental lens of a triple-win perspective. This perspective emphasizes that circular migration not only provides individuals with opportunities for personal and professional advancement but also benefits both countries of origin and destination. Developed countries, thanks to circular migrants, can fill labour shortages and meet their workforce demands, while developing countries can export surplus labour and, through the return of their citizens, strengthen their competitive advantages in the global market.

However, such a developmental approach tends to overlook the important structural factors – most notably, the segmentation of the labour market. As the theory of the dual labour market suggests in highly developed economies, the labour market is divided into two segments: the primary, consisting of secure, well-paid, and high-status jobs with advancement potential, and the secondary, comprising insecure, low-paid, and low-prestige positions (Piore, 1979). Since the local population often avoids "dirty, dangerous, and difficult" jobs, employers turn to migrant labour, thereby initiating and sustaining migratory flows (Massey, 2001; 2003). A significant number of migrants are employed in low-skilled, low-paid jobs such as farm labour, construction, cleaning, or the care sector. These positions typically offer no opportunities for skill development, training, or even basic language learning in the destination country. By contrast, they face de-skilling and de-professionalization, accepting jobs below their qualifications to gain access to employment (Triandafyllidou, 2013b). Sometimes, circular migration is not a matter of desirable lifestyle, but a way to combat economic deprivation.

By synthesizing the descriptive categories used in literature, two key characteristics of circular migration emerge. The first being bilocality – the existence of two parallel centres of life activities between which migrants alternate (Hugo, 2009; Skeldon, 2010). The second is heterogeneity – circular migrants are not a uniform group, but vary significantly in terms of their socioeconomic background, migration motives, legal statuses, and employment arrangements (Triandafyllidou, 2013a). Reducing its complexity to a single category fails to capture the full scope of the phenomenon.

Contextual Framework

Serbia's geopolitical reality is shaped by its position of a semi-peripheral country with a moderate level of development, situated on the outskirts of one of the world's most developed regions, which actively promotes emigration from the country (Bobić & Babović, 2013). Migration trends are further bolstered by visa facilitation and readmission agreements that were signed in 2007 between the EU and Serbia, which simplified visa procedures for certain categories of citizens. However, a major turning point took place in 2009, when visa liberalization allowed Serbian citizens to travel freely within the Schengen area without requiring a visa for short stays (Arandarenko, 2021). For a substantial number of Serbian citizens, traveling to the EU is legal, while their economic activities are informal and not correctly registered[4] (Meszmann, 2022).

4 In his report based on primary data, Meszmann (2022) demonstrated how various agencies, including registered, informal, and even illegal intermediaries, send workers from Serbia to the EU on a seasonal basis. These types of workers typically work outside the regulations of the country in which they are located, making this type of migration highly vulnerable to exploitation and challenging to track.

Commonly cited structural push factors of emigration, such as the unemployment rate or GDP *per capita*, are not the most decisive in explaining outward migration from Serbia. Between 2015 and 2019 – a period marked by economic growth and rising employment in Serbia – migration flows to the European Union increased significantly. This trend suggests that emigration is not primarily driven by absolute poverty or unemployment, but rather by a pronounced duality and structural limitations in the Serbian labour market that cause a shortage of quality jobs, and a high income inequality. A significant portion of the Serbian workforce remains confined to insecure, informal, or poorly paid jobs that offer limited or no opportunities for career advancement. These conditions contribute more strongly to emigration readiness than the general unemployment rate and the individuals' employment status (Arandarenko, 2021, p. 19). Another significant structural factor is the persistent and substantial wage gap between Serbia and EU countries. This disparity had only widened as a result of wage stagnation linked to fiscal consolidation policies implemented during the same period. These combined push factors have contributed to a steady outflow of workers, particularly those with medium skill levels. In fact, in recent years, the emigration of medium-skilled workers has increased relative to other skill groups, resulting in a skill structure among Serbian migrants to the EU that remains similar to, or in some cases even less favorable than, that of the resident population (Arandarenko & Aleksić, 2024).

In addition to the aforementioned structural characteristics, the demographic challenges that Serbia is struggling with are also pivotal in this matter. It is one of the countries with the highest depopulation rate in the world, which occurs as a result of the low fertility rate, typical for industrialized countries, combined with a high emigration rate, which is often seen in low– and middle-income countries (Lutz & Gailey, 2022). Countries with a long tradition of emigration have a large diaspora and strong migrant networks that stimulate and facilitate all subsequent movements. According to the United Nations estimates from 2019, the total number of Serbian emigrants was about 950,000 at that point, which represents about 14% of the country's resident population (Arandarenko, 2022, p. 100). Arandarenko's analysis further reveals that the overall picture of a sudden increase in the gross outflow of migrants from Serbia to the European Union in the mentioned period from 2015 to 2019 cannot be understood if one does not take into account the fact that in the same period, stocks[5]

5 The number of migrants from Serbia to the EU.

grew slowly, while flows[6] more than doubled (Arandarenko, 2022). Therefore, net emigration from Serbia is significantly lower than is usually reported in the media due to the increasing share of short-term, temporary, and circular migrations, even to traditional countries of emigration, such as Germany (Nikitović, 2022).

Contrary to the media narratives on migration that convey pessimistic forecasts about the alarming level of permanent emigration of highly educated citizens, which, therefore, should be stopped, the political discourse is saturated with ideas from migration governance advocates that promote circular migration. Since circular migration is highly valued from a developmental perspective, migration management is seen as a strategy that can positively influence economic and demographic outcomes, offering far better results than simply preventing emigration. "Circular migration represents an innovative response to the challenges of demographic decline and population outflow in Serbia. This migration model allows the country to harness the benefits of migration, transfer knowledge and capital from abroad, and thereby contribute to its economic development." (Milinković, 2023, p. 1). Although Serbia's normative framework lacks a clear definition of circular migration (FREN, 2023), it is evident that, when public policymakers do distinguish it from return migration, they primarily associate the former with the regulated mobility of highly educated individuals[7]. The findings presented in the following pages will demonstrate why such a view of reality is unfruitful from a heuristic perspective.

Research Method

The study aims to examine the motivation of circular migrants to leave their country and local communities, while also continually returning to them. Its main focus is on understanding the characteristics of the local environment that both "push" individuals into circular movement, and simultaneously draw them back.

Circular migrants are defined as individuals who work abroad, either temporarily or on a more permanent basis but maintain strong ties with

6 The inflow of migrants from Serbia to the EU in one year.

7 For example, The Strategy for the Management of Economic Migration 2021–2027, while acknowledging the importance of circular migrants, fails to define the term. In the document, circular migration is conflated with return migration, and all proposed measures and activities are inappropriately tailored to the latter (FREN, 2023).

their local communities in Serbia. The concept is operationalized through two dimensions:

1. Individuals who work abroad temporarily or seasonally and regularly return to Serbia, where they reside for several weeks or months, and
2. Whose most recent departure abroad occurred no more than one year ago.

To ensure diversity within the group, no limitations were imposed regarding the type of work they performed or the legal status of their stay abroad. Such an approach allows for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon that holds particular relevance for the Republic of Serbia.

In this paper, my focus is twofold: (1) to map out the range and diversity of circular migration practices, and (2) to explore whether these movements are driven by economic sufficiency or economic necessity. Given the qualitative nature and limited scope of the research, it is essential to note that the aim is not to provide an exhaustive overview of all types of circular movements or to comprehend the phenomenon in its entirety. However, thanks to a broadly defined concept, this approach enables the inclusion of groups that are very difficult to follow statistically, as semi-legal circular migrants. By moving beyond administrative and bureaucratic categories – often uncritically taken as relevant frameworks even in academic studies – this approach enables a deeper understanding of the variety of circular migration practices. Despite its limitations, a notable contribution of qualitative methodology to migration studies is that it allows for the exploration of migration in its processual nature, highlights the agency of actors at all stages of migration, and facilitates a deeper understanding of the interplay between structure and actors (Poleti Ćosić, 2022).

Data were collected during the fall and winter of 2023/24 through semi-structured interviews in three medium-sized cities in Serbia: Čačak, Užice, and Smederevo. The final sample included 24 circular migrants, of whom 14 were men and 10 were women. Since other socio-demographic data, such as age or level of education, were not collected systematically but appear sporadically in the transcripts, a more detailed description of the sample cannot be provided.

The conducted interviews were transcribed, which was followed by a descriptive thematic analysis. Data were processed using MAXQDA software for qualitative analysis. A hybrid model was employed in the study, which involved supplementing pre-prepared thematic schemes with the ones derived from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Migration patterns

The resulting sample consists of a very heterogeneous group whose members differ in terms of their migration practices, which are defined here as specific patterns of departure and stay abroad.

In most cases, our interviewees undertook their migratory movements between Serbia and EU countries or between Serbia and the United States. Among the mentioned European destinations are the following: Croatia, Germany, Switzerland, Montenegro, Hungary, Slovenia, France, Norway, as well as Russia and Turkey. Except for one participant, who spends most of his time in Norway due to having legal employment there and returns to Serbia whenever possible, all other interviewees have their lives situated in Serbia and go abroad in order to work, when needed.

Most of the surveyed migrants had previous migration experience, which is a solid proof of their tendency towards mobility. It is also highly indicative that migration was initiated either through migration networks – friends or acquaintances who provided initial information and support in the early stages – or through actors belonging to the migration industry, such as various intermediary agencies[8].

In terms of the legality of their statuses, the interviewees were divided into two groups: the ones with a legal migration status, and those living abroad in a semi-legality. The group with valid work permits, in addition to individuals in scarce occupations, includes respondents employed in the United States, all of whom are from Čačak and gained their first work experience there through the Work and Travel program. This group also includes migrants working on ships or oil platforms, for example in Ghana, who are not tied to any specific local context and do not participate in local labor markets. They belong to the group of rotational workers, as they have contracts that are repeated in regular, cyclical intervals. Simultaneously, they operate within transnational migration spaces. Last but not least, the group also encompasses individuals holding Croatian passports (ex-refugees)[9].

8 The migration industry is a concept that includes various actors and organizations (e.g. migrant recruitment and employment agency, lawyers, agents, smugglers and other intermediaries) through which migration is facilitated, organized and accelerated (Castles & Miller, 2009).

9 Citizens of Serbia often hold Croatian passports because they were born in the Republic of Croatia, which was part of the former Yugoslavia. Their life trajectories usually include experiences of being refugees, a direct result of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The second group consists of interviewees who choose EU countries as their destinations, taking advantage of the possibility to enter legally but work without a working permit. They limit their stays to 90 days – the duration of a legal tourist visa. Interestingly, some of them are fully aware that they are breaking the law, and as a result, they feel extremely uncomfortable while abroad. Their fear of local authorities is so grave that some women imposed strict limits on their movements, striving to remain invisible and avoid attracting any attention:

> "And in Germany, literally, that's undeclared work. And simply, by 8 p.m., you have to be at home. That means no walks, no going out, because it's a risk – above all for them – since it's strictly punishable there." (a female migrant from Čačak)

On the other hand, some interviewees are not even aware that they are violating any regulations:

> "The last time I was in Slovenia (...) in the theatre (...) I stayed for three months. I usually stay for three months; when I go, I go every six months. I stay that long because that's all we're allowed." (a female migrant from Čačak)

Their strong belief that, if they respect the 90-day limit, any real barriers to economic activity abroad is removed, helps them feel comfortable with their circular migration practices.

According to their own testimony, the circular migrants in the sample are employed in three categories of occupations:

1. Low– and medium-skilled manual occupations. This group includes men working in transportation (truck drivers), the hospitality sector (waiters and cooks), service industries (such as pool maintenance), and construction, as well as women employed in care and domestic work (including elder care, childcare, cleaning, and household cooking). This is also the largest group in the sample.
2. Mid-level vocational occupations. This group consists of medical technicians and tourism workers (such as tour operators).
3. High-skilled professional occupations. The third group encompasses professionals from the energy sector, creative industries (theater and film professionals), management and organizational professionals (a communication skills coach), and sports and recreation professionals (a basketball coach).

The level of qualification required for these jobs does not always align with the actual educational level of the migrants. Some individuals have experienced deprofessionalization while working abroad – for example, our sample includes a female technologist working in the informal care sector.

It is also important to note that these three occupational categories, based on required qualifications, do not always align with categories of legal status. Although individuals employed in lower-skilled positions on the secondary labor market are more frequently engaged in informal work, higher qualifications do not necessarily guarantee formal employment contracts or legal residency – some respondents working in the primary labor market also lack proper documentation or secure legal status. Although authors usually create specific classifications by combining the following two categories: the legality of status and the level of skills of the migrants involved (Triandafyllidou, 2013b), the resulting classification appears unhelpful in our context.

Motivation

Undeniably, the primary motive for engaging in circular migration is financial gain. In two-thirds of the interviews, respondents cited financial reasons as the primary driving force behind their decisions. Only four interviewed migrants emphasized that money played absolutely no role in their decision-making – and all four were young at the time when they left the country for the first time.

The sample is divided into two polarized groups, distinguished by the degree of necessity that prompted their migration to take place. On one side are the respondents for whom financial benefits were significant but who were not driven by existential insecurity – instead, they aimed to diversify their sources of income:

> "At the time, I was buying an apartment and needed money for the down payment – that was my main motivation. My financial situation did improve, then it got depleted." (a male migrant from Čačak)
>
> "The difference in salary was huge. But I didn't go there just to earn some money or to save up. I went there to be able to live a normal life, to work on myself, and to make sure that when I returned, I could support my daughter's education... So that was, let's say, the main goal. But I didn't go there just to work and sleep – I went there to live." (a female migrant from Čačak)

On the other side are those persons who sought work abroad out of financial necessity, in order to support their basic survival:

> "Well, to be honest, I was really deep in debt. My mother and father passed away too early. I was left all alone with a child. At the time, he was in his first year of high school. So, as a single mother, I had to provide everything... I just couldn't manage. I was working in a factory, then I quit because they didn't acknowledge my injury report. I told them they were thieves. My boss told me I was lying, that nothing had happened to me. But I had wit-

> nesses – a weight fell on my head from the scaffolding. From three meters high, three kilos. A weight. So then I quit and decided to sue them. During the trial, I was supported by the Center for Social Work. But what can you do with that... I was getting nine thousand dinars, and what can I say, I had to leave. Really, I was sinking deeper and deeper into debt. I even experienced – I'm not ashamed to say it – having the electricity turned off." (a female migrant from Smederevo)

Other characteristics of the local labor market are also crucial for understanding decisions related to circular migration. These include hiring based on informal connections or political affiliation, low wages, exploitation by employers, unpaid overtime work, inhumane working conditions, delayed payments, and the inability to take sick leave. For the respondents, going abroad is, therefore, not just a way to find employment. It is also a means of escaping the humiliation they experience on a daily basis in the domestic labor market. As a result, migration is often viewed as a means to regain dignity.

Although working abroad contributed to the improvement of their material situation, and for some highly educated respondents career progress and skill improvement were possible and available to them, testimonies about labor exploitation abroad were not rare. Migrants participating in formal work arrangements complained about working in less favorable (night) shifts, which then led to the psychological destabilization of the interviewee. Migrants employed in the informal sector shared experiences in which their employers refused to pay them the agreed-upon wages or provide the promised return tickets so that they could go home. The work arrangements that most often succumb to exploitation are live-in positions, where women move into and reside with the families for whom they informally provide care work:

> "Well, it's a good feeling when someone trusts you, and they were planning to hire me on a regular basis – every three months. But... well... there are certain things I can't accept. I didn't go because I was starving. I went because I have to help my grandsons who are at university – two of them. Just imagine, for dinner, they ask me if I want one roll or two. A plain roll – just bread. I don't eat dry bread here, so why would I eat it there?" (a female migrant from Čačak)

Moreover, the political situation in the country and systemic shortcomings are also critical "push" factors for circular migration. Although two-thirds of interviewees denied that systemic circumstances influenced their decision to emigrate when asked directly, their narratives reveal that numerous political and social issues indeed have shaped their choices. They cite systemic corruption, political clientelism, nepotism, the unpredictability of the system, insecurity, and a lack of personal freedom as being important reasons for seeking employment abroad.

When considering circular migration, it is essential to understand that the motives for leaving and the motives for returning represent a duality—two sides of the same coin. The factors that encourage respondents to remain engaged in circular movements are predominantly tied to emotional and cultural connections with local communities and a sense of belonging. Family, friendships, known lifestyles, and informal support networks play a crucial role in keeping people rooted in Serbia. Additionally, the challenges of adaptation deter migrants from considering permanent settlements abroad. Many describe persistent culture shock and an inability to adjust to values such as gender equality, sexual freedoms, multiculturalism, rigid bureaucratic systems, or work-life imbalance. Younger migrants tend to adapt more easily, especially when they are exposed to the language and culture in a working environment. In contrast, migrants engaged in informal employment – especially women in the care sector working within Serbian-speaking households – often experience profound struggles:

> "I don't know the language. I never leave the house except to go to the store or take out the trash. Someone helps me with the shopping – I barely manage. I spend most of my time with the older woman I care for, and I rarely go out. I live with her all the time (...) I go there only because I have to." (Female migrant from Čačak)

While it is true that some migrants from Serbia engage in circular migration to pursue upskilling and professional development, it is equally important to recognize that there are individuals who live in conditions far removed from the promised triple-win perspective.

Conclusion

Circular migration remains a significant yet insufficiently researched concept in the context of Serbia.

The findings point to notable gender and age diversity within the sample of circular labour migrants. It shows that it is no longer just men, the traditional breadwinners of the family. Additionally, those seeking employment abroad are not only of working age; it becomes clear that among them are also many individuals nearing, or who are already in retirement. Furthermore, the participants in the circular migrants group vary in terms of qualifications they possess, and the positions they hold in the labour market. One of the key insights is that these two structural characteristics do not necessarily overlap. Beyond the mismatch between individuals' qualifications and the jobs they perform abroad, there is also no strict correlation between job type and migration status. While it is true that those in lower-skilled positions in the secondary labour market more frequently partake in semi-legal or informal work arrangements, this is not the only scenario. Not all respondents working in the primary labour market own formal employment contracts or valid work visas. All aforesaid is particularly true for workers in the cultural sector, who often hold precarious jobs.

The data reveal a stark division within the circular migrant sample, shaped by their motives for migration. The socio-economic position of an individual is reflected as a "driving force" for entering circular migration and indirectly determines patterns of mobility, practices while abroad, and individual experiences. On one side are the respondents who sought employment abroad out of financial necessity. These are individuals who had to find a way to diversify their income in order to be able to provide for the basic survival of themselves and their families. Most of them have experienced various forms of injustice in the Serbian labour market – such as undeclared work, unpaid wages, workplace injuries, termination during medical leave, and other forms of exploitation. Unable to meet their existential needs through domestic employment, they end up turning to migration. On the other side are the respondents who migrated from a position of sufficiency. While financial considerations also played a role in their decision-making process, they were not the crucial factor. These individuals chose to enter foreign labour markets either out of curiosity and a desire for exploration in their youth, or for travel and career aspirations later in life.

Circular migrations from Serbia cannot be equated with the movements of digital nomads or creative industry workers, for whom mobility is a highly valued lifestyle and personal choice. In only a small number of cases in our sample does circularity serve as a pathway to improved livelihoods or career advancement – typically among a handful of highly skilled migrants who use it to further their professional development. In contrast, circular migration from Serbia is primarily shaped by structural conditions rather than identity questions.

If the state genuinely seeks to ensure that circular migration delivers benefits for all participants, as the triple-win perspective predicts, it is to move beyond rhetorical support and take concrete steps to institutionalize and protect migrants. This includes establishing a clear definition of circular migration, providing its citizens with support and protection against potential labour exploitation abroad, and formally recognizing circular migrants within policies and legal frameworks. For now, circular migration appears to serve as an externalization of the dysfunctions inherent in Serbia's economic and political structures.

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Irena Petrović[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Milica Vesković Anđelković[2]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

Original scientific paper
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IMMIGRATION BETWEEN NEEDS AND FEARS – ATTITUDES OF SERBIAN CITIZENS TOWARD IMMIGRANTS

Abstract: This paper aims to examine the attitudes of the Serbian population toward immigration in the context of depopulation and labor shortages, which are becoming more significant problems. Depopulation in Serbia, as well as throughout Europe, represents one of the most pressing problems of contemporary society. According to the latest census in 2022, Serbia has entered the final stage of population aging, which, along with low fertility rates observed since 1970, brings about many social issues. Additionally, there is a noticeable emigration rate of young, working-aged people, which affects the narrowing of this group, which is crucial for revitalizing society and the population. The problem arising from this unfavorable population trend, aside from the issue of its renewal, is the lack of workforce. This first became evident in manual labor jobs and those in lower social positions, and now there is an increasing number of foreigners occupying such roles in Serbia. It is expected that similar trends will emerge in all sectors of employment. Developed countries in Western Europe and the United States have responded to depopulation and the threat of labor shortages by developing migration policies that encourage immigration, primarily from countries that form the geopolitical semi-periphery. This raises the question of the justification and feasibility of such policies in Serbia. Aside from various other challenges, such as the attractiveness of Serbia to foreigners, there is also the question of the readiness of the Serbian population to integrate foreigners. Encouraged by this, we will analyze several dimensions of attitudes towards migrants, such as feelings of the economic and symbolic threat posed by immigrants, and willingness to allow different types of immigrants into the country, and preferred criteria for accepting migrants. For this purpose, we will use data from the 9th, 10th, and 11th rounds of the European Social Survey.

Keywords: immigration, integration, attitudes, European Social Survey

1 irena.petrovic@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7288-5034
2 mzandjel@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2513-8896

Imigracije između potreba i strahova – Stavovi građana Srbije prema imigrantima

Apstrakt: Osnovni cilj rada je analiza stavova stanovništva Srbije prema imigracijama i to u kontekstu sve izraženije depopulacije i nedostatka radne snage. Depopulacija u Srbiji, ali i u Evropi, predstavlja jedan od najvažnijih problema u ovom trenutku. Srbija se, prema poslednjem popisu stanovništva iz 2022. godine, nalazi u završnoj fazi starenja stanovništva, što, uz niske stope fertiliteta zabeležene još od 1970. godine, pokreće mnoga važna pitanja. Dodatno, Srbija se suočava i sa izraženom emigracijom mladih, koji čine značajan udeo radno sposobnog stanovništva, što dalje utiče na smanjenje ove kategorije koja je ključna za revitalizaciju ukupnog stanovništva. Nepovoljno kretanje stanovništva ne utiče samo na obnavljanje stanovništva, već ima značajne i dalekosežne posledice na tržište rada u vidu nedostatka radne snage. Takve posledice su najvidljivije u nedostatku kvalifikovanih i niskokvalifikovanih kadrova i sve češćem okretanju ka uvozu inostrane radne snage. Razvijene zemlje Zapadne Evrope i SAD odgovorile su na depopulaciju i nedostatak radne snage kreiranjem migracionih politika koje podstiču imigraciju, pre svega iz zemalja koje čine geopolitičku poluperiferiju. U skladu sa tim, postavlja se pitanje opravdanosti i izvodljivosti takve politike u Srbiji. Pored raznih izazova, poput privlačnosti Srbije strancima, postavlja se i pitanje spremnosti stanovništva u Srbiji da prihvati strance. Podstaknuti ovim pitanjem, u radu ćemo analizirati nekoliko dimenzija odnosa domaćeg stanovništva prema imigrantima. Biće analizirana osećanja ekonomske i simboličke pretnje koju predstavljaju imigranti i spremnost da se omogući dolazak različitih tipova imigranata (iste ili slične, kao i različite etničke/rasne grupe). Analiza će biti zasnovana na podacima 9, 10. i 11. runde Evropskog društvenog istraživanja.

Ključne reči: imigracije, integracija, stavovi, Evropsko društveno istraživanje

Introduction

This article aims to present the attitudes of the domestic population toward potential immigration to Serbia. Analysing data collected from population censuses, we conclude that Serbia is a country experiencing a significant decline in its population due to a long-standing low birth rate combined with a high mortality rate. We must also add the negative migration balance, which has contributed to Serbia's accelerated population decline. Moreover, such demographic trends lead to an increasingly unfavourable age structure, which affects the shrinking of the fertile population segment and the labour force. Therefore, shortly—alongside the projected population decrease of approximately 1.4 million by the middle of this century (Nikitović, 2022)—and without effective population policies, we can expect labour shortages that will further lead to economic and social challenges for our country.

This issue is not new, nor is it unique to Serbia. Following the second demographic transition, which began and concluded in the developed Western countries and then spread to the former socialist bloc, birth rates have been continuously declining, life expectancy has been increasing, and mortality rates have risen due to the natural population ageing. As a result, the population is decreasing across all European countries and parts of North America and some Asian nations. Additionally, changes in lifestyles and the growing share of highly educated individuals have influenced the occupational structure of the population. Native-born citizens increasingly seek highly paid and prestigious jobs, leading to a labour shortage, particularly in manual and lower-skilled occupations. However, due to accelerated depopulation, even those currently desirable jobs may remain vacant, resulting in slowed economic growth and hindered technological advancement. In response to these challenges, Western countries have adopted two main strategies: first, investing in the quality of their domestic population (in their education and manual skills) to offset numerical decline, and second, developing population policies with a strong focus on immigration, aimed at attracting labour from developing countries. A significant challenge in this context is the attitude of local populations toward immigrants. Various fears emerge — from unfounded concerns about job competition and economic security, to difficulties with integrating culturally, adapting to new value systems, needs, and lifestyles. These attitudes are particularly pronounced toward refugees and asylum seekers, who have settled in large numbers across Western Europe over the past decade (Hellwig & Sinno, 2016). Since 2015, when refugees from the Middle East began arriving in Serbia, even if only as a transit country, fear of their presence became evident. Motivated by this, our researchers have addressed this topic on several occasions, as evidenced by available reports and academic papers (Bjekić et al., 2020; Cesid, 2019; Petrović & Pešić, 2017; TNS Medium Galup, 2017).

Considering the experience of developed countries and using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), this study will examine the attitudes of the local population in Serbia toward the possibility of large-scale immigration. The focus will be on the potential gap between the absolute need to encourage immigration, due to the risks posed by excessive population ageing and labour shortages, and the willingness of Serbian citizens to accept newcomers and create a favourable climate for their integration. In the analysis, we will draw on Integrated Threat Theory, emphasizing the types of prejudice that are assumed to be widespread among the population.

Theoretical Framework

Migration is not a new phenomenon—it is as old as humanity. Throughout history, the directions of migration flows and their motives have changed. As migration movements have intensified over the past three decades[3], scholars have increasingly focused on various aspects of this process. As a result, several theories have been developed to better understand population movements, examining motivations, consequences, potential benefits, and costs, both for individuals and for societies. These theories also address the relationships between the native population and newly settled groups within a given country. This last aspect can play a crucial role in the integration of migrant populations, which has become one of the key objectives of modern migration policies in democratic societies.

The increased immigration to Europe, particularly from the Middle East, which occurred in 2015 and 2016, has generated intense debate about the integration of newcomers, changes in the characteristics of European societies, and the potential challenges immigrants may pose to host populations. As a result, academic interest in public attitudes toward immigrants and minority groups in this region has significantly increased (Davidov et al., 2020; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). Research findings indicate that negative attitudes toward immigrants are either on the rise or have remained persistently high. The findings also suggest that many Europeans view immigration as a potential threat to social stability, traditions, and norms. As a result, support has grown for political parties that promote anti-immigration policies (Davidov et al., 2020). This further indicates a noticeable antagonism toward immigrant groups.

Theoretical approaches, which were used for understanding the attitudes of native populations toward immigrants, stem from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and increasingly, multidisciplinary research. Given the historical tendency toward antagonism between groups, the predominant theories focus on perceived threats from immigrants. Several theoretical models emerged in the late 20th century to explain attitudes toward migrants. For instance, Bobo (1988) and others examined realistic threats like competition over jobs and resources. Sears, Esses, and Sidanius focused on symbolic beliefs and symbolic threats, relating to perceived threats to cultural norms and values. At the same time, Eagly, Stangor, and others highlighted the underestimated role of negative

3 According to United Nations data, there were approximately 304 million international migrants in 2024, which means that this number has doubled since 1991, when it stood at 154 million. Looking at population shares, in the last decade of the 20th century, the migrant population made up 2.9% of the global population, whereas now that share has increased to 3.7% (UN, 2025).

stereotypes in shaping prejudice (according to Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25). However, much of this research was conducted in isolation, with each scholar exploring only one aspect of the broader issue. In response, motivated by anti-immigrant sentiments in European societies and the USA, Stephan and Stephan wanted to offer a theory that could describe phenomena of antagonism toward people who immigrate. So, they developed an integrated threat theory that combines these perspectives — realistic, symbolic, and intergroup anxiety — into a single, more comprehensive framework. This model has proven to be more broadly applicable than most previous approaches. Because several theoretical perspectives on stereotypes are incorporated and thus may lead to prejudices, which are the main problem in accepting others, the theory has been applied to understanding the statements and feelings of people toward immigrants in different societies. The theory suggests that four basic types of perceived threat may lead to prejudice.

Their model consists of four groups of treads:

1. Realistic threats "are threats to the very existence of the ingroup (e.g. through warfare), threats to the political and economic power of the ingroup, and threats to the physical or material well-being of the ingroup or its members (e.g. their health)" (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25)[4].
2. Symbolic threats "primarily involve perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes. Symbolic threats are threats to the worldview of the group. These threats arise in part because the ingroup believes in the moral rightness of the system of value" (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25)[5].
3. Intergroup anxiety is a feeling of being personally threatened during interactions with out-group members (Simonovits, 2016). Namely, people feel personally threatened in intergroup interactions because they are concerned about negative outcomes for the self, such as being embarrassed, rejected, or ridiculed.

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4 This theory can be understood at the material, economic, and political level, and its focus is on competition over material and economic group interests. This concept is closely related to welfare chauvinism, as both concepts focus on the perceived competition of scarce resources (such as labour market positions and social services), and the majority's perception is that outsiders, e.g., immigrants, threaten these resources. Also, concept of realistic threats has its origins in realistic group conflict theory. This theory was primarily concerned with competition for scarce resource, such as territory, wealth or natural resources (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 25).

5 Some of the most prominent theories of prejudice in social psihology deal with these threats – symbolic racism and modern racism, ambivalence-amplification theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 26).

4. Negative stereotyping "are expectations of how a member of an out-group will behave and often related to feelings of threat and fear" (Verkuyten, 1997 according to: Simonovits, 2016, p. 55). An important distinction between perceived threats and negative stereotypes, on the one hand, and intergroup anxiety, on the other, is that the former are generally understood at the group level, whereas the latter is primarily viewed as an individual-level experience (Simonovits, 2016).

In the integrated theory, these four threats are used to predict attitudes toward outgroups, and we will apply them to the investigation of attitudes of the domestic population in Serbia toward potential immigrations. Threats, which we discussed, lead to prejudice as negative affect associated with outgroups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000, p. 27). The definition of affect includes emotions and evaluations, and we can apply it to understanding allowing immigrants by domestic groups. By this theory, we would like to add that the determinants of immigrant support are shaped by the identity of the target group. Immigrant groups are associated with different sorts of threats in popular discourse, in statements made by politicians, and in the coverage of media outlets (Ivarsflaten, 2007). Individuals who perceive that performance in a particular area – be it the economy, culture, security, or crime – is poor will react negatively to immigrant groups associated with threats in that sphere. So, investigations show that the public associates different types of immigrants with different threats, and security fears affect attitudes toward immigrants with different cultures and religions (Muslim in West Europe), while economic concerns affect views toward immigrants from countries with the same culture and religions, for example, immigrants from East Europe in the West (Hellwig & Sinno, 2016). Also, several studies conducted in Europe have shown that the size of the immigrant population is positively correlated with anti-immigrant sentiment. "That is: the larger the relative size of the immigrant population, the more pronounced the negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration" (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2020, p. 3).

Social and Economic Consequences of Depopulation in Serbia

Regarding population decline, Serbia does not lag behind broader demographic trends in Europe. Despite the undeniably different course of the second demographic transition, which raises the question of whether Serbian society has truly undergone it or followed a different course (Bobić, 2010; Petrović, 2011), demographic statistics show a rapid population decrease in the country. Namely, Serbia's population continuously grew from the end of World War II until the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century. However, since 1991, a population decline has been recorded, as evidenced by data from the 2002, 2011, and 2022 censuses and annual demographic statistics. According to official estimates, Serbia's population is decreasing at a steady rate, by about 300,000 people between each census. This has led to the fact that the estimated population after the 2022 census was 6,690,887 (RZS, 2022), while some authors claim that the number is even lower (Nikitović, 2022).

Analysing statistical data collected through population censuses from the second half of the last century onward, we observe that the 2011 census recorded the same number of inhabitants as the 1971 census, and that according to the 2022 census, approximately the same number of people live in Serbia as in 1961 (Chart 1). We can conclude that in the last decade, the population has declined at the same rate as it increased during the inter-census period between 1961 and 1971. Analogously, considering that the 1953 census recorded 6,162,326 inhabitants in Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Metohija) (RZS, 2022), we can assume that in the next ten years—until the next census—this number will decline even faster than the previously estimated rate of 300,000 per decade. Accordingly, the next census, scheduled for 2031, is expected to show half a million fewer people. If this trend continues, we can conclude that Serbia will exceed the projected population decline for the region of –15% (UN, 2019). This aligns with projections for Serbia's population by the middle of this century according to the so-called baseline scenario of population dynamics[6], which estimates a reduction of 1.4 million people, or 21% (Nikitović, 2022, p. 68). This means that, in demographic terms, Serbia will be in a much worse position than most European countries.

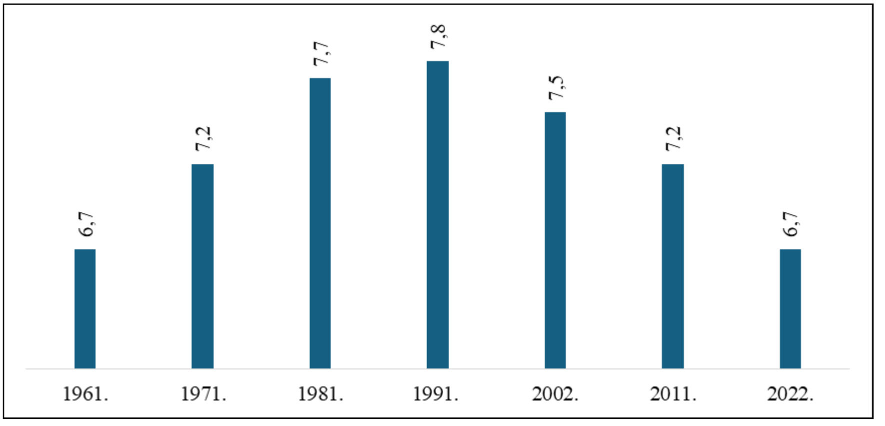
6 There are three scenarios for the future population dynamics in Serbia:

a) The baseline scenario, which appears to be the most likely for the future, and does not take into account any population policies;

b) The high fertility scenario, which is considered unlikely and assumes the very successful implementation of population policies aimed at increasing birth rates; and

c) The zero-migration scenario represents an imaginary future in which the migration balance equals zero (Nikitović, 2022, p. 65).

Chart 1. Population Change in Serbia According to Census Data from 1961 to 2022[7] (in millions)



Source: RZS, 2022.

When assessing the population decline, primary consideration is given to the natural processes of population renewal—births and deaths—while migration movements are left uncertain. However, since Serbia has recorded a negative migration balance for an extended period, this component is significant for estimating the future population size and age structure. According to the data presented in the Migration Profile for 2023, over half a million (573,952) Serbian citizens had obtained residence permits in a European country by the end of 2022 (KIRS, 2024)[8]. If we also consider those who moved outside Europe, a significant portion of Serbian citizens were living and working abroad that year. Namely, migration accounted for an estimated 15% to 26% of Serbia's depopulation between the 2002 and 2011 census years (Nikitović, 2022; Nikitović, 2019),

7 The population figures presented in the graph refer only to the population of Serbia, excluding Kosovo and Metohija, due to the lack of accurate data for the southern Serbian province. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (RZS) has not produced demographic statistics for Kosovo and Metohija since 1998, and all data related to the period between 1990 and 1997 are considered imprecise (Penev, 2002). Therefore, the graph displays the population recorded in each census year, with the population of Kosovo and Metohija subtracted.

8 Monitoring emigration represents a particularly complex issue. Domestic records do not allow for comprehensive or precise insights into the size and characteristics of the emigrant population, and the statistics of foreign countries to which emigrants from the Republic of Serbia traditionally gravitate are often neither accessible nor accurate. When compiling the Migration Profile, data from Eurostat are used, which EU member states publish on the number of immigrants in the current year (KIRS, 2024). Data from other countries is not available.

and this trend has continued since. The only brief period when Serbia recorded a positive migration balance was during the internal displacement of people caused by the regional conflicts following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the late 20th century. However, while this positively affected the number of inhabitants, it did not improve the age structure and, consequently, did not impact birth rates positively. This is because the incoming population was significantly older than those leaving the country. The younger individuals who initially arrived with older family members mostly moved on to Western European countries (Lukic & Nikitovic, 2004). Therefore, since the baseline scenario predicts Serbia will lose 1.4 million people in the next three decades, it is based on the assumption of zero net migration, making it unlikely that a larger population decline in Serbia is expected (Nikitović, 2022).

Changes in population size also affect its demographic structure. The trend of low birth rates in Serbia, which since 1970 has been insufficient even for simple generational replacement (Nikitović, 2019), combined with the emigration of predominantly young people, has drastically changed the population's age structure. According to census data, the Serbian population is ageing moderately. In contrast, the average age recorded in the 2011 census was 42.5 years; the 2022 census shows the average age of Serbia's population at 43.9 years. What is more concerning is the increasing proportion of elderly people (65+) and the middle-aged population (15–64), alongside a decreasing share of children and youth (0–14) (RZS, 2022)[9]. Over time, an even greater disparity among these age groups is expected, along with a decline in the number of middle-generation individuals, especially women of fertile age. This will further cause a sharper decline in birth rates and lead to socio-economic problems. Primarily, the workforce problem stands out as it will become urgent due to the shrinking labour contingent. According to data collected through the Labour Force Survey in the last quarter of 2024 (RZS, 2025), as much as 43.7% of citizens are outside the labour force, where, besides students and pupils, there is an increasing share of elderly people. As this older age group grows, there is expected to be more dependent elderly people, which will further burden the working-age population economically and due to the need for additional care. Regarding the workforce, the quality issue should not be forgotten regarding technological progress. Given Serbia's low investment in science and relatively underdeveloped policies for

9 The share of the population aged 65 and over was 22.1%, representing an increase of 4.7% from 2011. The share of the middle-aged population was 63.5% according to the 2022 census, representing a 4.8% increase from 2011. The share of the youngest population was 14.4% in the 2022 census, marking a decrease of 9.5% compared to the 2011 census (RZS, 2022).

cooperation with the scientific diaspora, we can expect significant lagging behind developed Western countries.

Considering the negative demographic picture and awareness of the necessary scientific and technological progress, several strategies and action plans have been adopted in Serbia since the start of this millennium; however, their consistent implementation is questionable. The constant revision and adoption of new documents also evidence this. Regarding population policies aimed at natural population change, it can be said that even if the desirable birth rate of 1.8 children per woman is reached, generational replacement will not occur (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). Another way to increase the population, following the example of developed countries that have faced similar problems, could be to encourage immigration policies. Namely, the decision to change place of residence is made mainly by young, working-age people, so their permanent settlement could positively impact Serbia's population's age and labour structure. The idea of a positive impact of immigration on our population is not new (Nikitović, 2010), but it has been shown that its feasibility is very low. The reasons lie in weakly motivating population policies and insufficient openness of our population towards other peoples and cultures, which is also the topic of this paper.

Methods

This paper uses data from the European Social Survey (ESS), specifically from the 9th (conducted 2018/2019), 10th (conducted 2020/2021), and 11th rounds (conducted 2023/2024), in which Serbia participated. The sample sizes for Serbia in these rounds were as follows: 9th round – 2,043 respondents; 10th round – 1,530 respondents; and 11th round – 1,563 respondents. Serbia has been included in this research starting from round nine. The sample framework of the ESS includes all persons who are 15 years old and older (no upper age limit) living in private households in Serbia, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, or language. The individuals are selected through strict chance selection in every phase of the design.

Results and Discussion

In our data analysis for this study, we will first examine respondents' attitudes toward accepting immigrants who belong to the same ethnic groups, as well as their attitudes toward accepting immigrants who bring a different cultural context. We hypothesize that, similar to findings in Western European countries (Hellwig & Sinno, 2016), there will be greater resistance to integrating ethnically different groups compared to populations belonging to the same or culturally similar ethnic groups. As shown in Table 1, nearly half of the respondents from Serbia believe that many should be allowed to come and live in Serbia. Additionally, 31,3% of participants expressed that some immigrants from the same racial or ethnic background should be allowed to come and live in Serbia. Combining these two groups, we can see that over 70% of Serbian residents exhibit a favourable attitude towards the immigration of individuals from their own racial or ethnic group. Moreover, the fact that fewer than 10% of respondents oppose all immigration highlights the predominantly positive view of immigrants from the same racial or ethnic background. At the same time, we can see that the share of respondents with positive attitudes towards immigration is increasing.

Table 1. Allow many/few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as majority (in %)

	9th round 2018/2019	**10th round 2020/2022**	**11th round 2023/2024**
Allow many to come and live here	39.4	41.4	45.7
Allow some	30.9	31.6	31.3
Allow a few	17.8	21.2	16.3
Allow none	11.9	5.8	6.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

In addition to the fact that such findings are expected across all societies, it is essential to note that Serbia is a country that has already experienced the settlement of population groups of the same ethnic origin. According to the 2001 Census, nearly half a million refugees (451,980), mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, were coming to the Republic of Serbia. To this, we should add around 200,000 individuals who arrived from Kosovo and Metohija after the 1999 NATO attack and the expulsion of the Serbian population from the southern province. Furthermore, there is a significant number of students from neighbouring countries studying at our universities. Therefore, Serbia has a long-standing tradition of receiving people of the same ethnic origin, and as a result, the population has remained largely open to the integration of this type of immigrant. Accordingly, the data we obtained, indicating a high willingness among our population to accept newcomers who belong to the same ethnic group, did not come as a surprise.

However, when it comes to attitudes toward immigrants of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, the picture changes significantly, as shown in Table 2. Worse results, in terms of more pronounced anti-immigrant attitudes, are expected given the fact that Serbia has traditionally been a country of emigration. Only recently, with the onset of the migrant crisis and the opening of the Balkan route in 2015, have the citizens of our country begun to gain experience in receiving immigrants not only of different ethnic origins but also from entirely different cultural and normative systems. Therefore, it is unsurprising that 23,8% of Serbian residents believe that many should be allowed to come and live in Serbia. At the same time, more than 30% of respondents think that some should be allowed to come, which does not differ significantly from their views on immigrants of the same racial or ethnic background. On the other hand, the latest findings show that one in five respondents in Serbia expresses strong anti-immigrant attitudes toward these newcomers, confirming the results of research conducted six years ago.

Table 2. Allow many/few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from majority (in %)

	9th round 2018/2019	**10th round 2020/2022**	**11th round 2023/2024**
Allow many to come and live here	21.4	27.3	23.8
Allow some	31.0	31.7	32.1
Allow a few	27.0	28.7	24.9
Allow none	20.7	12.3	19.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

In contrast to earlier findings, this trend is not linear. The tenth wave of the survey showed a decline in anti-immigrant attitudes, which can be understood, on the one hand, as a result of the gradual decrease in the number of refugees from the Middle East in Serbia, and on the other hand, their accommodation in reception centres, which restored the original appearance of cities and thereby reduced the sense of insecurity among the local population. However, the most recent data indicate a renewed increase in negative attitudes, returning to previously recorded levels. The arrival of Russian nationals[10], which undeniably[11] led to a rise in

10 According to data from the Commissariat for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, more than half of the immigrant population in 2023 (51.1%) were Russians (KIRS, 2024:9). One of the first impressions among the population of Serbia, primarily in Belgrade, is that Russians are driving up rental and real estate purchase prices (Nova, 2022).

11 It is interesting that when forming attitudes toward the Russian population, their positive impact on the country's economy is completely overlooked. Namely, during 2021, Russians opened 11,081 companies in Serbia (Business and Finance, 2024).

prices, primarily of real estate, but also services, has rekindled antagonism toward the immigrant population in Serbia.

In addition to the increased number of Russians and Ukrainians in Serbia in recent years, due to the labour shortage in the country and the concessions made by the Serbian government toward foreigners, especially entrepreneurs willing to invest here, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of workers immigrating from non-European countries. The most significant numbers come from China, Turkey, India, Nepal, and various African nations. According to data from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the majority of them (58.9%) cite employment as the main reason for coming to Serbia, followed by family reunification, education, and other reasons (KIRS, 2024, p. 12). While immigrants from Russia and Ukraine largely continue to work for the same companies they were employed with in their home countries (primarily in the IT sector), others are mainly engaged in construction, restaurants, and food delivery services.

The data we collected through our research indicate that Serbian citizens hold highly negative attitudes toward people coming from poor countries, which we believe is a consequence of the symbolic threat previously discussed. Namely, the data that we present in Table 3 shows that 23% of respondents in Serbia would not allow anyone from poor non-European countries to immigrate. At the same time, 27.5%—presumably cosmopolitan-minded individuals aware of the domestic labour shortage—would allow only a small number of immigrants to enter. The data also show that 28.6% would accept only some immigrants, while 20.9% would gladly welcome a larger number of newcomers. The same trend as in the previous case was recorded—there was a decline in anti-immigrant beliefs in 2020, coinciding with a decrease in the influx of migrants from the Middle East. However, with the recent increase in the number of workers from African countries, there has been a renewed rise in negative attitudes, which we can see in the results in 2023.

Table 3. Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe (in %)

	9th round 2018/2019	**10th round 2020/2022**	**11th round 2023/2024**
Allow many to come and live here	19.5	24.7	20.9
Allow some	27.3	31.6	28.6
Allow a few	27.1	30.5	27.5
Allow none	26.1	13.2	23.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

The reasons for the skepticism of our country's population toward immigration, especially of people from poorer countries, can be understood by examining the components of the integrated threat theory. This dimension was operationalized using the following three questions "Would you say it is generally bad or good for country's economy that people come to live here from other countries?", "Would you say that country's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?" and "Is country made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?". These questions are measured on a ten-point scale, where 0 indicates a strong anti-immigrant orientation, and 10 represents a strong favor for foreign citizens moving to Serbia and their impact on various aspects of life in Serbia. Results are presented in the Table 4.

Table 4. Attitudes towards immigrants

	9th round 2018/2019		**10th round 2020/2022**		**11th round 2023/2024**	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Immigration bad or good for country's economy*	4.05	2.959	4.47	2.965	4.64	2.966
Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants**	4.86	3.137	5.24	3.067	4.89	2.991
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live***	4.72	3.025	5.23	3.055	4.77	2.868

*0 – Bad for the economy, 10 – Good for the economy; ** 0 – Cultural life undermined, 10 – Cultural life enriched;

*** 0 – Worse place to live, 10 – Better place to live

When analysing the average values related to different types of perceived threats, it is clear that anti-immigrant sentiments have been present throughout all the years examined. The lowest average values were recorded concerning realistic threats, specifically its economic component, which was the focus of measurement in this case. Therefore, we cannot say that the Serbian population is primarily sceptical about immigration due to fear of losing national identity, changes in ethnic structure, or shifts in societal values[12]—reasons often cited in the everyday discourse of populist political parties. The main issue lies in the fear for one's own liveli-

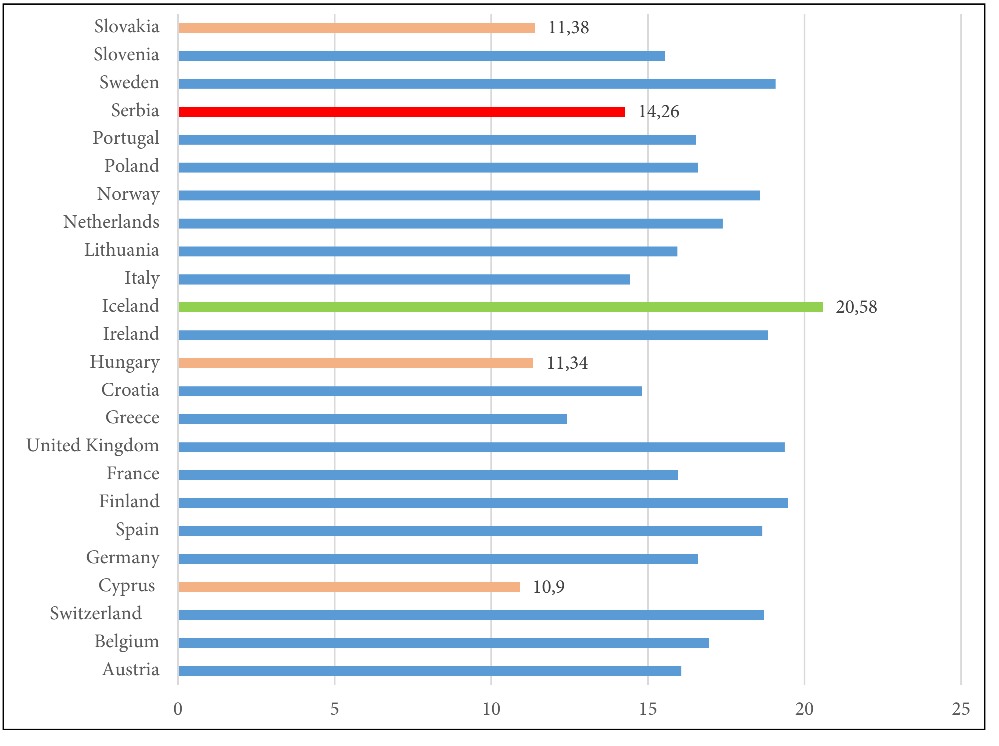
12 The fear that immigrants may negatively affect the quality of life and cultural identity is also present, though it is expressed to a somewhat lesser extent than concerns related to economic threats. Overall, the average values across all examined years and dimensions hover around 5. However, unlike the perception of economic threat, which has shown a slight decline, attitudes regarding the impact of immigrants on quality of life and cultural identity have not followed a linear trend. Initially, negative beliefs about the influence of immigrants on these aspects declined, but recent research in-

hood, particularly regarding the sufficiency of material resources for both the local population and newcomers.

On the other hand, the growing awareness among Serbia's population regarding the country's demographic challenges, which point to a labour shortage, has contributed to a gradual decline in fears over the economic consequences of immigration. In other words, it has become evident that without the immigration of foreign workers, both financial and social stability would be at risk. As a result, the average values related to the sense of economic threat have been decreasing over time[13].

To understand the extent to which the population of Serbia is oriented against immigration, we compared their feelings of threats with those in other countries that participated in the ESS, which is presented in Chart 2. For that purpose, we created an index of anti-immigrant ori-

Chart 2. Index of anti-immigrant orientation, mean and standard deviation



dicates a resurgence of such concerns. The average values for all analyzed dimensions have once again dropped below 5.

13 Although they remain below 5, which indicates that the sense of economic threat among our population still exists.

entation based on the three previously mentioned statements[14]. A one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals significant differences in attitudes towards immigration among the analyzed countries[15]. Tukey's test indicates that the most negative perceptions of immigration are found in Cyprus, Hungary, and Slovakia, with no statistically significant difference between these three countries. Following these are Greece, Serbia, Italy, and Croatia, which also show negative attitudes, albeit to a lesser extent. In contrast, Finland and Iceland exhibit the most positive attitudes toward immigration.

According to the presented data, in countries with a larger immigrant population, such as Germany and France, a significantly smaller percentage of respondents express strong anti-immigrant attitudes toward immigrants of different races or ethnic backgrounds. For example, results from the 11th round of the European Social Survey (ESS) show that only 3.7% of respondents in Germany believe that no one should be allowed to come and live in the country, while this percentage is 6.5% in France. These findings contradict both theoretical and empirical research suggesting that a larger immigrant population is positively associated with an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment (see Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2020). However, it is worth noting that these countries have traditionally been immigrant-receiving nations, and their populations have become accustomed to people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, prolonged negative demographic trends in these countries have led their populations to recognise and accept the importance of immigrants for the labour market. Their experience supports the expectation that anti-immigrant attitudes among Serbian citizens may decline in the future. Serbia is new to immigration, but it is a country facing long-term negative natural population growth and continuous population ageing. Therefore, migration emerges as one of the optimal solutions for preventing further negative trends, not only in demographics but also in the economy and society as a whole.

Conclusion

The prolonged birth rate crisis, decades of negative natural population growth, and negative migration balance have resulted in Serbia losing over 30,000 people annually, equivalent to the size of a small town in the

14 The analysis indicated that the scale shows reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.874. The scale ranges from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 30.

15 Brown-Forsythe=274.376, sig=.000.

country. The consequences are numerous: from continuous population aging, depopulation of villages and even towns, especially in the eastern and central parts of Serbia, to labor shortages that would have been unimaginable at the beginning of this century. Therefore, depopulation has become a real issue for responsible decision-makers and the entire population. It is a problem that threatens to hinder the country's social and economic progress.

Responses to this situation vary, from the development of policies focused on childbirth and family support to the creation of favourable migration policies aimed at encouraging return migration and enabling the immigration of people who wish to settle in Serbia. At first, this idea seemed very radical and even unimaginable. However, following the "migrant crisis" of 2015/16, which saw a massive influx of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, the nature of migration flows in Serbia began to change significantly. Serbia is no longer just a country of emigration, but has become a country of transit migration, with the potential to become a final destination. This shift has imposed the need to change existing strategies for addressing the issue of irregular migration and to develop new integration policies.

The real problem remains the persistent anti-immigration attitudes among the Serbian population. According to research findings, Serbian citizens are still not ready to accept the integration of migrants, especially those belonging to different ethnic groups, which implies the introduction of new cultural patterns and a necessary shift in everyday discourse. Even after the arrival of wealthier populations from Russia and Ukraine, the presented data show that there was no increase in the perception of realistic threats. This outcome can be understood in light of the strong national orientation that persists among the Serbian population, which reinforces concerns about preserving national identity. It is also linked to Serbia's short history of immigration. Therefore, despite an increased awareness of the problems posed by low birth rates and population decline, Serbian citizens still exhibit fear toward the influx of culturally different populations. When it comes to immigration, Serbia can thus be characterised as a society caught between a real need and a clearly expressed fear.

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Milica Vesković Anđelković[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy
Nataša Jovanović Ajzenhamer[2]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

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INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN SERBIA: CHANCES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract: The paper focuses on analyzing the importance of international education as a key factor in social development, with special attention to the challenges faced by individuals, policymakers, and universities. Through historical context, publicly available data, and empirical research, the paper emphasizes that international education is fundamentally essential for the continuous development of states. According to data from the World Trade Organization, countries that promote research and international mobility of the academic community are leaders in international trade, capital flow, and foreign direct investment. In the case of Serbia, there is awareness of the benefits of attracting academics from abroad, but problems in coordination and creating better conditions for their integration are becoming apparent. However, the collected data also show that Serbian students abroad face similar challenges. In conclusion, the paper offers recommendations for the development of public policies regarding international students in Serbia.

Key words: international education, public polices, international students, chances, challenges.

Međunarodno obrazovanje u Srbiji: šanse i izazovi

Apstrakt: Rad se fokusira na analizu značaja međunarodnog obrazovanja kao ključnog faktora društvenog razvoja, sa posebnim osvrtom na izazove sa kojima se suočavaju pojedinci, donosioci odluka i univerziteti. Kroz istorijski kontekst, javno dostupne podatke i empirijska istraživanja rad ukazuje na to da je međunarodno obrazovanje suštinski važno za kontinuirani razvoj država. Prema podacima Svetske trgovinske organizacije, zemlje koje podstiču istraživanja kao i

1 mzandjel@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2513-8896
2 natasa.jovanovic@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3151-9732

međunarodnu mobilnost akademske zajednice predstavljaju lidere u međunarodnoj trgovini, protoku kapitala i stranim direktnim investicijama. Što se tiče Srbije, postoji svest o koristi od privlačenja akademaca iz sveta, ali se nazire problem koordinacije i stvaranja boljih uslova za njihovu integraciju. Međutim, prikupljeni podaci pokazuju da se sa istim problemima suočavaju i naši student u inostranstvu. U zaključku se navode preporuke za kreiranje javnih politika koje se odnose na međunarodne studente u Srbiji.

Ključne reči: međunarodno obrazovanje, javne politike, međunarodni studenti, šanse, izazovi.

Introduction

Based on the results of empirical research conducted among an international student population and secondary analysis of data from other domestic and foreign studies, this paper aims to highlight the potential benefits for Serbia from investing in international student mobility, as well as the challenges faced by society and public administration. Migration and population mobility characterize the modern world, called the age of migration[3] (de Haas et al., 1998), and the number of international students increases every year. Therefore, this phenomenon deserves careful consideration when creating public policies.

In the age of globalisation and relatively easy exchange of knowledge on a global level, as well as the openness of universities to students of foreign origin, and due in part to their strong motivation for international student exchange, there has been significant growth in the migration of the academic population. According to UNESCO data for 2021, the number of international students has tripled compared to the beginning of this millennium (UIS, 2023), reaching 6.4 million in 2022, whereas in 2001 that number was 2.2 million. According to available data, the main destinations remain the USA and Western and Northern European countries. However, data on the movement of this population show that other countries, such as China, Japan, and Oceania, are also emerging, with their universities becoming increasingly popular. Regarding Serbia, as a coun-

3 Namely, the number of migrants is continuously increasing. According to United Nations data, in 2024 there were approximately 304 million international migrants in total, meaning that this number has doubled compared to the last decade of the previous century, when it was around 154 million (UN DESA, 2025:2). A significant portion of this increase is attributed to refugees from war-affected areas, primarily the war in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, as well as prolonged conflicts in African countries. In addition, globalisation, accompanied by interstate agreements on the free movement of people, capital, and goods, has contributed to the rise in the number of economically motivated international migrants.

try of origin for international students and as a host to students from various parts of the world, growth is also being recorded here.

In addition to awareness of academic programs, various scholarship schemes —initiated and implemented by governments and different foundations — have contributed to the volume and direction of student mobility. Without these programs, such mobility would be far less accessible, especially for students from lower social strata (Lopez-Duarte et al., 2021). Furthermore, state policies aimed at this population are also crucial in creating a social climate that would attract them. The motivation of states to develop appropriate policies lies in the proven significant impact of this population on the growth of economic profit, as well as cultural and human capital. However, the studies referenced in this paper indicate that, despite efforts by states and a relatively long history of international education in Serbia, students still encounter numerous barriers during the initial integration process into the host country's education system and society.

International Education as a Significant Factor in Understanding the Societal Prosperity of Countries

There are numerous reasons for the increase in the number of international students and the identification of specific patterns in their movement. Still, they are generally recognized as the result of social transformations[4] and state policies developed based on identifying the multifaceted importance of student mobility, not only from the individual's perspective, but also from that of universities and states (Sidhu, 2011). Research conducted in the United States shows that the presence of international students shapes the identity of each university and significantly contributes to its overall well-being (Hegarty, 2014, p. 225). First, international students represent a vital component in university research. According to some authors (Chellaraj et al., 2008) a 10% increase in international grad-

4 The importance of international education was recognized even earlier. In the second half of the nineteenth century, European universities became accessible to all social classes. Despite the differences between the German, French (Napoleonic), and Anglo-Saxon models, universities opened their doors to foreign citizens. One of the basic premises of the mass type of higher education (as it exists today) is openness to student mobility, allowing individuals to further develop capital in the form of knowledge and social connections in their home countries (Jarić & Jovanović Ajzenhamer, 2020). This was particularly important for France as a colonial power, since graduates would return to their countries and participate in building their societies according to the French model. Thus, the diversification of knowledge and students lies at the very core of the idea of mass higher education, even before the intensification of globalization processes.

uate students correlates to a 4,5% increase in a patent applications. In that sense, it could be said that international students are picking up the mantle of innovation in the USA universities where they study and research and are essential to these universities' research function. On the other hand, most of them must pay their fees which have significant impact not only on universities but also on local economy. Injecting almost 43,8 billion dollars in to the USA economy during the 2023-2024 academic year (NAFSA, 2025), international students are a vital source of revenue. From tuition and fees, to food, clothing, travel and textbooks almost every other industry on the local level benefits from their presence.

Viewed from a broader economic perspective, analyses of the economies of developed societies point to the advantage of prioritizing the creation, storage, use, and transfer of knowledge as essential conditions for development. According to the World Trade Organization's analysis, research focused on growth is the primary driving force determining the scale and direction of international trade, capital flows, foreign direct investment, and the advancement of integration processes (Grečić, 2010). Aware of the importance of scientific and technological progress, the countries that are statistically the most attractive to international students—and at the same time global geo-economic leaders—carefully design immigration policies and invest in the diversity and quality of tertiary education. Their goal is to attract highly educated migrants from underdeveloped and developing countries, which represents their leading strategy for progress (Chua, 2007; Florida, 2003).

In the 'war for talent,' national governments and public policies play a key role, as national development needs and the needs of international students create them. In addition to attracting highly educated individuals from other countries, the public policies of developed states are also aimed at creating a context that would motivate the domestic population to engage in academic mobility, to acquire and transfer knowledge and best practices, and direct them toward the development of their home country. Contrary to the views of some early globalization theorists—such as Appadurai (Appadurai, 2011), who argued that the role of the state would diminish as globalization progresses—research on international student migration shows that the state continues to play a vital role in the decisions of individuals and their families to participate in academic mobility. Depending on whether the goal is to attract foreign students or to encourage domestic students to pursue mobility for the sake of knowledge, states create attractive conditions for life and research at home, or provide scholarships for talent to study abroad and establish conditions for easier (re)integration.

Historically, the encouragement of Serbia's educated elite to acquire knowledge abroad dates back to the 19th century, when young men were sent to Vienna and Pest to gain experience and contribute to the creation of a modern state. The history of higher education in Serbia — from the development of the Velika škola (Grand School) in the early 19th century to the founding of the University (in 1907) as a formal and mass higher education institution with guaranteed autonomy (separation from church and state) — is closely tied to educational migrations of key actors and students. After World War I, during which a large number of students perished, hundreds of young men from Serbia went to European educational centers to complete their studies and acquire new knowledge (Trgovčević, 2003). State-funded scholarships were suspended during periods of deep socio-economic crisis, particularly in the 1990s. In that period students got scholarships from foreign governments and foundations, which did not necessarily have representation in the Republic of Serbia (Vesković Anđelković & Vasojević, 2023).

Today, international students of Serbian origin are funded from various domestic and foreign sources, indicating, on one hand, Serbia's interest in gathering educational and social capital from around the world, and on the other, the interest of different countries in our talents and the knowledge acquired in Serbia. One of the motives for the growing attention to student mobility and the increased investment in the mobility of students of Serbian origin is Serbia's accession to the Bologna Process, which, in addition to other higher education reforms, also emphasizes mobility. The Bologna Declaration significantly influenced the increase in the number of international students in Europe, and through programs such as TEMPUS and ERASMUS, it has contributed significantly to the rise in the volume of student mobility from Serbia[5].

On the other hand, considering the findings of various analyses on the importance of attracting foreign students—not only from an economic standpoint but also from the perspective of international relations—as well as the obligations set forth by the Bologna Declaration, Serbia is shaping a policy aimed at creating conditions to attract students from other countries to study at its universities. In addition to joint programs of the European Union, the 'World in Serbia' program, launched in 2011, stands out. It annually awards scholarships to around 200 foreign students from more than 60 countries, not limited to those from Europe. Besides financial support, scholarship recipients are provided with accommoda-

5 According to UNESCO data, in 2021, there were a total of 11,247 Serbian students enrolled at universities worldwide, making up about 0.2% of the total international student population (UIS, 2023).

tion and free Serbian language courses, an additional incentive to choose Serbia as a study destination. Implementing this program significantly contributes to the increase in foreign students in our country[6], opening the door to greater knowledge exchange and creating emotional capital, which can play an important role in bilateral international relations. Given the long-term development goals of the Republic of Serbia, which include a knowledge-based economy and closer international networking, it is expected that policies aimed at attracting foreign students will continue, alongside efforts to encourage the mobility of Serbian students for knowledge transfer, expanding social capital, and establishing bilateral relations with host countries.

Challenges International Students Face in Studying Abroad

In the age of mass migration and population mobility, the decision to change one's place of residence—even when motivated by war, political crises, or natural disasters—gives a person the feeling that they are in control of their life and strong enough to adapt to new contexts and living conditions. Therefore, we can assume that „hope for a better present or future elsewhere drives the individual to experience migration or mobility" (Papatsiba, 2005, p. 30). Thus, students' mobility becomes an act expressing the individual appropriation of an "enlarged" action-space, which is supposed to become less constrained by social determinism. According to this assumption, mobility can also be seen as a form of elective biography (do-it-yourself biography) and would favour the emergence of a freer individual (Ibid, 29). Results of a few research (Vesković Anđelković & Vasojević, 2024; Vesković Anđelković, 2019; Nada & Araújo, 2018; Papatsiba, 2005) have shown that student mobility reinforces the individual belief of being able to face changing environments, to monitor the self and to be monitored as a self, and to take control of one's life-path reflexively, by accepting risks impelling new dynamics. From the students' perspective, mobility experience seems to release impulses for personal growth and individual autonomy. Yet this advantage, however important it may be, often dominates the other outcomes of a mobility period, such as cultural and political awareness, intercultural competence and enlarged feeling of belonging (Papatsiba, 2005, pp. 29 – 30).

6 The share of foreign students in Serbia within the total international student population in 2021 was similar to that of Serbian students in that population, 0.2%, which in absolute numbers amounts to 15,060 students (UIS, 2023).

So, migration could have double-edged benefits – as we saw, students' migration has the potential for hugely positive consequences for the person and their communities of origin. Whether through the flow of ideas, remittances or technology transfer, migration positively enhances human capabilities (Castles, 2010, p. 1568). However, it is also important to acknowledge that migration can destabilize the security of individuals who are confronted with significant changes in language, culture, food, and climate, often without the supportive networks of family and friends. A sense of security is critical to enable individuals to make the necessary academic adjustment, to build new relationships and adjust to a different sociocultural milieu (Sidhu, 2011, p. 13). Some authors (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 35) have summarized factors that could have big impact on students sense of wellbeing and security: lack of equal respect, problems of intercultural mixing, language barriers, financial difficulties, work, housing, health care, safety, immigration, university bureaucracies, loneliness.

Among all the factors listed, insufficient language proficiency is the most frequently mentioned issue. Even within the European Union, where English is used as a lingua franca at universities, students often feel isolated from the local community and their peers in the host country. Taking lectures in a language different from the local one fosters the creation of language-based clusters that keep international students away from locals. According to some authors, "relations with locals might be the key to moving forward on loneliness" (Sawir et al., 2008, p. 172). At universities where there is no option for instruction in English, students who have not sufficiently mastered the language of the host country find it more challenging to follow classes and pass exams. They often achieve poorer results than domestic students, which becomes a source of frustration and can be one of the reasons for a quick return to their country of origin.

Insufficient language proficiency can further lead an individual into isolation and loneliness, especially if they do not already have an established network of acquaintances before arriving in the host country. Students often report that during their stay abroad, due to limited language skills, they faced difficulty bringing their personality to life in a foreign language (Nada & Araújo, 2018, p. 315). Although some of them recognized the language barrier as a motivating factor for learning the language of the host society (Nada & Araújo, 2018, p. 316), in most cases, this obstacle is most easily overcome by creating a positive context at the university and in society at large. Adapting lectures to meet their needs and organizing more frequent consultations along with language classes has proven to be the most effective way to integrate international students. Additionally, a supportive atmosphere at the university and within the local community helps mitigate cultural dissonances that formed barriers to meaningful discourse (Peacock & Harrison, 2009, p. 429).

As with the case of language, a positive and friendly atmosphere in the environment where the students find themselves plays a crucial role in the lives of many foreign students. According to the results of the empirical research, „students can feel emotionally deprived in their host country without their support network from their home country" (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 703). Most of the students included in the research recognised that their successful adaptation in host countries is highly dependent upon the support they received from other people in the local environment. Therefore, their engagement in network relationships gained significant benefit for the participants' adaptation process (Gill, 2007). In that process, support should not be provided from a paternalistic perspective, as this will result in foreign students' levels of belonging being weakened, and they could feel unable to become full members of their higher education institution. Universities which accept foreign students should effect changes in their own structures in order to adequately welcome them (Nada & Araújo 2018, p. 320).

A positive and motivating atmosphere in the host society, primarily at the university and in the surrounding environment where students find themselves and begin forming their first networks, plays a key role in overcoming other challenges they may face. One of the significant difficulties in the lives of international students is their financial situation. Therefore, some authors argue that international student migration is selective concerning the students' socio-economic status (Lopez-Duarte et al., 2021). Scholarships, which students primarily rely on during academic mobility, generally do not cover all the living expenses in the host country. Most students are financially supported by their families, which shows that they usually come from families with an above-average economic status (Beerkens et al., 2015). Student employment is another way to cover the additional costs of living abroad. However, this brings us back to the issue of insufficient language proficiency and cultural barriers—obstacles that can only be overcome if a supportive network of people in the host country accompanies the student's persistence and determination for success.

Other difficulties mentioned by Marginson and colleagues (Marginson et al., 2010) are more or less pronounced depending on the society in which the student finds themselves. Health care depends directly on the system of that society. Also, universities and state bureaucracies rely directly on the established system in the host country. Adapting university bureaucracies to the needs of international students is especially important in countries participating in the Bologna Process, which emphasises mobility and the mutual exchange of knowledge. Therefore, in this sense, we can say that policies aimed at facilitating student integration, not only as a necessary condition for student mobility but also when accompanied by a supportive social environment, can contribute to reducing, and perhaps even eliminating, feelings of loneliness among students.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper were collected during the implementation of the project "International Student Migration in the Serbian Context and (Re)Construction of Identity: Main Issues and Inputs for Policy Making (IS-MIGaIN)", funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. The project consisted of several phases that involved different data collection techniques, and therefore, the methodology was diverse – data were first collected through focus groups, followed by a survey, and finally through interviews (for more details, see Stojšin, 2025). However, this paper focuses exclusively on the data collected through interviews. The interviews were conducted in April 2024 with a sample of 19 respondents. The collected data were transcribed, then processed and analyzed using the MAXQDA software. During the coding process, more than ten categories were identified, including benefits and challenges experienced during the stay abroad and some recommendations for public policy makers, which are the topic of this article. However, since the sample includes only 19 cases, the conclusions presented in this paper cannot be generalized to the entire population.

The sample was divided into three groups:

1. Students from Serbia currently studying abroad,
2. Students of Serbian origin who studied abroad and have returned, and
3. Foreign students currently studying in Serbia.

The sample included a total of six men and thirteen women. The average age of the respondents was 29.1 years, with the majority—eight respondents—being between 30 and 34 years old. A total of six international students were studying in Serbia. Among the Serbian respondents, four were studying in Germany, two in Austria, two in Hungary, two in France, and one each in the UK, the USA, and Taiwan.

Given that this paper also aims to define certain recommendations for public policy development, the conclusion will include insights drawn from the data collected during the workshop "International Academic Migration: Toward a Positive Experience for Students," conducted by members of the research team with potentially interested stakeholders. The workshop's goal was to identify guidelines for social support and develop a model of cooperation among relevant institutions at various levels of governance.

Results and Discussions

Based on the analysis of all 19 conducted interviews, we can conclude that, without exception, international students believe they have gained a lot by going abroad. The benefits they mention do not relate solely to themselves as individuals but also to their faculties and the society of their country of origin as a whole. In the conversations themselves, respondents refer to the material aspect the least, which is understandable given their stage of life, as well as the goals of their mobility. The analysis of responses shows that all respondents primarily emphasise changes in their personality, such as building self-confidence and a sense of independence, and they also mention a sense of maturity. Ena, who returned from Austria, says:

> "*Studying abroad is a great opportunity for growing up, rapidly so, and everyone should take advantage of it*" (Ena, 33, returnee from Austria).

This can be explained, especially in the context of Serbia, by the fact that mobility is often the only way for young people to become independent and separate from their family of origin. In addition, going abroad empowers them by strengthening their social capital. Unlike the period spent within the parental home, where social capital is primarily based on that of their parents, international students have the opportunity to meet new people independently. These new acquaintances lead to the discovery of other cultures, their norms, and values. Sava, a returnee from France, says:

> "*From studying abroad, the most valuable experience for me was meeting so many different nationalities in one place.*" (Sava, 33, returnee from France)

What can be observed in the interviews is the importance of living in student dormitories, which are often, especially in countries with a longer tradition of international student exchange, explicitly designed to accommodate students from different cultural backgrounds. The importance of getting to know and integrating into new cultures is multifaceted. It is primarily recognised in shaping an individual's identity (Vesković Anđelković & Vasojević, 2023) and in acquiring competencies that can be very useful in international relations (Predojević Despić, 2022). Arul, an international student in Serbia, describes the overall impact of international experience on an individual as follows:

"*I feel when you move abroad, you face different situations, you get to experience different things, and this helps you build your character, and it gets you adjusted, you adjust to different situations that life throws at you. I feel like if you should move out of your comfort zone rather than stay in one place, obviously some people prefer the comfort, but if you move abroad, it gives you an opportunity to experience new things and how to adjust to, you know, different challenges. Studying abroad, for example, allows you to experience a new culture, learn a new language, and meet different people. And basically, it develops you as a person, because if you're used to something and you're comfortable, you're not going to build your character yourself. Whereas if you study abroad, you're going to face a variety of different challenges, experiences, good and bad. This will build your character and make you a better person, as you will have been in various situations and will know how to act accordingly*" (Arul, 27, Bangladesh).

What's important to highlight is the recognition of the importance of international migration for institutions, whether a faculty or research institute, where the respondent is studying or employed. The acquisition of human capital is a key benefit of migration, particularly for highly educated individuals. Primarily, the focus is on the transfer of that capital and its investment in the development of the home country, which is why developed countries often encourage young, educated people to gain experience at foreign universities (Grečić, 2010). Jovana, Serbian student in Austria, recognises the importance of migration even for the academic community she belongs to:

"*Well, it can be beneficial for them in the sense that they send their students there who could bring some knowledge back to us, because professors don't usually participate in such exchanges. They are already established individuals, while students, being younger, have the opportunity to go somewhere, learn something new, and perhaps start developing their scientific skills. They might get an idea that they could achieve something here with their instrumentation or possibly improve something they are already working on. Or if some team has an excellent project, it could be based on expanding the science they learned abroad, buying some new instruments, or something like that*" (Jovana, 29, Serbian student in Austria).

On the other hand, respondents also mention the challenges and difficulties they faced, which serve as valuable input for shaping future supportive population policies. Undoubtedly, they identify language as the biggest obstacle to living abroad and integrating into a new society. For this reason, most of them begin by learning the language of the country in which they are. It has become evident that the English language, although often considered universal, is generally not sufficient for everyday life in a foreign country. Respondents note that in some countries, such as

Germany, there is a practice of refusing to speak any language other than the country's official language (Svetozar, 30, Serbian student in Germany). On the other hand, they also report that professors—not only at Serbian universities but also at universities in different countries—often lack sufficient English proficiency to lecture and work effectively with international students (Arul, 27, from Bangladesh; Tamara, 27, Serbian student, returnee from Thailand; Marina, 23, Hungary). This problem often leads students to stop attending lectures, which in turn lowers their academic achievement. This is confirmed by Serbian student studying in Hungary:

> "*On the other hand, a couple of professors at the faculty don't speak English well, and they are the ones teaching me directly. This faculty ranks among the top 200 in the world in our field. How can we address the issue of hiring a professor who doesn't speak proper English? My reaction to that was to decide not to attend those lectures. Maybe that's not the best decision, but I think it's a waste of time to go to a class where I don't understand half of what's being said.*" (Marina, 23, Serbian student, Hungary)

Lack of language proficiency creates challenges both on a personal and institutional level. When it comes to individual difficulties, students struggle with mastering the course material due to a limited understanding of the language. They often have to translate the literature first, which significantly prolongs the learning process and raises concerns about whether they can truly acquire knowledge to its full extent. As a result, international students often show lower academic performance compared to their local peers (Nada & Araujo, 2018). Besiana, shares her experience:

> „*Everything that I do now for the masters takes like double time for me, because of the language, because I have to translate everything either firstly to myself from Serbian, or myself to Serbian if I need to present something. Therefore, everything takes a bit more time.*" (Besiana, 30, Albania).

Another issue, which extends beyond academic success and relates to the individual, is the challenge of integration. The first problem that arises is that, due to insufficient language proficiency, international students struggle with self-presentation, which hinders their ability to establish closer relationships with peers and other members of society. Serbian student, who is currently studying in Austria, says:

> "*Language is something you master over time. It's not a problem now, but there are certain things a person just can't express in another language the way they can in their own. You can't express your feelings the same way—over there, it's all a bit more stiff, at least for me.*" (Jovana, 29, Serbian student, Austria)

Knowing the language is crucial for handling administrative tasks. In some Western European countries, as reported by respondents from Germany, France, and Austria, officials generally do not speak English, which is especially problematic for students who have not yet mastered the local language. However, as noted by a respondent from Germany, in some places, there is even a prohibition on speaking a language other than the country's official language.

> "*They have institutions where foreigners come, where they have their first contact with Germany, and there, by law, they are not allowed to speak English. I asked, 'Do you speak English?' He said, 'I do, but I am not allowed to speak English.' I said, 'But this is an institution and an office for foreigners who have come from who knows where—how do you imagine this working?' They just shrugged their shoulders*" (Svetozar, 30, Serbian student, Germany).

When it comes to Serbia, in addition to the usual administrative difficulties encountered in other countries, one must also consider the signage and forms written in Cyrillic script—a script not used outside Serbia.

> „*And then it was hard to find detailed information because when you have to open these documents that are like scanned, and they are written in Cyrillic*" (Besiana, 30, Albania).

What should not be overlooked, however, is that the positive atmosphere in student dormitories—and society more broadly—is something that greatly aids integration and provides strength to persevere in achieving one's goals. Not a single respondent in the study reported experiencing discrimination or having any issues with anyone at the university or in the broader social environment, despite being aware that they are not fully integrated. Foreign students studying in Serbia particularly emphasise the kindness of people on the street and their peers at university. This gives hope that the population of Serbia, as well as that of other countries where Serbian students go, is becoming more open to immigration, at least when it comes to professionals.

Conclusion

It is indisputable that the benefits of studying abroad are manifold, both for the student and the wider community. Something that has been repeated many times, and which the practice of highly developed countries has confirmed, is that the economy and technological progress are based on knowledge. Moreover, knowledge grows only through exchange and circulation, which is best achieved through cooperation among individuals who acquire it in different circumstances. However, the migration of experts presents a challenge for public policy. Openness to students from diverse countries, cultures, and religions, first and foremost, requires institutional adaptability to meet the needs of these students. Based on the analysis, we have seen that language is one of the main challenges faced by foreign academics. Insufficient language proficiency has consequences not only on academic achievement but also on a personal level, in terms of forming friendships with peers from the host country and in the limited exchange of feelings, goals, and intentions. Therefore, language emerges as a key factor behind students' decisions to abandon their studies abroad.

In response to this challenge, Serbia has introduced the "Serbian as a Foreign Language" program, which is available to all students participating in the "World in Serbia" program. Discussing this foreign language learning program at the workshop "International Academic Migration: Towards a Positive Experience for Students," held within the same project, participants who are either lecturers or users of the program pointed out that despite the good intentions of the initiators and funders, there are problems and a need for further improvement. Respondents noted that the duration of this program is not adequate — this year, the course was extended to one year. Still, even that is insufficient to master the language to a level suitable for studies and integration into Serbian society. Additionally, there is a very limited number of teachers available for this program. Therefore, respondents suggest increasing the financial allocation for this program as well as the number of engaged instructors. One proposal was also to establish a criterion requiring a certain level of language proficiency before arriving in the country, which would ensure the program's effectiveness.

The interviews revealed that insufficient language proficiency has dual consequences, affecting both the individual and institutional levels. Regarding the impact on the individual, the primary concern is improved integration into the social environment. One of the proposals is to design informal social programs for foreigners. For these programs to be successful, it is necessary to allocate more funding for their implementation, find ways to motivate people to participate (for example, awarding extra credits in studies to those who assist colleagues from other countries), and increase their visibility. Better integration and connection with peers positively influence the sense of security, thereby reducing the likelihood of dropout.

What is missing for successful integration is a dedicated body responsible specifically for foreign students. In Serbia, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Centre for Serbian as a Foreign Language, universities, faculties, cultural institutions, and NGOs are involved in this work alongside their other responsibilities. The recommendation is to finance a separate, independent but state institution whose sole responsibility would be working with foreign students. This body would also coordinate the activities of all institutions, which would report what they do and how they support integration.

Last, but not least, is the need to adapt the administration to the needs of this group. Specifically, translating documents into several major world languages, or at least into English, would greatly facilitate navigation. Furthermore, the availability of all procedures on websites was also emphasised in conversations with the respondents. Additionally, administrative staff should use English to avoid poor communication with service users.

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Carina Puiu[1]
Babes-Bolyai University, Romania
Sorana Constantinescu[2]
Babes-Bolyai University, Romania

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INVISIBLE STRINGS AND VISIBLE LAWS: REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN SERBIA, ROMANIA, HUNGARY AND POLAND

Abstract: This article examines how abortion attitudes are shaped in four Central and Eastern European countries, Romania, Serbia, Hungary, and Poland, by exploring the interplay between individual values, trust, and national sociopolitical contexts. Although these countries share post-socialist legacies and similar legislative histories, they differ in levels of access to abortion and public support for reproductive rights. The study pursues two key objectives: (1) to provide a comparative overview of abortion policy development in each country and (2) to analyze how confidence in religious institutions, gender role beliefs, democratic values, and respondents' sex predict attitudes toward abortion. Methodologically, it employs a twofold approach: a qualitative comparison of legislative trajectories and a quantitative analysis of survey data using the World Values Survey and the European Values Study (2017–2022). Findings indicate that trust in churches predicts lower support for abortion only in Romania, while in Poland it has a positive effect, potentially reflecting backlash to restrictive laws. Traditional gender beliefs negatively affect abortion support in Romania and Serbia, but not in Hungary or Poland. Democratic values are positively associated with support in Romania, Serbia, and Hungary, but not Poland. Gender differences also vary by country: men are more supportive in Serbia and Hungary, while in Poland, women express greater support. The results point to the importance of historical, religious, and political contexts in shaping abortion attitudes. They further support theories that interpret anti-abortion sentiment as part of broader anti-gender movements fueled by economic insecurity, cultural backlash, and right-wing populist discourse. These findings highlight the need to situate individual-level attitudes within wider ideological and institutional frameworks.

Keywords: abortion, democratic backsliding, anti-gender mobilization, right-wing populism

1 carina.puiu@stud.ubbcluj.ro, https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0630-3224
2 sorana.constantinescu@fspac.ro, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5040-4562

Nevidljive niti i vidljivi zakoni: reproduktivna prava u Srbiji, Eumuniji, Mađarskoj i Poljskoj

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad razmatra kako se stavovi o abortusu formiraju u četiri zemlje centralne i istočne Evrope – Rumuniji, Srbiji, Mađarskoj i Poljskoj – kroz analizu odnosa između ličnih vrednosti, poverenja i šireg društveno-političkog konteksta. Iako ove zemlje dele post-socijalističko nasleđe i slične zakonodavne tokove, one se razlikuju po stepenu dostupnosti abortusa i podršci javnosti za reproduktivna prava. Istraživanje ima dva glavna cilja: (1) da pruži uporedni pregled razvoja politika abortusa u svakoj od zemalja i (2) da analizira u kojoj meri poverenje u verske institucije, stavovi o rodnim ulogama, demokratske vrednosti i pol ispitanika utiču na stavove o abortusu. Metodološki, studija kombinuje kvalitativnu analizu zakonodavnih tokova sa kvantitativnom obradom podataka iz Svetskog istraživanja vrednosti (World Values Survey) i Evropskog istraživanja vrednosti (European Values Study) (2017–2022). Nalazi pokazuju da poverenje u crkvu predviđa manju podršku abortusu samo u Rumuniji, dok u Poljskoj ima pozitivan efekat – što može ukazivati na otpor prema restriktivnim zakonima. Tradicionalna uverenja o rodnim ulogama negativno utiču na podršku abortusu u Rumuniji i Srbiji, ali ne i u Mađarskoj i Poljskoj. Demokratske vrednosti su povezane s većom podrškom u Rumuniji, Srbiji i Mađarskoj, ali ne i u Poljskoj. Rodne razlike takođe variraju među zemljama: muškarci su skloniji podršci abortusu u Srbiji i Mađarskoj, dok su u Poljskoj žene te koje pokazuju veću podršku. Rezultati ukazuju na značaj istorijskog, verskog i političkog konteksta u oblikovanju stavova o abortusu. Takođe potvrđuju teze da se anti-abortus sentiment može razumeti kao deo šire antirodne mobilizacije koju pokreću ekonomska nesigurnost, kulturni otpor i desničarski populizam. Nalazi naglašavaju potrebu da se individualni stavovi posmatraju u svetlu šireg ideološkog i institucionalnog okvira.

Ključne reči: abortus, slabljenje demokratije, antirodna mobilizacija, desničarski populizam

Introduction

In contemporary Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), gender issues, particularly reproductive rights, have become a focal point in the region's broader political battles over the meaning and direction of democracy. Far from being peripheral, questions of abortion access, bodily autonomy, and gender equality as a whole are now central to understanding the region's political transformations. While gender equality was seen by many as an essential part of the democratization process (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), in recent years we have seen the rise of anti-gender movements targeting abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and other progressive policies – such as the introduction in sex education and even policies aimed at reducing gender violence – which these movements have labelled 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory'(Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). What distinguishes these movements is their deployment of populist strategies, rooted in distorted conceptions of democracy. They often position themselves as defenders of "the people" against corrupt elites and external influences, portraying progressive reforms as imposed threats to national identity and cultural sovereignty (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Śledzińska-Simon, 2020; Zaharijević, 2018). With this volatile ideological landscape, abortion remains one of the most polarizing political issues in CEE, where communist legacies, strong religious influences and shifting political contexts intersect.

Studied countries are all shaped by their communist legacies, though each experienced different forms of state socialism that have left varied cultural and institutional imprints. Religion within the regions also varies, with Romania and Serbia being predominantly Orthodox, while Hungary and Poland are Catholic. The difference in religion is also observed in levels of religiosity, with Romania and Poland being significantly more religious than Hungary and Serbia (Baronavski & Evans, 2018).

Adding to the political context, they also have different standings at European level, with Hungary and Poland being members of the European Union (EU) since 2004, and Romania since 2007, and while Serbia became an EU candidate in 2012, after being a potential candidate since the early 2000s, it has not yet joined the EU (European Commission, 2025).

In terms of legislation, Poland currently enforces one of the most restrictive abortion legislations in the region, permitting the procedure only in case of rape, incest or life-threatening pregnancies (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In the other three countries, abortion on demand is legal, but with different degrees of limitations. Hungary has, over time, put in place several legal obstacles, such as restricting non-surgical abortions (Parker, 2022). In Serbia abortion is possible, although access remains inconsistent and often marked by poor conditions and limited support (Belgrade Center for Human Rights, 2023; Rašević & Sedlecky, 2009), while in Romania access to abortion is limited due to the high number of medics refusing to perform the procedure on religious or moral grounds (Centrul FILIA, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The discussion on anti-abortion attitudes, associated movements, and their ties to right-wing politics is far from new. Scholars were already writing on the topic in the 1980s, in the context of the rise of the anti-abortion movement in the United State. Many of their insights continue to offer relevant theoretical frameworks today (Petchesky, 1985; Luker, 1984; Ehrenreich, 1981; Petchesky, 1981). What we now categorize under the broader umbrella of anti-gender movements were initially theorized as backlash movements, a reaction against societal shifts regarding gender roles, women's participation in the labour market, and their changing status in family and society (Petchesky, 1981). Yet the fact that these movements are reactionary does not render them baseless or insignificant. Rather, they are fueled by anxieties caused by progressive developments that challenge established norms, which is in turn exacerbated by the deepening economic insecurity (Petchesky, 1981).

Since the 1980s, the literature on anti-gender mobilization has expanded significantly. In the European context, scholars have increasingly focused on the regional specificities of these movements, particularly after 2010, when they gained momentum across CEE (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). Within this context, the argument that anti-gender movements are a backlash movement still holds true. Graff & Korolczuk (2022) argue that they are based on anxieties concerning the rise of individualism, with the decline of community values as a consequence, and the growing uncertainty of everyday life. Thus, the right-wing populists instrumentalise the anxieties of people living in socioeconomic precarious conditions, but also of those who are afraid progressive change will lead to the loss of their sociocultural position (Korolczuk, 2020). This is also a point of divergence from previous literature, because contrary to the argument that the United States anti-abortion actors are mostly independent, current literature argues anti-gender movements have become increasingly tied to right-wing populists (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Korolczuk, 2020; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). There are alliances created between ultraconservative activists, right-wing politicians and religious actors (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Moreover, the assumption that these movements are innately neoliberal is no longer accepted, as it has been theorized that anti-gender mobilizations in Europe are shaped as a form of anti-neoliberal resistance (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

In the context of women getting involved in the antifeminist movement and taking anti-abortion stances, Ehrenreich (1981) argues that this happens because this progressive change in the ideas surrounding motherhood and marriage makes women afraid that they will lose the sense of stability and security they provide. This is especially relevant, since the women holding these ideas are usually in a context where they have lower levels of education and income, a higher level of religiosity, got married earlier and are housewives or employed in women dominated fields (Luker, 1984). A historical precedent for this dynamic can be found in socialist Romania, where gender discourse shifted markedly from early egalitarian ideals to a narrative that re-centered women's identity around motherhood and child-rearing responsibilities during the 1970s and 1980s. This shift, clearly visible in the state propaganda discourse targeting women, reveals how official narratives can redirect women's roles toward domesticity in times of political and demographic anxiety (Constantinescu, 2017). As Soare & Tufis (2020) observe, within authoritarian frameworks, motherhood is reaffirmed as a traditional gender role essential not only for national survival but for maintaining social order.

Thus, the way in which women's stances on abortion are influenced by their demographic attributes, splits them into women who fight for welfare policies and women who fight to maintain the status quo because they feel it offers them protection, a split which Ehrenreich (1981) believes is caused by economic crises. This protective stance may also be reinforced by the internalization of sexist gender norms, which shape women's gender identities in ways that naturalize their own subordination and reinforce existing power structures. As Constantinescu (2021) argues, internalized misogyny functions not as the root of gender oppression, but as a mechanism that sustains it, influencing how women view themselves and others, especially when intersecting with other forms of prejudice such as racism or classism. In this sense, internalized misogyny may not only inform attitudes toward other women but also shape how women regulate their own bodies and behaviors in line with dominant gender norms (Constantinescu, 2021).

Anti-abortion attitudes are a complex issue, as they are influenced by different socioeconomic, cultural and political factors. While economic factors are especially important, because economic crises and neoliberal policies mean cuts in social and health services, thereby shifting a substantial share of care responsibilities from the state to women within the family (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), religion also plays a big role in anti-abortion sentiment. Barkan (2014) showed religiosity acts as a suppressor variable when looking at gender differences in abortion attitudes, while religiosity is important not only individually, but also at a national level (Adamczyk, 2022). This focus on religiosity is particularly relevant in CEE, where religion has been deeply intertwined with political history, national identity formation, and anti-gender mobilization. The Catholic Church, for instance, has played a significant role in the 'war on gender', opposing the United Nations' inclusion of the term 'gender' in documents (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017) and aligning itself with ultraconservative networks and right-wing populist parties across the region (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Throughout CEE, religion functions not just as a belief system but as a cultural and political signifier. In Poland, Catholicism remains deeply embedded in national identity, with ultraconservative actors framing "gender ideology" as a threat to the traditional family, nation, and Christian civilization (Azis & Azarine, 2023; Korolczuk, 2020). Similarly, in Romania, the most religious country in Europe (Baronavski & Evans, 2018), the Orthodox Church plays a central role in shaping public values, particularly those connected to family and morality (Turcescu & Stan, 2005). However, when it comes to the anti-abortion campaigns in the country, it was actually the neo-Protestant groups which have been the most active in this sense (Mihai, 2025). Another predominantly Orthodox country, Serbia has seen the increased involvement of the Church in the state since the early 2000s, which has led to the intensification of religious nationalism and backsliding in terms of gender equality (Drezgić, 2010). Meanwhile, in Hungary, where the Catholic Church holds less dominant cultural authority, the Fidesz government has increasingly incorporated Christian references into its public discourse, often invoking traditional values in discussions of national identity and family policy (Halmai, 2018).

Sociopolitical contexts also play a part in attitudes towards abortion, along with the country's affluence or development (Gaskins et al., 2013; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Cross-national research has shown that in countries with more restrictive abortion laws, individuals tend to express lower levels of support for abortion access compared to those in countries with more permissive legislation (Loll & Hall, 2019). This indicates that policy not only reflects public opinion but also actively influences it. One explanation for how this phenomenon works is that policies shape community norms, which are the foundation of individual beliefs and attitudes (Shellenberg et al., 2011). This context becomes even more relevant in CEE countries, where abortion has been ideologically associated with Marxism or leftist ideology and where the discourse against 'gender ideology' consistently uses anti-communist rhetoric (Corrêa et al., 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). However, these narratives vary significantly across national contexts, depending also on each country's political regime (Zhang, 2020) and specific historical experience with abortion policy under communism.

Methods

This study employs two methodological approaches:

1) A comparative analysis on abortion legislation in Romania, Serbia, Hungary, and Poland;

2) A quantitative analysis of attitudes toward abortion, using data from two major cross-national surveys: the World Value Survey and European Value Study (2017-2022 dataset) (EVS/WVS, 2024). All the variables used in the analysis are the same in the two datasets and can be used in a comparison.

Table 1. **Country** *characteristics*

Characteristic/Country	Poland	Hungary	Romania	Serbia
Dominant religion	Catholicism	Catholicism	Orthodoxy	Orthodoxy
Religiosity ranking (out of 34)[3]	8	20	1	10
EU membership	+	+	+	-

To analyze the factors influencing abortion attitudes across these four countries, the study employed a series of multiple linear regression models, estimated independently for each country. This method allows for the simultaneous inclusion of several predictor variables, liberal values, trust in churches, gender-related attitudes, importance of democracy, and sex.

Results and Discussion

Legislative Analysis

Poland liberalized abortion in 1956 to reduce maternal deaths from unsafe abortions (Act of 27 April 1956 on the Conditions for the Termination of Pregnancy), with the obligation to consult two doctors being eliminated in 1959. However, in 1993, after the issue was brought back into debate, abortion became legally restricted again (Act of 7 January 1993), the basis of this change being the adoption of the 1991 Medical Code of Ethics, which declared abortion to be ethical only for medical reasons or if the pregnancy was the result of a crime (Nowicka, 2010). The 1993 law remained in place until recently, with the exception of the period between 1996 and 1997, when a more liberal law was introduced, only to be later declared unconstitutional (Bucholc, 2022). In 2020, the politically controlled Constitutional Court (Wiącek, 2021) ruled that fetal malformation would no longer be considered a legal ground for abortion, effectively instituting a near-total ban (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In Hungary, abortion has been legal since 1953, but restrictive measures have been introduced over time. A 1992 law declared fetal life begins at conception (Act LXXIX of 1992 on the Protection of Fetal Life), and 20 years later, amendments to the law limited access to non-surgical abortion

3 See Baronavski & Evans (2018).

(Parker, 2022). Furthermore, in 2022, the government has introduced a policy, according to which medics are obliged to show signs of life to the mother before performing the abortion (Cursino, 2022). This adds unnecessary psychological barriers to the procedure, by shaming women seeking abortions and it is part of Orbán's pronatalist agenda, in which he also uses anti-migrant rhetoric (Orbán, 2023).

After the legalization of abortion in 1957 (Decree No. 463/1957), Romania took a different direction from the rest of the eastern countries, when Decree 770 was instituted in 1966 (Decree No. 770/1966), banning abortion on socioeconomic grounds. The primary goal of the decree was population growth (Niță & Ile, 2020), linking women's reproductive roles to national identity. The law was repealed in 1990, but although abortion remains legal up to 14 weeks (Romanian Penal Code, Law No. 286/2009), a 2021 report by Centrul FILIA (2021) showed that fewer than 60 of 171 hospitals surveyed offered abortion services, with many doctors refusing on religious or moral grounds). The legacy of Ceaușescu's coercive pronatalism has made lawmakers reluctant to push restrictive legislation, yet public discourse often echoes conservative values that reframe women's reproductive roles as instruments of national survival (Iancu, 2016; Puiu, in press).

In Serbia, abortion was widely practiced on socio-medical grounds since 1952, and the law was later liberalized further in 1969, making abortion on demand possible until the 10th week of pregnancy, without a waiting period (Rašević & Sedlecky, 2009). Abortion debates began in the 1990s, which were defined by an anti-communist and nationalist rhetoric, with the Orthodox Church being involved as a way to regain its sociocultural influence (Drezgić, 2004). However, while there were attempts at making the legislation more restrictive, they all failed, which could be due to the fact that in Serbia, unlike in other CEE countries, feminists had a central role in these debates (Drezgić, 2004). Historically, the Yugoslav space had a different experience than the rest of the Eastern Bloc, as feminism emerged in the 1970s, helped in part the openness of the regime, and it was defined by a diversity of ideas, not fully aligned with either Western, capitalist feminism or the statist Estern model (Zaharijević, 2017).

There are significant differences in terms of how each country dealt with abortion throughout time. However, recent developments, including the anti-abortion campaigns, are part of a bigger, transnational antigender movement. While legal frameworks vary, a common thread across these countries is the way in which state-promoted pro-natalist campaigns and nationalist-religious discourses have increasingly framed women as instruments of demographic recovery, often at the expense of reproductive autonomy. Therefore, while our analysis focuses on individual countries, we look at how attitudes are shaped by broader contexts and how they are interconnected with each other. Our aim is to go beyond national barriers in understanding these dynamics.

Quantitative Analysis

The longitudinal data on abortion attitudes in the analyzed counties reveal persistent yet shifting patterns of societal conservatism, particularly in relation to moral opposition to abortion.

Table 2. Attitudes against abortion[4]

Wave/Country	Poland	Hungary	Romania	Serbia
1981-1984	-	44.3	-	-
1989-1993	59.2	-	-	-
1994-1998	56.8	28.2	38.9	26.3
1999-2004	-	-	-	34.1
2005-2009	64.4	35.1	61	39.5
2010-2014	63.8	-	66.8	-
2017-2022	51.4	33.6	65.4	37.6

Poland consistently exhibits high levels of opposition across all time periods for which data are available, peaking at 64.4% in 2005–2009 and remaining above 50% even in the most recent 2017–2022 wave (51.4%). This pattern aligns with Poland's strong Roman Catholic tradition and the significant influence of the Church on public discourse and policy making.

By contrast, Hungary displays significantly lower levels of opposition, ranging from 28.2% in 1994–1998 to 35.1% in 2005–2009 and slightly decreasing to 33.6% by 2017–2022. Despite its post-socialist context, Hungary's more secularized society likely contributes to more permissive attitudes toward abortion, indicating that religiosity may serve as a key explanatory variable in cross-national differences.

Romania presents a different trajectory. Attitudinal opposition rose sharply from 38.9% in 1994–1998 to 66.8% in 2010–2014 before slightly declining to 65.4% in 2017–2022. This increase may reflect the resurgence of traditionalist and nationalist discourses in the post-accession period, along with the consolidation of Orthodox values in public life. While anti-abortion discourses is part of anti-gender mobilization, Romania is a

4 "Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between: Abortion", measured on a scale from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable). For the table we have used the added value of *1+2+3*.

particular case due the legacy of Ceaușescu's abortion ban that remains deeply embedded in Romania's collective memory, particularly among older generations who witnessed its devastating consequences firsthand, including the high number of women deaths, unsafe procedures, and institutionalized children neglect. This historical trauma has tempered the popularity of overtly restrictive abortion discourse, making it a politically sensitive issue that many actors approach with caution. While there have been attempts to link anti-abortion to anti-LGBT and other anti-gender discourses, we cannot say that it has been successful. Nonetheless, the 2018 "Referendum for the Family" and subsequent legislative efforts to restrict gender education illustrate how abortion and gender equality continue to be politicized as part of a broader backlash against perceived liberal encroachments, suggesting that the symbolic framing of reproductive rights may intensify in future debates.

Serbia shows a somewhat similar pattern of increased opposition, rising from 26.3% in the mid-1990s to 39.5% in 2005–2009 and stabilizing around 37.6% in the latest wave.

Overall, the data suggest a complex interplay between religiosity, historical legacies, and evolving political climates. While Hungary's relatively low levels of abortion opposition seem to diverge from regional trends, both Poland and Romania demonstrate how religious and institutional factors can reinforce moral conservatism over time. To better understand these links, comparative regression models were constructed. In each country, a liberal values index was computed by averaging responses to the following items: justifiability of divorce, homosexuality, suicide, casual sex, and sex before marriage. Item availability varied slightly by country, but all versions reflected the same underlying construct. Reliability was acceptable across all four samples:

Table 3. **Reliability** *analysis for liberal values index*

Country	Number of Items[5]	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Romania	5	.738
Serbia	5	.627
Poland	4	.805
Hungary	4	.726

The dependent variable is "Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified,

5 Items: justifiability of divorce, homosexuality, suicide, casual sex, and sex before marriage for Romania and Serbia, and justifiability of divorce, homosexuality, suicide, casual sex for Poland and Hungary.

or something in between: Abortion", measured on a scale from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable)

Hypothesis

H1: Individuals with more liberal values are more likely to support the justification of abortion;

H2: Confidence in religious institutions in negatively associated with support for abortion;

H3: Individuals who express stronger adherence to traditional gender roles are less likely to support abortion;

H4: Valuing democracy is positively associated with abortion support.

H5: Across all countries, women will express greater support for abortion than men

Table 4. **Standardized** *Regression Coefficients (β), dependent variable: justifiable abortion, WVS and EVS 2017-2022*

Predictor	Romania	Serbia	Poland	Hungary
Liberal values	.649*	.597*	.606*	.619*
Men better business executives	−.096**	.016 (ns)	−.017 (ns)	.013 (ns)
Men better political leaders	−.031 (ns)	−.080*	−.008 (ns)	.029 (ns)
Confidence in churches	−.058*	−.015 (ns)	.171*	.030 (ns)
Importance of democracy	.053*	.076**	.035 (ns)	.072
Sex	+.023 (ns)	+.073**	−.053*	+.059**
Model R^2	.418	.370	.491	.419
Adjusted R^2	.414	.366	.487	.416

Note. p <.05 (*). p <.01 (**), ns = not significant.

Across all four countries, liberal moral values were the strongest predictors of abortion support, consistently showing large, positive, and statistically significant effects. The strength and direction of other predictors, however, varied.

We opted for Confidence in churches, as this variable captures respondents' perceptions of institutional legitimacy and moral authority, which is particularly relevant in understanding how religious institutions influence attitudes toward abortion in post-communist societies. Rather than focusing on individual spiritual behavior – that was tested in the pre-analysis without relevant results, this measure reflects the extent to which people accept religious bodies as credible and influential actors in public and moral life. Only in Romania did trust in churches predict lower abortion support (β = −.058), suggesting an enduring moral authority of the Orthodox Church. Poland, in contrast, exhibited a positive effect of confidence in churches (β = .171*), and while unexpected, this could be explained by the public backlash against recent abortion restrictions. In Serbia and Hungary, confidence in churches was not a significant factor.

If for Poland and Hungary both variables measuring gender roles were non-significant, in Romania and Serbia they have a significant negative effect on abortion support; those who hold more traditional views on gender roles in the economic or political sphere are also more likely to reject abortion.

The perceived importance of democracy emerged as a significant positive predictor of abortion justification in Romania (β = .053), Serbia (β = .076**), and Hungary (β = .072), while it was not statistically significant in Poland. In the countries where it was significant, this finding suggests that individuals who value democracy tend to also support women's rights. Support for abortion in this framework may reflect an understanding of democracy as a guarantor of private choice and bodily autonomy. However, the non-significant result in Poland points to a more complex relationship. In recent years, Poland has undergone a period of democratic backsliding and the findings are aligned with the changing nature of democratic discourse under regimes with illiberal tendencies. As Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue, right-wing populist actors in Poland have redefined democratic values through a moral lens, framing "real democracy" as rooted in tradition, national sovereignty, and the protection of the so-called natural family. Within this framework, individual rights, particularly those linked to gender and bodily autonomy, are often portrayed as threats to societal cohesion rather than as democratic entitlements. Thus, while democracy elsewhere in the region is associated with personal freedom and gender equality, in Poland, its public interpretation may be increasingly decoupled from liberal rights, leading to the observed lack of correlation. This divergence underscores the importance of understanding democracy not just as a procedural concept, but as an evolving cultural and ideological construct shaped by national context and political rhetoric.

Looking at the influence the respondent's sex has on the dependent variable, we can see that in Serbia and Hungary men are significantly more supportive of abortion than women, while in Poland women are more supportive on the matter. As Poland has one of the most restrictive abortion legislation in the area, we can hypothesize that the difference in the 3 countries comes from women's direct experience with the consequences of limited access. Interestingly, Romania stands out as the only country where sex is not a significant predictor. Notably, it is also the only case where confidence in churches has a significant negative effect on abortion support. This alignment supports Barkan's (2014) argument that religiosity can function as a suppressor variable in gendered analyses, possibly masking the effects of gender when religious authority plays a dominant normative role.

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the context-dependent and multi-layered nature of abortion attitudes across post-communist CEE. While some predictors display significant cross-national variation, others offer compelling insights into how institutional trust, gender norms, political values, and sociocultural legacies converge to shape public opinion.

Trust in religious institutions, measured through confidence in churches, emerged as a powerful contextual variable. In Romania, lower abortion support among those with higher church confidence suggests the enduring moral authority of the Orthodox Church, consistent with historical patterns where official narratives reinforced motherhood as a national and moral imperative (Constantinescu, 2017; Soare & Tufiş, 2020). In contrast, Poland showed a surprising positive correlation, potentially reflecting backlash to institutional overreach and growing public dissent following the Constitutional Court's near-total ban. This dynamic echoes Petchesky's (1981) foundational argument that anti-abortion attitudes are not static but shaped by complex social anxieties in response to shifting ideological climates.

The role of traditional gender norms was significant in Romania and Serbia but not in Poland and Hungary. This discrepancy may speak to different phases of backlash politics (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). In line with Ehrenreich's (1981) and Luker's (1984) early work, those holding more conservative views around women's roles in society often support anti-abortion stances to preserve what they perceive as protective, stabilizing frameworks, especially in contexts of socioeconomic precarity.

Democratic values proved to be robust predictors of support for abortion in three of the four countries, highlighting a possible connection between reproductive autonomy and liberal democratic imaginaries. These results reinforce Inglehart & Welzel's (2005) theory that value shifts toward individual autonomy and secular-rationalism increase alongside societal development. However, Poland's lack of significance complicates this picture, suggesting, in line with Zhang (2020), that political regimes and institutional erosion may distort or decouple democratic ideals from gender equality commitments.

Sex differences in abortion attitudes were also notable. While women typically show more support for abortion (Loll & Hall, 2019), our findings complicated this narrative. In Serbia and Hungary, men were more supportive, while in Poland, where abortion restrictions are most severe, women's support exceeded men's. These results likely reflect not only legal context but the emotional and embodied impact of abortion bans on women's lives. Osborne et al. (2022) further nuanced this, showing how even well-intentioned or "benevolent" sexism, rooted in idealized visions of motherhood, can subtly suppress both men's and women's support for reproductive rights.

Importantly, these findings must be understood within the broader theoretical landscape of anti-gender mobilizations in the region. As Graff & Korolczuk (2022) argue, post-2010 anti-abortion and anti-gender movements across CEE function as populist backlashes against perceived threats to community stability, fueled by economic insecurity and fear of status loss. Their alignment with right-wing populists and religious institutions represents a shift from earlier, more fragmented mobilizations (Korolczuk, 2020), forging a powerful ideological front that repositions reproductive control as part of a broader culture war.

Ultimately, this study affirms that abortion attitudes are not merely reflections of personal beliefs or moral frameworks, they are shaped by institutional trust, cultural narratives, religious legitimacy, gendered expectations, and political strategy. Understanding them requires a critical lens that accounts not only for individual-level predictors but also for the transnational discourses, historical traumas, and sociopolitical alliances that continue to define the reproductive landscape in CEE.

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URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND IDENTITY

Vera Backović[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Philosophy

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HOW DOES RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATION CHANGE THE URBAN SYMBOLS OF BELGRADE?

Abstract: A city's identity is based on a heterogeneous set of elements, among which material symbolism is very important since it is the basis of the visual representation and the city's silhouette. Nas's typology of symbolism was modified for the analysis of medium-sized cities in Serbia and then applied to examine the urban identity of Belgrade.

In the last fifteen years, several housing projects have been started in Belgrade, and the Belgrade Waterfront Project (BWP) stands out because it radically transformed the existing urban structure by gentrifying a large centrally located area in the city. The paper's main aim is to analyze the perception of urban change and its impact on the city's identities based on three empirical studies conducted from 2018 to 2024 by the Institute for Sociological Research. Findings based on the first qualitative research (2018/19) show that Belgrade is positively evaluated as not a standardized tourist location. During that period, BWP was in the first phase of construction. In the second online survey (2021), members of the academic community in Belgrade criticize the commercialization of the city space and the direction of its development. The third online survey (2024) includes the student population, which was assumed to have a more positive attitude towards contemporary urban changes. However, this hypothesis was not confirmed. Namely, social science and humanities students don't recognize and don't accept BWP as a symbol of the city.

Keywords: urban change, gentrification, symbols of the city, Belgrade

Kako radikalna urbana transformacija menja urbane simbole Beograda?

Apstrakt: Identitet grada zasniva se na heterogenom skupu elemenata, među kojima materijalni simbolizam zauzima važno mesto, pošto je on osnova vizuelnog prikaza i siluete grada. Nasova tipologija simbolizma je modifikovana za analizu

1 vera.backovic@f.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4850-9247

gradova srednje veličine u Srbiji, a zatim primenjena za ispitivanje urbanog identiteta Beograda.

U Beogradu se u poslednjih petnaest godina započeto je više stambenih projekata od kojih se izdvaja projekat Beograd na vodi / Belgrade Waterfront Project (BWP) jer je radikalno transformisao postojeću urbanu strukturu džentrifikujući veliko područje u centralnom delu grada. U radu se analizira percepcija urbanih promena i njihov uticaj na identitet grada Beograda na osnovu tri empirijska istraživanja koja je sproveo Institut za sociološka istraživanja u periodu od 2018. do 2024. godine. Nalaz prvog kvalitativnog istraživanja (2018/19) pokazuje da se pozitivno vrednuje da Beograd nije standardizovana turistička lokacija. U tom periodu BWP je u prvoj fazi izgradnje. U drugom online istraživanju (2021), pripadnici akademeske zajednice u Beogradu kritikuju komercijalizaciju gradskog prostora i pravac njegovog razvoja. Treće online istraživanje (2024) obuhvata studentsku populaciju, za koju se pretpostavilo da ima pozitivniji stav prema savremenim urbanim promenama. Međutim, navedena pretpostavka nije potvrđena, naime studenti društveno-humanističkih nauka ne prepoznaju i ne prihvataju BWP kao simbol grada.

Ključne reči: urbana promena, džentrifikacija, simboli grada, Beograd

Introduction

Material symbolism, although only one element of a city's identity, is a crucial aspect in its formation, as it represents its physical foundation. Urban architecture in general, various cultural and historical monuments and buildings are particularly important because they form the basis of the visual appearance and silhouette of the city. As a city develops over time, its morphology changes, so the city's identity is not fixed but is subject to change, especially in cases of significant alterations to the urban structure. As the processes of privatisation and commercialisation have intensified in recent years, their consequences in urban space have become more evident in Belgrade. This paper aims to analyse how urban changes affect the identities of Belgrade based on three surveys.

The analysis is based on data from three empirical exploratory surveys conducted from 2018 to 2024 by the Institute for Sociological Research. The first survey "Territorialization of transnational discourses and practices in Belgrade" was conducted with various experts, including foreign experts who lived and worked in Belgrade at the time of the research, as well as local experts whose work is related to foreign companies. The interviews were conducted in the last months of 2018 and the first months of 2019. The sample consisted of 42 respondents, including 21 local residents and 21 foreign citizens.

In the second online research, "Everyday life in a globalizing city – discourses and practices of employees at universities in Belgrade", the sample was 230 respondents employed at the University of Belgrade and the University of Arts. It was conducted in April and May 2021. A third online survey, "Identity of Belgrade", was carried out in November 2024. It included 173 respondents – students of social and humanities at the University of Belgrade.

Theoretical Framework – Urban Symbolism

The theoretical framework was developed for analysing medium-sized cities in Serbia (Spasić & Backović, 2017) and subsequently applied to the study of Belgrade's urban identity (Spasić & Backović, 2020; Backović, 2024). It is based on the typology of urban symbolism by Nas et al. (Nas, Jaffe & Samuels, 2006; Nas, De Groot & Schut, 2011), which was modified in accordance with the local urban context (Spasić & Backović, 2017; Spasić & Backović, 2020).

According to Nas et al., the category of material symbolism is not homogeneous but consists of several elements. It encompasses the material urban configuration, as well as specific objects and their relationship to the natural environment[2]. Among others, it comprised urban architecture (main streets, city centres, architecture in general or individual neighbourhoods) and monuments and buildings. Among the latter, one can distinguish religious objects (such as mosques and churches), historical structures (for example, fortresses, old towns and archaeological sites) and cultural buildings (theatres, museums). Other types of urban symbolism are discursive (stories about the city), personal/iconic (famous people – historical figures, writers, painters, actors), behavioral (patterns of collective behavior), emotional, gastronomic and sign symbolism.[3]

As a city is a place of festivals, carnivals, fairs, exhibitions and demonstrations, in some cases, it is known precisely for these patterns of collective behavior, the so-called behavioral symbolism, which then have an important place in the identity of these cities. This is the primary meaning of this symbolism, while the secondary one, also grounded in the elements of city identity in Serbia, focuses on characteristic activities in a particular city (Spasić & Backović, 2017).

2 The relationship between the natural and built environment can refer to integration with nature or the inclusion of nature/green spaces in the city itself (Spasić & Backović, 2017).

3 In the analysis of the identity of cities in Serbia, the importance of food and drink, as well as the coat of arms, was noted; therefore, two new categories were included in the typology of symbolism: gastronomic and sign symbolism.

Contextual Framework

At the beginning of the second phase of the post-socialist transformation (2000) – unblocked post-socialist transformation (Lazić, 2011), the processes of privatization and commercialization that are reshaping the city space are intensifying. The actions of the market and the rent gap (Smith) led to frequent changes in ownership and the functions of buildings in central city locations (Sykora, 1993; Stanilov, 2007). The question of the identity of the city and its symbols is opened up in public when recognizable buildings are closed.

The emergence of new urban actors (investors and private construction companies), the withdrawal of the state and the reduction of its regulatory role, accompanied by a weak institutional framework, created opportunities for the dominance of investor urbanism, which threatens public space and the public interest/good (Vujović & Petrović, 2007; Petovar, 2006; Petrović, 2009).

The effect of the rent[4] and functional gap theory[5] is manifested in the frequent changes in the purpose of buildings and owners, first in central locations, and then spreading to other parts of the city. Changes in space in Belgrade due to privatization and commodification have caused public controversy, and the most famous examples are the following: in 2000, the first bookstore to close was the Jugoslovenska knjiga, when the trend of opening shops instead of bookstores began. Soon, one of the most famous kafana in the city, Pod lipom, was closed and Pizza Hut opened in its place, in 2003 (Belić & Bukvić, 2013). In the following years, many restaurants / kafane were on the verge of closing. Also, Cafe Ruski car changed owners and was first part of the Vapiano restaurant chain (2012, see B. R., 2012), then Monument.

In the last fifteen years, several housing projects have been started in Belgrade, and the Belgrade Waterfront Project (BWP) stands out because it radically transformed the existing urban structure by gentrifying a large area in a central city (Backović, 2019).[6] The national level of government played a decisive role in launching the project and implementing modifications to the institutional framework to enable its implementation

4 A rent gap exists between the current value of property or land and its potential value, thus attracting profit-driven investors (Smith, 1987).

5 Sykora mentions the following ways in which the existing state of urban space use is transformed: the reuse of empty and abandoned buildings; replacing less efficient industrial or commercial activities with more efficient ones; and the conversion of apartments into office space or luxury apartments; and construction of new buildings on previously unused land (Sykora, 1993, p. 290).

6 The K-district near the Belgrade Fortress, on the site of the former Beko factory, also stands out.

(Zeković et al., 2018, Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019).[7] The project has direct consequences for the city's transport infrastructure, its size is disproportionate, and the ongoing removal of the Sava Bridge for the Belgrade Waterfront (2024/2025) will further burden the existing, already overloaded infrastructure. An expansion in the direction of the Belgrade Fair, Kamenička Street and on the other side of the river (2025) has also been announced, which is expected to have a further impact on the city centre and the city as a whole.

To bring shopping activities back to the city centre[8], the Rajićeva Shopping Centre was opened next to the Belgrade City Library (2017) at the end of Knez Mihailova Street. The shopping centre building overshadowed the library building, especially the roof structure. Another library is facing the consequences of this kind of urban development, the construction of a three-story underground garage on Skerlićeva Street posing a threat to the National Library of Serbia (2024/2025).

Recently, the influence of neoliberalism has become more radical and obvious in urban space. Thus, the Hotel Jugoslavija[9] (2024) was demolished to make way for a luxury residential complex with a view of the Danube.

The BWP expansion plan is heading towards the Belgrade Fair[10], where Hall 1 has a protected status (for now, it has been planned that the facility will remain in its existing form, but with a changed purpose). A particularly controversial case is the General Staff Building (2024–). In 2005, the building was protected and given the status of a cultural property. It is a building of undeniable historical, cultural, architectural and symbolic importance.[11] The illegal removal of the status enabled its sale, intending to convert it into a luxury hotel.

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7 Among others: Agreement on Cooperation between the governments of Serbia and the UAE (March 2013); Modifications of the Planning and Construction Act from 2009 (December 2014); 'Lex specialis' enacted in urgent procedure (April 2015) (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019, pp. 655-656).

8 Previous shopping centres are located outside the centre, primarily in New Belgrade (3).

9 The construction of the Hotel marked the beginning of New Belgrade's development, making it a symbol of that period (Bogunović, 2005).

10 At the time of construction, it represented the pinnacle of the domestic construction industry. The dome of Hall 1, with a span of 106 meters, was constructed using a semi-prefabricated system and remained unique in the world for a long time (Bogunović, 2005, p. 69).

11 A masterpiece of modern architecture in the capital (Bogunović, 2005, p. 220), the only preserved work of Nikola Dobrović in Belgrade, a symbol of modernism, dedicated to the Battle of Sutjeska in the Second World War, was damaged during NATO bombing in 1999. The example of the General Staff, according to Popadić, illustrates how the memory connotation of a building changes from "an architectural monument, through a through a site of devastation, to a polygon for political juggling

Material Symbolism as the Basis of the City's Identity

When it comes to material symbolism, it is most often mentioned that Belgrade is recognizable by its location on rivers, i.e. the Sava, the Danube, or both, as well as their confluence, then the historical complex Kalemegdan and the Pobednik monument. The two "images of the city/panorama" that the respondents give are the view of Kalemegdan, Pobednik and the Cathedral from New Belgrade, and the view from Kalemegdan to New Belgrade. When it comes to specific objects, the following are mentioned: the Temple of St. Sava, Knez Mihajlova Street, Republic Square and the monument of Knez Mihajlo, the Cathedral Church, the Gardoš Tower in Zemun and, less often, Topčider, Košutnjak (parks in the city).

Despite many symbols from the category of material symbolism, the primary finding of the first research is that Belgrade's identity is rooted in behavioral symbolism (Spasić and Backović, 2020; Backović, 2024). Belgrade is known as a lively city with warm and friendly residents, numerous cafes, bars and restaurants/kafane – a city with a soul and a special atmosphere. The following quotes describe it:

> *This is a living city and it is made up of people who really try to keep it alive. Whenever you want to go somewhere in Belgrade, be it Tuesday or Saturday, you can find something that will be good for you. I think it's hard for someone to be bored in Belgrade, while it's very easy to be bored in Vienna, where you can't even buy cigarettes anywhere at eight o'clock in the evening, you can't see people on the street, especially on weekdays.* (RD3)
>
> *I like the outdoor life, cafes, the way people are socializing in cafes and streets. Both me and my wife we actually like the atmosphere in Belgrade, the way people are, we feel that we are welcomed.* (RF5)
>
> *There is this aspect of people like to go out and interact with people. The fact that you have concept "bašta" when it comes to cafes and bars, it is really cool, you don't have that in many other places... they (people) are willing to interact, they are not isolated, they are at the open, they are socializing.* (RF12)

The atmosphere of the city is also associated with disorganization, contradiction and a certain level of inconsistency. This is manifested in the lack of maintenance of the housing stock (building facades) and the poor functioning of the traffic system (crowded public transport, traffic jams, parking problems, and insufficient bicycle lanes). The overall traffic infrastructure is not adequately developed, and streets and sidewalks are neglected.

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with public resources«, indicating the importance of constant care for memory contents (Popadić, 2018).

Breaking rules that are not common in other European cities and relate to the administration and regulation of opening hours of shops and cafes (some shops are open 24 hours a day and some bars and restaurants are open beyond their assigned hours). Of particular note is the lack of a smoking ban and that smoking is allows indoors.

> *But there's a lot of very stupid administration, there's a lot of papers you wrestle with all the time... But I like is that you can always find a way, I've never found anything that I can't... you know... there's always a way, it takes a while sometimes to find out how to do it, or somebody can tell you*. (RF18)

During the city's development, the existing urban configuration and heritage were not always taken into account, resulting in unusual combinations rather than harmonious urban areas. This influenced the formation of material symbolism. When it comes to this type of symbolism, visual, historical, and stylistic diversity is recognized. This diversity can also be described as a mixture or confusion. It fits into a pattern of contradiction and chaos, so it is in line with behavioral symbolism. The mixed influences of different historical civilizations are also due to Belgrade's border position in terms of geography and political and cultural history.

> *First time I came to Serbia the thing that shocking me the most when we were walking around the city is, like, the combination of the architectures, like this really old falling apart stuff with this futuristic, modern stuff*. (RF11)
>
> *When you come and see... and actually everything work in a weird way. I haven't been in so many cities in this area but if you goes north lie in Hungary or Austria everything is more beautiful, nice houses and everything is in order and if you go south that's Turkey or Greece or that way. It seems me even more celtic in the middle of that. So mix those two sides.You can even seen ... If you go to Zemun it's bit of Austria or Hungary. If you are in Kalemegdan and look behind you that is Turkey*. (RF6)

The disregard for urban standards has led to a specific urban structure. This has been especially evident in the last decade. The processes of neoliberal transformation of the city are underway, but the consequences in the urban space are not yet so radical. The Belgrade Waterfront Project (BWP) is in the first construction phase. In July 2018, the first building was completed, and residents were announced to move in.

The first survey (2018/2019) highlighted that the city centre is not just for tourists. The city space has not been standardized and touristified to the point where it has completely displaced the local population and amenities. As tourists and foreigners have the opportunity to experience the city and meet its residents, they can participate in the daily life of the local population, allowing them to feel the unique atmosphere of Belgrade. This distinctiveness is manifested in the experience of the city as a place where one lives.

> *The thing specific about Belgrade is its personality... it's not corporatized in the way that many other cities have. You don't have so many kind of uniform chain shops or uniformity... There are many cities you can go to where you get just the same experience, from one city to the next, and there's no difference. But I think that Belgrade something that's different, that is unique*. (RF13)

On the other hand, the authorities' efforts are focused on attracting tourists, especially during the New Year holidays (Tanjug, Blic, 2018). To this end, investments are being made in decorating the city, which has raised questions about the justification of the costs, especially the Christmas tree that was placed in the city center. At the time the research was conducted, the topic was current.[12]

> *But the Christmas decoration is something that is captivating the mind of all expats – why do you have so many Christmas decorations for so long*? (RF17)
>
> *Christmas lights all time* (ironic laugh). RF19

Regarding the direction of the city's development, although it is not in particular focus, some respondents criticize it:

> *They try to present all those Waterfront area as a brand, and Beton hala, walking by the river, but is so problematic. Rivers are brand but they are take it in the wrong way*. (RF20)

Although it is a different context, the respondent emphasised the following when describing housing conditions:

> *I like the fact that the rivers are present, although I was bit surprised that the construction is not really ... adequate. I tried to rent a flat by the river, with a river view, it was not possible. I mean, whatever is available is very limited and it was already rented out or it is owned by people who are living there. The only thing that is left is this new project, this Waterfront thing, which I find pity that is down there*. (RF10)

In the second survey, the same symbols of the city were identified as in the first (Table 1). Since it was an online survey, the answers are more specific, while in the interviews, respondents had the opportunity to explain their views in more detail.

12 The previous year, news appeared in the media that the local authorities were ready to pay more than 80,000 euros for the New Year's tree. After the media announcement, the contract was not implemented (see Danas Online, 2017).

Table 1. What makes Belgrade recognizable?

	%
Kalmegdan	27.4
Lively city, atmosphere, bars, restaurants, nightlife	19.8
Rivers and confluence	17.0
Open people and hospitality	11.8
Negative features	10.8
A blend of traditional and modern	2.4
Pobednik	2.4

What is significantly different from the first is that, in addition to bad traffic and criticism of nightlife, negative characteristics also include the accelerated commercialization of urban space. The results of the second study showed that the contemporary development of Belgrade is dominated by the commercialization of space, which leads to the loss of local specificities. Much more explicitly than in the previous study, the academic community has clearly recognized this trend (Backović, 2024). They point out that in this process the city's characteristics that distinguished Belgrade from other cities are being lost. The touristification of Skadarlija, the destruction of Savamala, the riverbanks, have led to the previous "*Belgrade no longer existing*" (IS177) and that it has turned "*into a shapeless mass that can be seen everywhere in the world*". (IS163)

The image that is the symbol of Belgrade and its position – the confluence and Kalemegdan are "*obscured and corrupted by Belgrade Waterfront project*" (IS96). The confluence and Kalemegdan have been identified in all studies as undoubted symbols of the city. According to the findings, the commercialization of urban space has led to the loss of local identity.

The third survey included students from the social sciences and humanities (the sample size was 173). It was carried out in November 2024, prior to the start of student protests and blockades. The results would probably have been more critical if it had been conducted a little later.[13]

The student perspective is somewhat different compared to the previous one, and some differences are observed – as expected, negative characteristics are mentioned to a lesser extent (Table 2).

13 The students in the blockade organized a Protest for the General Staff on March 24 (they submitted an initiative to the Constitutional Court to assess the constitutionality of the decision that revoked the status of cultural property). In addition, they organized several discussions on the importance and protection of cultural heritage, especially with regard to the General Staff.

Table 2. What makes Belgrade recognizable?

	%
History, cultural – historical monuments	24.9
Nightlife, bars, restaurants	17.9
Kalemegdan	15.0
Capital city	11.0
Open people and hospitality	4.6
It's crowded; Negative features	4.0
Belgrade Waterfront Project	1.2

In previous surveys, this wasn't the case, for the first time, students recognised, to a small extent, the Belgrade Waterfront and West 65 as a symbol of the city (Table 2 and 3).

Table 3. What is the symbol of Belgrade?

	%
Kalemegdan	28.9
Pobednik	22.0
Temple of Saint Sava	11.0
The coat of arms and flag	5.2
Avala, Tower, Monument of the Unkown Hero	4.0
Rivers, Sava, Dunav, confluence	4.0
Belgrade Waterfront project, West 65	1.7

First, open-ended questions were asked about the recognizability of Belgrade and its symbols (previous tables). Then, photos were offered, and respondents were asked whether they considered them symbols of Belgrade. Most respondents answered affirmatively for all of the offered symbols except in three cases – caffes, New Belgrade and Belgrade Waterfront (Table 4).

Table 4. Is the symbol of Belgrade in the picture?

	Yes	No	I don't know
Confluence and Kalemegdan	98.8	0.6	0.6
Caffes	22.0	68.8	9.2
Republic square	91.9	5.2	2.9
Skadarlija	73.4	18.5	8.1
Pobednik	94.8	1.7	3.5
Temple of Saint Sava	96.5	2.9	0.6
New Belgrade	36.4	55.5	8.1
Avala tower	78.0	17.3	4.6
Nightlife	46.8	39.3	13.9
Belgrade Waterfront	39.3	54.3	6.4
Cathedral Church of St. Michael the Archangel	54.9	28.3	16.8
Gardoš	55.5	27.2	17.3
Kafana	48.0	41.6	10.4
Ada	66.5	20.8	12.7

The hypothesis was that the younger population would be more open to accepting the city's new symbols and would be more inclined towards BW because of the different content it offers. This hypothesis was not confirmed because in the first case, when they had to choose a city symbol independently, BW was rarely mentioned, and even when identifying the symbol in the picture, the majority answered negatively. Regarding the image of the cafe, it is possible that the selected image does not accurately represent the atmosphere of the full cafes in the city.

Conclusion

Based on the data collected in three surveys, it can be concluded that changes in the city over time have influenced the identity of Belgrade. There have been key changes in the urban structure over the last 15 years. Findings from the first qualitative survey (2018/19) indicate that Belgrade is positively evaluated as a non-touristic city. During that period, BWP was in the first phase of construction. In a second online survey (2021), members of the academic community in Belgrade more explicitly criticize the commercialization of urban space and the direction of its development, in which BV plays a central role. The third online survey (2024) includes the student population, which was assumed to have a more positive attitude towards contemporary urban changes. However, the stated hypothesis was not confirmed. Namely, students of social sciences and humanities don't recognize and don't accept BWP as a symbol of the city.

In summary, the characteristics of contemporary urban development are as follows: closing of iconic cultural sites and city places – changes in the use and ownership of buildings; reduction of green areas – privatization of public and green areas for new apartment blocks or for expanding parking spaces and threatening cultural and historical heritage and cultural institutions – new housing projects, shopping centres, garages, hotels... The identity of Belgrade is based on behavioral symbolism, the basis of which is material symbolism. Its changes, the disruption of the existing urban structure, affect the atmosphere, the soul of the city, thus changing the identity of Belgrade, directly creating new symbols that are not accepted and tearing up the urban structure that is the weft of behavioral symbolism.

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Božidar Filipović[1]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation
Irena Stojković[2]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation
Marijana Veselinović[3]
University of Belgrade, Serbia
Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation

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SHOULD WE GHOST GOFFMAN? SELF-PRESENTATION ON INSTAGRAM AMONG HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Abstract: In this paper, we will explore the possibilities of analyzing visual content on social media. Specifically, we are interested in whether Goffman's theory can be applied to the analysis of Instagram. The intention is to investigate how and in what ways the key concepts of Goffman's theory can be "translated" in order to gain new insights. Concepts such as region, team, and role distance. Such an attempt opens up new possibilities in the analysis of social media, but at the same time presents new challenges. The main challenge lies in the way and possibilities of articulating Goffman's dramaturgical model outside the context of face-to-face interaction. The act of comparison requires finding new ways to utilize the theoretical "tools" that Goffman has left us as a legacy. On the one hand, there is the danger of oversimplifying his theory, reducing it to mere analogies without any "added value." On the other hand, there is the risk of denying the significance of the new and different context of its application. Our reconsideration of the possible applications of Goffman's theory has been encouraged by a specific research task, namely the project 'Youth Identity Development Through the Use of Digital Media', supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. The project is led by the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. Part of the project is the content analysis of Instagram profiles of high school and university students. The project also includes other research methods:

1 filipovic.bozidar1@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7805-7213
2 irenas@fasper.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4264-7983
3 anamarijana93@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4457-1487

a survey (with the largest number of participants) and a focus group interview. However, these parts (of the research) will not be the focus of this paper. The aim of this paper is to outline the theoretical foundations for the potential analysis of empirical material collected for the purpose of content analysis.

Key words: Goffman, dramaturgical model, Instagram, Region, Teams, Role Distance

Da li da ignorišemo Gofmana? Samopredstavljanje na Instagramu među srednjoškolcima i studentima

Apstrakt: U ovom radu ćemo istražiti mogućnosti analize vizuelnih sadržaja na društvenim mrežama. Konkretno, zanima nas da li se Gofmanova teorija može primeniti u analizi Instagrama. Namera rada je da se istraži kako i na koji način se ključni pojmovi Gofmanove teorije mogu „prevesti" kako bi se došlo do novih saznajnih uvida. Pojmovi kao što su: region, tim i distanca od uloge. Ovakav pokušaj otvara nove mogućnosti u analizi društvenih mreža, ali istovremeno postavlja i nove izazove. Osnovni izazov ogleda se u načinu i mogućnostima artikulacije Gofmanovog dramaturškog modela izvan konteksta interakcija „licem u lice". Sam čin komparacije zahteva pronalaženje novih načina da se teorijski „alati" koje nam je Gofman ostavio u nasleđe iskoriste. S jedne strane, postoji opasnost od pojednostavljenja njegove teorije, svedene na puko poređenje bez ikakve „dodate vrednosti". S druge strane, rizikuje se negiranje značaja novog i drugačijeg konteksta njene primene. Naše preispitivanje mogućih primena Gofmanove teorije podstaknuto je konkretnim istraživačkim zadatkom, i to projektom „Izgradnja identiteta mladih kroz upotrebu digitalnih medija", koji finansira Fond za nauku Republike Srbije. Projekat realizuje Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet za specijalnu edukaciju i rehabilitaciju. Jedan deo projekta predstavlja analiza sadržaja Instagram profila učenika srednjih škola i studenata. On obuhvata i druge metode: anketa (sa najvećim brojem učesnika) i fokus grupni intervju. Navedeni delovi (istraživanja) neće biti u fokusu ovog rada. Cilj ovog rada je postavljanje nacrta teorijskih temelja potencijalne analize empirijske građe prikupljene u svrhu analize sadržaja.

Ključne reč: Gofman, dramaturški model, Instagram, region, tim, distanca od uloge

Introduction

Umberto Eco once said: "A text is a machine for producing interpretations" (Eco 1979, p. 195). This sentence succinctly points to the endless possibilities of (new) interpretations that may take the given text as their foundation. Its meaning, in the case of Goffman's theory and attempts to apply it in the contemporary (digital) context, can be expanded. One could say—or at least raise the question—must we limit ourselves only to the text? Can we breathe new life into Goffman's theory if we place his text (or theory) into a non-textual context? This question, along with a series of others that arise from it, will form the backbone of the paper in which we will attempt to offer at least some answers. As can be seen from the title, by "new" we refer to the digital environment of social media. Considerations on how Goffman's theory could be "translated" into the digital environment have been present in the literature for some time now (Hogan, 2010; Murthy, 2012; Bullingham, 2013; Picone, 2015; Tashmin, 2016; Walsh, 2022).

Goffman's dramaturgical model is based on a particular understanding of the *social role*. He compares this "old" sociological concept to an even older institution — the theatre. As in the case of the theatre, individuals, that is, the bearers of a certain (social) role, have *performances* and an audience that observes them. *Performances* are carried out before an audience with the intention of controlling the impression made on them. This approach provides us with insight into important questions relevant to the analysis of Instagram profiles: how exactly do individuals perform their social roles? What impressions do they want to make on the audience before whom they perform? What kinds of challenges can other (co-) performers present to them? How does the audience's reaction affect those who are performing? And so on.

Our reconsideration of the possible applications of Goffman's theory has been encouraged by a specific research task, namely the project 'Youth Identity Development Through the Use of Digital Media', supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. The project is led by the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. The research is still ongoing, so I will not present raw and incomplete data. Part of the project is the content analysis of Instagram profiles of high school and university students. In this paper, we will present only a few observations and notes related to Goffman's dramaturgical model. They are inspired by the research we are conducting (a content analysis of Instagram profiles). More specifically, by reflections on how the collected data could be analyzed.

The Rise and Role of Instagram

Leaver et al. offer an insightful account of the very origins of the social network Instagram:

> Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger initially began working together on an app in 2010, but it was not focused on photography at all. Rather, inspired by the emergence of location-based check-in apps, the pair were developing a Foursquare competitor, a check-in app called Burbn, based on locating and sharing details of the best bourbon locations. After realizing their app was unlikely to compete with a glut of locative media apps, the two completely stripped their work back to photos, comments and likes with an optional check-in (Leaver et al., 2020).

Much more important than this interesting story about Instagram's early days is the clarification offered by the same authors that Instagram did not introduce technological innovations, but rather achieved a well-balanced combination of key elements. "Notably, Instagram did not invent photo sharing, or photo filters, or even square frames. Instagram's success was based, in part, on their successful integration and balancing of these elements, but all of them existed at the time in other apps which pre-dated Instagram" (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram experienced very rapid growth at its beginning. In the first two months after its launch (2010), the platform was used by 2 million users. The rapid development certainly contributed to the interest from larger companies. In April 2012, Facebook announced the acquisition of the social network Instagram for one billion dollars. Today, Instagram has around 2 billion active users worldwide MAU (Monthly Active Users) (Backlinko, 2025). Recent studies clearly indicate that Instagram users utilize this platform to construct their self-identity (Aulia & Subarsa, 2024, pp. 39-40). With such a large number of users, Instagram is not just a network where individuals (as private persons) present themselves to other individuals. A significant portion of activity on Instagram is connected to and driven by commercial, marketing, promotional, and generally economic purposes. In our paper, we will not devote special attention to such activities and practices, although they too may be part of the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this paper. What can a user actually do on Instagram? What are the basic features?

The answer may be clearest when looking at the main menu tabs: "Instagram's core interface includes five bottom menu tabs—Home, Search, Reels, Shop, and Profile. Each section opens up a new layer of navigation, letting users dive deeper into content, analytics, and more" (Vale, 2025). We believe that, in analyzing Instagram as a social network, not all technical or software features are equally relevant to the topic of this paper. In this regard, we will focus primarily on the possibilities and dynamics of individual self-presentation on the profile. More precisely, in this context, of particular interest may be how individuals present themselves in the posts on their profiles. Although "stories" also carry Goffmanian potential for analysis, we believe that this potential is greater and more significant in the case of posts on users' profiles. This conclusion is based on several evident facts. First, posts on users' profiles are generally available for a longer period of time. Most posts remain on a user's profile for a very long time—some for as long as the account itself exists. On the other hand, a story is relatively short-lived (unless manually removed by the user, it lasts for 24 hours). An even more important difference lies in the interactional potential of these two Instagram features. Like and comment options are available for both profile posts and stories. However, only in the case of posts is this interaction visible to others, thus creating an *audience* of all other users who merely observe the interaction (See more about this concept, as well as other key concepts of Goffman's dramaturgical model, in Spasić, 1996, pp. 43-62). More precisely, an audience that is not simultaneously an (active) participant. Why is the audience important to us? Primarily because we aim to consider potential answers to the above-mentioned questions through Goffman's dramaturgical model. In such a model, the audience constitutes an essential part of the analysis. We are aware that Goffman has already opened a door for the analysis of visual materials (photographs). His work *Gender Advertisements* (Goffman, 1979) could, in that regard, serve as a sufficient guide. But why are we "knocking" on the wrong door of Goffman's theoretical legacy? An analysis limited solely to the interpretation of visual materials (photographs and videos) would exclude the very interactional potential of the dynamics that many consider to be the heart of contemporary social networks—likes, comments, reposts, hashtags, and so on. The possibility of including this very important aspect of social networks in our analysis is provided by Goffman's dramaturgical model of sociological analysis.

The fundamental question, then, is whether we can apply old sociological "tools" within a new digital environment. This question—and the answer to it—has profound implications for how we understand contemporary communication more broadly. These implications are not purely academic. It has become almost a commonplace in public (media) discourse to claim that youth possess a lower level of basic social skills and reduced capacity for self-articulation in face-to-face interactions. That the digital world makes them "alienated" and insufficiently prepared for the "real world" of encounters in physical space and real time. Goffman's theory, in this sense, may serve as a kind of test. If it remains relevant and methodologically applicable, it compels us to at least question how sustainable such a hypothesis truly is. If his theory can transcend physical space as the foundational category of face-to-face interaction, then the often-voiced public concern (usually framed within the context of worry for younger generations) may not be entirely well-founded. Of course, in this regard, we must proceed with caution. The complexity of communication and its implications for psychosocial development are much broader and deeper.

Goffman's study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), will undoubtedly occupy a central place in our paper, primarily because it forms the backbone of his dramaturgical model. In this paper, we could engage in a general discussion on how Goffman's core concepts—such as impression management or performance—can be situated within the digital context. We could focus solely on these concepts and attempt to understand what they offer in analyzing social networks like Instagram. We are confident that even such an analysis could lead us to interesting conclusions, or at the very least, open new paths for future research. However, we believe that within the limits of such a restricted space, such an analysis would remain too general in nature. It might merely leave the impression of very rough analogies that would not lead researchers toward more informed interpretative positions when analyzing empirical findings. That is why we have decided to use more concrete concepts from his work as illustrations. These concepts are: region, team and role distance. We do not have obvious or systematic arguments for this choice. It partly emerged as a result of insights we found interesting during the course of our empirical analysis. It could be said that these concepts helped us *ad hoc* to better understand certain behaviors and practices on Instagram. On the other hand, they seem concrete enough to us (sometimes even somewhat "technical") to protect us from overly general and empty analogies. To "protect" us from overly general analogies that do not contribute to a better analysis of the data or a specific topic.

Region

The concept of *region* for Goffman has a clearly defined spatial and temporal dimension. In this sense, it poses a significant challenge when applied to the digital context, as the digital world differs precisely in these aspects from the "real" one. How does Goffman define the concept of *region*?

> A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. Regions vary, of course, in the degree to which they are bounded and according to the media of communication in which the barriers to perception occur. Thus thick glass panels, such as are found in broadcasting control rooms, can isolate a region aurally but not visually, while an office bounded by beaverboard partitions is closed off in the opposite way. (Goffman, 1959, p. 106)

The key differentiation Goffman makes in relation to the concept of region is between the *front* and the *back*. Elsewhere, however, Goffman states the following:

> Given a particular performance as a point of reference, it will sometimes be convenient to use the term "front region" to refer to the place where the performance is given. The fixed sign-equipment in such a place has already been referred to as that part of front called 'setting.' We will have to see that some aspects of a performance seem to be played not to the audience but to the front region. (Goffman, 1959, p. 107)

On the other hand, the *back* (region) holds a completely different position in relation to the performance being carried out or enacted:

> A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters. (Goffman, 1959, p. 112)

How, then, is it even possible to translate these concepts—so firmly rooted in space and time—into the digital world, which is often said, in a sociological sense, to dissolve such boundaries? What, in that regard, would constitute the front and back region? To what extent, and in what ways, can we apply Goffman's concepts in the analysis of Instagram posts? It is not particularly difficult to determine that a post, as such, could be viewed as a front region—that is, as the place where the performance takes place, serving the purpose of managing impressions in a desired manner. However, before we attempt to offer even a preliminary answer to the question of what the back region might be, it must be said that the issue of the front region does not end there. As every social media user today knows, it is possible to control who—meaning which audience—will see the posts you share on social networks. These posts can be completely public or restricted to a specific group of people (e.g., followers). Certain posts may be intended only for a "selected" audience, while others serve to present ourselves to a broader group of people—or even to the entire world. In that sense, the behavior of the actor—as well as the content of the post—changes depending on who the post is directed to and whether it is intended for a "broad" audience. However, during our research, we observed a phenomenon—among both high school students and university students—that is not so uncommon: the existence of active profiles that contain no posts at all. In a conversation (focus group interview) with one high school student, we learned that such a practice is not unusual for them at all. The existence of a profile with not a single post does not mean that the person does not have another profile where they do share content. On the contrary. The practice of maintaining several "parallel" profiles on social media is precisely aimed at creating regions where impression management can be carried out for a specific and deliberately selected audience. Such a practice makes it possible to keep certain categories of "undesirable" viewers separate from other segments of the "audience" to whom one wishes to present oneself in a very specific way. We cannot make well-founded assumptions about exactly whom or why students wish to avoid—or at least which audiences they want to "separate." In general terms, it would make sense to assume that this kind of "closure" is generational in nature, serving to limit access for parents, relatives, parents' friends, and similar groups. To understand the full scope of the potential continuum between the back and front regions on social media, we must also take into account one more possibility that often remains outside the scope of researchers due to its ethical and methodological sensitivity—group chat. Only when we take such interactions into account can we speak of the fundamental digital mechanisms through which a division between the front and back regions is enacted—with the overall aim of impression management undertaken by users through their activities on social media. Each of these possibilities can serve as a basis for outlining such distinctions between regions. However, we must not forget the important differences that arise in comparison to the original (Goffmanian) use of these concepts. The boundary between the front and back regions that one can establish in the digital environment of social media is far more flexible. The actors themselves can decide where these boundaries lie to a much greater extent. The examples Goffman provides in his study do not allow for such boundaries to be altered arbitrarily, quickly, or easily. In that regard, group chat may most closely correspond to the back region. When we make this claim, we are not referring to just any group communication. Rather, we have in mind those group interactions that specifically revolve around commenting on posts intended for a broader audience. We can assume that such conversations—at least when it comes to young people—often focus on the post itself (e.g., who liked the photo and who didn't, who left a comment, how good or appealing the post is, and so on).

Team

What does *team* mean for Goffman? "I will use the term 'performance team' or, in short, 'team' to refer to any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine" (Goffman, 1959, p. 79). Goffman recognizes that the analysis of individual performance is, in some situations, insufficient. In other words, in certain social settings, cooperation emerges as too significant to be viewed merely as the coordination of individual actors:

> [...] an emergent team impression arises which can conveniently be treated as a fact in its own right, as a third level of fact located between the individual performance on one hand and the total interaction of participants on the other. (Goffman, 1959, p. 80)

In addition to everything mentioned, one key characteristic of a team is the shared control of impression. Cooperation implies shared intentions, that is, coordination in the effort to leave the desired impression in front of the audience. In order to achieve this, the team must share a common back region. Finally, there must be trust and loyalty among the members. For the performance to be successful, team members must assume that everyone will act in accordance with an explicit or implicit agreement. How could we apply this concept in the context of researching social media? The actions of a team can be observed on several levels when analyzing the use of social media platforms such as Instagram. First, in the analysis of posts, it can be noticed that the same circle of people often appears in the comments—individuals who can reasonably be assumed to be close to the account owner. The comments frequently consist of compliments or praise regarding the post. Sometimes, team members ask questions to which they most likely already know the answers. In doing so, they provide the account owner with an opportunity to further explain the context of the photo or to highlight a specific aspect that might otherwise go unnoticed. Liking posts is taken for granted. Members of a team could easily be identified through an analysis of the frequency of mutual liking and commenting (setting aside the technical and methodological challenges of conducting such a research). The activities of team members—their collaboration—do not begin and end solely in the digital world. Team members often take part in the very production of photos and videos. They may appear in the posts themselves, contribute to the creation of content, help prepare the account owner for taking photos or videos, and so on. In the case of Instagram as a social network, the tagging feature is used. It can explicitly indicate a team member who is relevant to the given post. Another feature on this social network can also be methodologically useful in identifying team members: the option to share stories. That is, users can repost a story originally published by another person who is part of their team. However, this practice should not be taken as a sufficient or definitive indicator for determining whether someone is a team member. Ultimately, the most reliable way to determine the composition and boundaries of teams is through communication in the backstage (back region). Chats in group conversations that take place around Instagram posts—especially those concerning performance strategies—reliably reveal who the members of a given team are. The only problem with this method of identifying team composition is methodological in nature. Access to such data is confidential and, in most cases, cannot be directly observed.

Role distance

In the case of the third concept – which we have selected as an exemplary case of applying Goffman's theory – we will rely more heavily on another work. It is the study *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (1972). In this work, Goffman elaborates on the concept of *role distance*. A large part of the aforementioned study is dedicated specifically to the concept of *role distance*.

> In any case, the term 'role distance' is not meant to refer to all behavior that does not directly contribute to the task core of a given role but only to those behaviors that are seen by someone present as relevant to assessing the actor's attachment to his role and relevant in such a way as to suggest that the actor possibly has some measure of disaffection from, and resistance against, the role (Goffman, 1972, pp. 95-96).

Can this Goffmanian concept be relevant to the ways in which people present themselves on Instagram? In the case of Instagram users, two levels of role distance can be observed. The first refers to the display of distance toward roles that individuals perform in everyday life. In this regard, Instagram appears merely as a medium that records acts of expressing such distance. Among student and pupil populations, examples can be found in situations where they present their roles (as pupils or students) in a humorous or ironic manner. However, such examples do not actually go beyond the conventional framework of applying Goffman's theory and do not address the fundamental questions we raised at the beginning of this paper. Such examples cannot be taken as evidence for the potential applicability of his dramaturgical model within a digital context. Nevertheless, we consider this concept useful and applicable for analyzing Instagram profiles among students and pupils. The reason lies in the occasional appearance of posts that challenge the dominant narrative matrix of self-presentation. Distancing from the role being performed does not have to refer solely to social roles in real space and time, but also to the role that is constructed through posts on this social network. For example, if the account owner seeks to present themselves in the role of an influencer or gamer, we can find posts or other forms of activity on Instagram that deliberately display distance from such a role. These roles are often portrayed in a humorous or grotesque manner. At times, the self-image—or the role that has been constructed through a series of previous posts on the profile—is directly and explicitly disrupted. In this regard, a clear parallel can be drawn with the 'merry-go-round' example that Goffman describes (Goffman, 1972, p. 98).

Conclusion

The central question in this paper is the possibility of translating Goffman's dramaturgical model into a digital environment. We believe that such a model could be of interest in the endeavor we have undertaken (analyzing the content of Instagram profiles of students and pupils). Our aim was to show that physical space and time are not, or do not necessarily have to be, insurmountable obstacles to applying Goffman's theoretical legacy in a digital context. The concepts we have selected—region, team, and role distance—were chosen solely as illustrations appropriate to the scope of our study. This line of inquiry could have been pursued further, in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, in conclusion, we are obliged to offer at least a few remarks concerning the limitations of such an undertaking. The digital environment (Instagram) must, in some sense, still be regarded as a secondary level of reality. The roles that all profile owners perform, and the impressions they seek to leave on their audience, are ultimately grounded in a context that is not digital. In other words (at least within the framework of our analysis), within the Instagram environment, an individual cannot consistently and convincingly manage the impression they wish to convey to an audience if they are not capable of doing so in face-to-face interactions. Certainly not in the long term. Performance or self-presentation in the digital world can be suspended or entirely avoided—an individual simply needs to make that decision. Some might argue that even when we completely withdraw from the digital world, we no longer remain subjects within it, but we can still be objects—someone can photograph us, write about us, or discuss us. However, this fact does not change the essence of the matter. At that point, we can no longer speak of an individual's intention to present themselves in a certain way, but only of how they are perceived by others. In face-to-face interactions, however, such a decision is not possible, or comes at a significantly higher cost. On the other hand, an individual on social media can simultaneously maintain multiple impressions or performances—across different accounts or through various posts. From a technical standpoint, such possibilities are virtually unlimited. In face-to-face interactions, however, one can perform only a single role at any given time and in a specific physical space. It should be emphasized that any comparison between face-to-face interaction and interaction in the digital world must take into account certain 'spaces of freedom' that may be particularly interesting for analysis. The digital environment allows for a certain degree of manipulation regarding both the manner and timing of interaction. One is not required to respond promptly to a message, comment, like, etc. What matters is not only the nature of the interaction, but also its temporality. Such a practice is simply not possible in face-to-face interaction.

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