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## "KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK, ZA NAŠ KEJ!" CITIZENS' PASSIVE SUPPORT TO THE LOCAL ACTIVIST GROUP<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Deep-rooted political turbulence, along with the present hybrid regime, have resulted in an undesirable social, economic and political milieu in Serbia. Such an atmosphere is a fertile ground for a grey economy, corruption, nepotism and restrictions to media freedoms. These 'unconventional' means of social functioning, have caused a decline in trust towards state institutions and proportionally, increase of citizen participation in non-institutional models of engagement.

The aim of this paper is to analyse one such model of non-institutional engagement: the local activist group *Za naš Kej*, operating in the area *Savski blokovi* (Sava apartment blocks) in New Belgrade. The authors analysed local residents' perception of the activist group *Za naš Kej* in comparison to the group's narratives and actions. By using a grounded theory approach authors explained the role of groups such as *Za Naš Kej* in the development of participatory and deliberative democracy within the local community.

Our data indicates that *Za naš kej*, despite its local character, does not have a strong foothold in the community, and thus receives only passive support. Citizens perceive *Za naš kej* as mediator between local institutions and residents of the Sava apartment blocks. Despite the failure to mobilise a wider group of citizens for their cause, this activist group continues to be a relevant (political) actor within the local community.

### KEYWORDS

civic engagement,  
political participation,  
activist-research, local  
community, Serbia,  
New Belgrade

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Recent global dynamics have put cities at the centre of political tensions due to the privatisation of public spaces and reduction of social services (Mattei, Quarta 2015). Radical urbanization has caused the reconfiguration of the spatial economy in cities and communities, putting the latter in a strategic position for developing an analysis of global processes (Sassen 1996). These dynamics vary from country to country, depending on the social, economic and political context.

With quite a turbulent recent past and its long post-socialist transformation, Belgrade presents an interesting example for research of the interrelations between social, political and economic positions (Grubović 2006). Such circumstances directly caused a lack of civic education and decreased non-institutional social engagement. The synergy of these factors created fertile grounds for commotions between the state, the market, the urban planning issues and privatisation (Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021).

In addition, Serbia's recent tumultuous history has accelerated the development of a grey economy, nepotism, corruption and restrictions on media freedoms (Stanojević, Stokanić 2014). These 'unconventional' means of social functioning and communication, along with the overall atmosphere in Serbian society, have caused a decline of trust among citizens towards state institutions. Such an atmosphere is often generated when public institutions continuously turn a blind eye to illegal practices; when urban planning processes are not transparent and open to the needs of citizens, that is, the actual users of the commons. Such circumstances create dysfunctional relations among citizens and decision-makers, provoking citizens to take things into their own hands through various initiatives, neighbourhood activities or even protests (*ibid.*). On the other hand, reactionary and autocratic regimes seek to aggravate distrust and reduce citizen participation in decision-making, keeping all the decisions in the state's hands (Maričić, Cvetinović, Bolay 2018).

In the last five years, there has been a clear increase in use of non-institutional channels and instruments in Serbia (Vukelić, Stanojević 2012; Babović et al. 2017; Petrović 2018; Krstić et al. 2018; Pešić, Petrović 2020; Novaković 2020). An escalation in protests has shown that citizen trust in institutions and political parties has been declining sharply. By contrast, local initiatives and new social movements have been prospering (Petrović 2019; Delibašić et al. 2019; Pudar Draško et al. 2020; Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021). Concurrently, the global trend of declining political engagement with once dominant forms, such as party and union membership, has opened up compensating channels of representation and accountability. "New or newly popular civic forums, 'town meetings', 'open space events', citizens' juries and online consultations, provide spaces for testing of beliefs, reflection on values, articulation of interest and forging of agreement around policy platforms" (Rogers 2005: 604).

In this paper, we will present and analyse the perception of the residents of New Belgrade regarding the local activist group *Za naš Kej* (henceforth ZNK), as an example of such a "compensating channel of representation" (*ibid.*). This single-issue group has been advocating the preservation and revitalisation of

the Sava quay and related public goods and facilities since 2018. Further, we will discuss whether ZNK operates within the public sphere, providing space for all citizens to participate and deliberate, or is merely a hull of civil society, taking: “too-ready routes to participation by small groups of activists with intense commitments to (often) extreme causes, coupled with obstacles to routine participation by ambivalent citizens with everyday concerns” (Fiorina 1999: 20).

Since the foundation of the group, ZNK has been constantly trying to rely on the relevant institutions, by addressing the spatial and communal problems in the area they operate. Even though most of these attempts were unsuccessful, ZNK continues with the same strategy, although that might seem contradictory if we consider that activist groups usually “take things into their own hands” when distrust in institutions rises (Maričić, Cvetinović, Bolay 2018).

Finally, we will draw arguments and conclusions about ZNK’s role in practising participatory and deliberative democracy in local communities, based on material collected through three independent paths: an online survey, in-depth interviews with residents of New Belgrade and an insiders’ information about ZNK’s functioning. We decided to follow a grounded theory approach (Glaser, Strauss 1967) for triangulation of the three sets of data about ZNK’s activism to scrutinise not only the attitudes of citizens towards this activist group, but also the role the group plays within the local community. The findings will show that citizens’ support to this group is rather passive, which might be used as an important feedback for the group. In the further research we might focus on the reasons why this is the case and what are the methods and tools that ZNK could undertake in order to improve their influence on the rise of citizen engagement in their community.

## Authors’ Reflection

The context in which ZNK will be analysed in this paper regards the Sava quay in the largest municipality in Serbia, New Belgrade. More precisely, ZNK operates in the apartment blocks (the so-called *blokovi*) – the socialist-modernist large housing estates with a population of 79,310,<sup>2</sup> including all three authors of this paper.

Keeping in mind that the authors of this paper are residents of the mentioned apartment blocks, in which area ZNK operates, it is essential to emphasise that during the formal part of the research, but also in its exploratory phase, they have gained direct and continuous field experience. In addition, two of the three authors are active members of ZNK.

Therefore, we approach the issues described here as residents, activists and, indeed, researchers. The dual position of researcher-activist significantly facilitates and accelerates the process of “entering” the field, participating in joint activities such as planting, clean-ups, group meetings, and gaining the trust of the local community. Moreover, these multiple identities open the door to

2 According to the 2011 census.

informal conversations important for understanding the general attitude of this locally-focused form of activism.

However, we are aware that this type of engagement can also negatively affect the attitude of potential informants towards researchers and the research topic itself (Sztandara 2021, Kara 2017). Moreover, two of three authors are aware of their interest in promoting the positive image of ZNK through this paper. In this sense, we are attentive to the ethical obligation this activist-research position carries, treating it with caution and a dose of self-reflection in interpreting the obtained data.

## Context

The Sava quay was built at the end of the eighties, right after the construction of the *blokovi*. The vast green areas next to the river were supposed to oppose the grey and concrete mass of buildings. Indeed, more than 80% of the quay's surrounding area consists of urban greenery. In accordance with the values and ideological paradigms from the period of construction, public spaces, green areas, promenades, riverfronts and embankments were not designed for profit, but were instead considered a public good (Le Normand 2014).

A replacement of political paradigm brought significant changes in urban theory and practice, namely an entrepreneurial city (Harvey 1989). Starting with "*Savski galeb*" in 1987, the riverbank has increasingly become dotted with *splavovi*, permanently docked barges with restaurants, night clubs and other leisure and sport facilities. In December 2021, the authors of this paper counted around 100 floating objects along the 2.4 km long quay, leaving only about 400 meters of free approach and view over the river.

According to the Law on Docking Floating Objects along Riverbanks (Sl. list grada Beograda, no. 4/2007), the minimum distance between two docked floating objects must be 15 meters. The Law further forbids the docking of the barges at certain places along the riverbank, due to potential pollution of water sources. Most of these floating objects have never received appropriate sanitary, technical, tourist permits to stay docked or float. Local authorities are aware of this situation and have confirmed it repeatedly in the local media.<sup>3</sup> These floating objects, thus, produce environmental, safety and legal problems for the local residents:

- Water, soil, air and noise pollution. The barges produce waste that is often dumped directly into the river; green surfaces are destroyed by vehicles, despite traffic being prohibited in that area (Water Law, Article 133); extremely loud music can be heard throughout the neighbourhood at night, particularly when operating hours are not respected (Law on Protection from Noise Pollution in the Environment).

<sup>3</sup> Blic online, Internet. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/nadlezni-tvrde-da-izgoreli-splavovi-nisu-imali-dozvole-ali-i-da-nisu-prosli-tehnicki/m69m8nv> (viewed 14 January 2022)

- Most of the barges are unauthorised to use electricity or the water supply and sewage systems. Electric cables and water pipes are illegally installed, hanging over pedestrian paths and tied to trees and electrical poles. Despite being designated a completely pedestrian area, motor traffic is present, destroying the surfaces and endangering visitors.

However, according to locals' and activists' reactions on the social networks and in the media, the biggest problem for most of them is immaterial: the fact that they do not see the river anymore because the view has been blocked by too many, too large barges.

### **Za naš Kej**

In 2018, seven neighbours formed the informal group of citizens ZNK, after Belgrade's Deputy Mayor announced that the quay near the apartment blocks was slated to be reconstructed in the same way as Belgrade Waterfront – a new and controversial development in the centre of Belgrade, practically completely lacking green areas. This meant that vast green areas would largely be turned into built up and commercial areas. The newly-formed group immediately organised a petition, signed by 5,823 people.<sup>4</sup> And although the announcement of construction triggered the formation of a group, the underlying problem that brought them together was the dissatisfaction with the illegal barges.

Since 2018, the group has mostly dealt with the preservation and revitalisation of the quay in three main ways: internal and external communication; advocacy and participation in public review meetings about the area; fieldwork (collecting signatures for petitions, organizing clean-ups and forestation, etc.). The group is driven by a vision of preserving shared public goods, and acts on different institutional and corporate levels in trying to achieve that vision.

ZNK comprises fifteen citizens living in different parts of New Belgrade that are near the Sava quay. The group is open to new members and has no particular barriers to admission, nor obstacles to dropping out anytime. Members of the group communicate daily in a closed Viber group, while external communication with the group's supporters/followers takes place via social media. The group has around 1,800 addresses on its mailing list and over 3,000 followers on social networks. All the decisions are made democratically among active members, usually by voting within the Viber group. There are no official leaders of the initiative, only more or less active and assertive members. ZNK occasionally cooperates with similar local groups and citizen initiatives.

### **Method**

To come up with a theory to explain how local residents perceive activist groups opposing the privatisation of public spaces in the Serbian capital, we

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<sup>4</sup> ZNK Facebook post summarizing the petition, internet. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.940245963245787&type=3> (viewed 14 January 2022).

relied on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This paper synthesises insights gained through three sources of data studies that have ZNK's activism in focus. The authors of this paper participated in the design and implementation of two independent studies: an online community survey and interviews with the members of the community. Third source of data were insider insights about how ZNK functions. However, there are some limitations of using a grounded theory approach on secondary data. Authors could not challenge descriptive and analytical codes they uncovered in the data by returning back to the interviewees or online community survey respondents. Rather, authors relied only on their own insights for reaching the saturation of categories. However, all three authors were involved in discussion of the results to minimise unilateral reading of the data.

### Online Community Survey

The quantitative data was derived from the online community survey conducted by the activist group ZNK. Surveys were used because they are conventional methods for direct involvement of citizens in the community, across all sectors – non-profit, business or governmental (cf. Zhang, Lin 2011). The survey was conducted online, administered through Google Forms and shared on social media and through email, in May and June 2020. The survey included questions<sup>5</sup> about demographic characteristics, attitudes towards the quay and attitudes towards ZNK. The sample of participants in ZNK's survey was not representative of the whole neighbourhood (and therefore neither are the results); rather it was convenient for the purpose of collecting different opinions and providing respondents with space to deliberate about issues in the neighbourhood that are important to them.

A total of 1,920 people participated in the online community survey, of which 1,149 were women. The median age of participants was 40, while 50% of participants were between 35 and 47 years old, with the youngest participant 12 and oldest 82. Eighty percent of participants live within a maximum distance of two kilometres from the quay. ZNK used the descriptive results<sup>6</sup> to inform its future activities. For the purpose of this study, authors discussed not only the descriptive results of questions from the survey, but also calculated additional results by intersecting different questions from the survey by using inferential statistical techniques Pearson's correlation<sup>7</sup> and Multiple linear regression<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, the authors discussed the mere implementation of the survey by ZNK.

5 All questions in Serbian and English are available at <https://osf.io/6q9ge/> (viewed 19.2.2022)

6 All results of the survey are available at: <https://osf.io/mdgea/> (viewed 20.2.2022).

7 Measure of the strength of association between two variables.

8 Multiple linear regression is a statistical technique that uses explanatory variables to predict the results of variable of interest.

## Interviews

The qualitative data refer to segments of conversational interviews (Leech 2002), and form a part of an ongoing, more extensive study on residential housing and urban commons in large housing estates in New Belgrade. For the purposes of this paper, the qualitative data represents segments of interviews conducted with fifteen residents (seven female, eight male) of New Belgrade housing estates, aged between 22 and 62.<sup>9</sup> In the Yugoslav period, these housing estates were predominantly inhabited by workers of non-manual activities, that is, the socialist middle class. After the privatization of the housing stock in 1991 and the rapid change of population after 2010, the apartment blocks continued to retain a class-homogeneous character, and are still predominantly inhabited today by the new, creative, technocratic middle class (Backović 2010).

All fifteen informants were recruited over a year-and-a-half-long period of fieldwork (May 2020 – October 2021). The interviews were conversational, audio-recorded with the informants' consent and held at the informants' homes or nearby cafes. Questions regarding civic activism in the neighbourhoods were raised as the end of the interview approached, such as "There are various citizen initiatives dealing with the urban greenery in your neighbourhood, along with Facebook groups and activist groups such as ZNK– do you take part in any of those?"; "What is your perspective of their activities?"; "Is that the reason you do not take a more active role in supporting them?", etc.

## Insider Insights about How ZNK Functions

To better understand the internal dynamics of ZNK, in addition to the insider insights (such as messages sent to the ZNK at social media and dynamics of ZNK's activities) brought by the two author-activists, in this paper we will also rely on an interview<sup>10</sup> with one of the founders of ZNK. It was conducted in October 2019, as part of a more extensive study mapping new social movements in the Western Balkans and assessment of their needs and capacities.

## The Process of Data Analysis

The data were analysed following the initial research question of how local citizens perceive ZNK. As interviews provide the best insight into the participants' contemplation of ZNK, they were the starting point for descriptively labelling different attitudes towards the activist group. First insight from the

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<sup>9</sup> As the subject of the more extensive study on residential housing and urban commons only somewhat coincides with the research questions of this paper, only the segments of the interview that explicitly refer to civic activism in New Belgrade and the attitude of respondents towards activist groups operating in local communities in which they live have been used for this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Agenda for the interview with one of the ZNK founders is available at: <https://osf.io/m8z7d/> (viewed 25.2.2022).

data was the prevalence of *passive support* against *active support* toward ZNK from the interviewees. Further, authors validated this result with insider information about ZNK (such as lack of volunteers) together with comments of survey participants. From the second reading of the interviews authors labelled interviewees' explanations for their passive support to the ZNK into three descriptive categories. Labels were *lack of information*, *apathy* and *strategic and/or ideological disagreement*.

To draw the first analytical codes explaining ZNK's role in the community regarding promotion of participatory and deliberative democracy, authors again triangulated data from all three data sources. Two analytical codes emerged - ZNK's role as *a service to the local community* and *platform for civic education*. Proceeding with the saturation of analytical codes allowed us to propose a theory about how ZNK developed the role of service-provider and education platform in the context in which it operates.

## Results and Discussion

### Dominantly passive support from the local community

It is important to emphasise at the very beginning of this chapter that we have not come across a respondent that does not support the causes for which ZNK stands. ZNK has thousands of followers on social media and email newsletter, five thousand people signed the survey in 2019, almost two thousand people took part in the online community survey in 2020, and hundreds of people come to large scale events ZNK organises for the community. In 2020 ZNK organised an exhibition at the quay. The exhibition opening on June 28, 2020 was attended by approximately hundred local residents. On September 11, 2021 ZNK organised the festival entitled "See you at the quay?" (*Vidimo se na keju?*), which was attended by around a thousand visitors. Moreover, the respondents in the online community survey that were more familiar with ZNK<sup>11</sup> were more keen to participate in diverse activities around quay's issues in future<sup>12</sup> ( $r=.214^{13}$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Despite the potential to mobilise community members, after three years of existence, ZNK counts only fifteen enthusiasts, while the numerous population of the nearby large housing estates provides only passive support. One of the quotations from in-depth interview summarises this pattern:

11 Self-assessed familiarity by answering the question: "How familiar are you with what the informal citizens' association "Za naš keju" is doing?" on a scale: 1- "Not at all", 2 - "A little", 3 - "Partially", 4 - "I am very familiar".

12 Keenes to participate was calculated as a sum (with minimum of 0 and maximum of 9) of all the activities participants marked they would attend or be volunteers. Pool of activities was: forums with experts, rallies, petitions, sharing flyers and hanging posters, being a building representative, speaking to media, ecological events, cultural events and sport events.

13 The greater the absolute value of Pearson's  $r$  is (from 0 to 1), the more interrelated are changes within two variables. Plus or minus represent the direction in which the change is taking place.

*I support them. I did not directly participate, but I shared everything online that I could, I did not come into contact with them directly, but I tried my best to raise awareness about it because I think they are fighting for something...* (F, 21, student)

Further, in the online community survey, respondents were offered to leave an anonymous comment, which 72 of them did<sup>14</sup>. The comments were classified into three elements of attitudes towards the quay and ZNK – “elaboration”, “affection”, and “action”. First, the respondents used comments to elaborate their opinion from the initial survey or ask additional questions and give unrelated suggestions. Second, the respondents expressed greetings or gratitude towards ZNK and appreciation of the quay. Finally, the respondents either perceived ZNK as their representative, which allowed them to stay passive and rely on ZNK (“Go for it, ZNK!”, “Keep up the good work, ZNK”), or else they showed motivation to participate with ZNK in fighting to preserving public goods together (“We have to preserve the Savaš quay!!!”, “We are here to help in all the cultural and ecological projects”, “I will participate in your activities whenever I have time”, “I await the call for the next meeting of the group”). From 72 comments, only 22 people showed motivation to join ZNK in whatever form. These contrasting participant positions (passive or active) were to be expected, considering how many people share ZNK’s views on the quay but do not volunteer in the ZNK’s activities (or are otherwise active in the quay’s preservation).

Besides “counting heads” of followers on ZNK social media and events, the online survey allowed the authors to understand attitudes, behaviours, and demographics of people close to ZNK. Through the survey, ZNK successfully mobilised members of the community who have an interest in maintaining the quay as 66% visit it almost daily throughout the year, or at least once or twice a week. However, not all the survey participants have the same familiarity with ZNK’s activism because the survey was shared online not just by the ZNK, but its followers and other popular Facebook pages in the neighbourhood.

To see which attitudes, behaviours, and demographics of the community encourages more attentive following of local activist groups such as ZNK, we ran a multiple linear regression model using variables from the survey. We included five predictors (perceived appearance of the quay, amount of leisure time spent at the quay, residence proximity to it, age and gender), and one criterion – familiarity with ZNK’s activism. Model provided some regularities worth mentioning. First, those more familiar with ZNK’s activism also had a slightly worse opinion about the quay’s appearance ( $\beta_5 = -0.169$ ,  $p < .001$ <sup>16</sup>). Second,

14 All comments (in Serbian) are available at this link: <https://osf.io/t6v7n/> (viewed: 22.3.2022.)

15  $\beta$  and b coefficients are a measure of total effect of the predictor variable (such as age or spending time at the Quay) on the criterion (familiarity with ZNK’s activism). Greater the value of coefficient, greater the effect of particular variable on the criterion.

16 Parentheses contain statistics and parameters showing if the model is significant. If p value is below  $<0.001$ , we presume that model results are more likely to represent real conditions in the population instead of representing random variations.

those more familiar with ZNK's activism spent slightly more time at the Quay ( $\beta=0.182, p<.001$ ). However, neither residence proximity to the quay ( $\beta=-0.037, p=.953$ ), nor participant age ( $\beta=-0.063, p=.005$ ), nor gender ( $b=-0.056, p=.235$ ) contributed significantly to the prediction of familiarity with ZNK's activism. Results from the model support the perspective of ZNK as an activist group that has the potential for mobilising diverse community members in terms of demographics (age, gender, residency) but people unified in terms of how much they care about the quay where they spend their leisure time, and are unsatisfied with its current appearance enough that they want to deliberate about it.

Still, all five predictors taken together predicted only a 5.6% of differences in the familiarity with the ZNK ( $F(5, 1870)=23.137, p<.001$ ). One of the reasons for the low predictive power of the model is that variables we included in the model were the ones available from the online community survey which was made to provide a glimpse into public opinion and not extensive brand analytics. Other reasons that contribute to the differences in familiarity with the ZNK's activism, and thus lesser participation in ZNK's diverse activities around quay's issues, came up from the in-depth interviews. Based on qualitative data consisting of interviews and informal conversations with participants of ZNK activities, the reasons for predominantly passive support to this local activist group can be classified into three groups: lack of information; apathy; strategic and/or ideological disagreement. In the next section, we will analyse each of these reasons in more detail.

### 1. Lack of information

The fact that almost a third of the respondents from the interviews claim that they are not sufficiently or not at all familiar with the activities of ZNK was surprising at first, especially considering the fact that the group has been operating for several years:

*I haven't seen it anywhere, I just know that sometimes they announce in a Facebook group that there will be cleaning or planting of trees, but I don't know who does it, who organises it. (F, 1996, student)*

*I don't have a particular view because I don't know enough about what they do. I mean, I can see from these events that they are organising, but I don't know exactly what they are doing and what their plans are. I mean, as much as I'm kind of even somewhat familiar with these things and interested in topics, I don't think they've really reached me. Actually, I don't know how I can get involved in what they are doing to benefit the whole block. So, basically, I don't know much. I don't know how to get involved. Maybe I wouldn't even get involved, since, for various reasons, I don't know what's going on there. (M, 35, lawyer)*

*I have never heard of them, I don't follow social media, but I go to the quay all the time. I go for walks almost every day or feed the swans... (M, 61, retiree).*

Results of the online survey confirm this. Half of the 1,920 people interested in landscaping the quay said they know "nothing" or "a little" about

ZNK's positions and activities, while 36% said "partially," and only 12% said they are familiar with them "to a large degree." To a certain extent, the survey reached people outside ZNK's supporters and served as a campaign for raising awareness about ZNK's activism. However, the 230 participants who said they knew ZNK's positions and activities "to a large degree" can be taken as a good approximation of the number of people actually being ZNK's most ardent supporters in the community at that point. Online community survey was circulating for days around the internet, newsletter, viber group, and mouth-to-mouth in the neighbourhood so there is only a slightest chance that someone from the ZNK's closest community missed it.

The low recognition of ZNK's activism in the neighbourhood reflects the fact that most of the activities of this local activist group, paradoxically, take place within social media bubbles, and not in the field. When it comes to learning about ZNK, 12% of 1,920 survey participants have heard about ZNK through the petition when ZNK was formed, 1% heard about ZNK through either TV or newspapers, while the majority learned about ZNK through social media (44%) and by word-of-mouth (17%). Before participating in the survey, 25% of participants did not know that ZNK existed. This predominance of informing through social media completely coincides with the media practices of the Serbian population, based on the results of research on informing and media practices in digital environment in Serbia conducted by researchers of the Centre for Media Research (Milivojević et al. 2020). The results of this study indicate that as many as 32% of the population of Serbia is predominantly informed through social media, of which Facebook is still the most used among various generations for information and other purposes, with as many as 77.4% of users (Ibid).

Finally, in an interview conducted with one of the founders of ZNK in 2019, the informant (M, 45, *Za naš Kej*) recognised the need for more fieldwork. He emphasised that the greatest need is for the initiative to grow and include assertive representatives of every building in the area. Throughout the interview, the same informant underscored a burning need for more fieldwork and a door-to-door campaign to mobilise the community. However, none of this seems to have materialised in the past three years, which is the reason why many residents of the area near the quay are still not familiar with the activities and goals of this activist group.

## 2. Apathy

Existing research already indicates a high degree of political mistrust among Serbian citizens (Spasić 2004; Golubović 2007; Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021), which leads to apathy and anti-politics (Rajković 2020, Fiket et al. 2022). Further, the interviewed New Belgrade residents are not immune to such a pervasive and long-lasting condition:

*Last winter in [apartment] block 70 I signed that petition for the spacing between the barges. I know all about it, and if I notice activists on the Quay, I absolutely approach them; it doesn't bother me to answer a survey or sign a petition or*

*anything. But I think that in this country if someone powerful wants to accomplish something that will be the case. It's something the little man can't influence. I think that's a big problem.* (F, 47 cosmetician)

When social (and political) mobilisation occurs in such unfavourable political circumstances, it generally has an individualistic focus (Fiket et al. 2017). This is exactly the attitude towards joint engagement in their neighbourhoods, expressed by some of our interview respondents:

*Our courtyard was tidied up by a guy across the street, he was all over the news, literally buying seedlings and flowers out of his pocket. And, bro, that's it. You want to take care of your own, of what's in front of you, your garden. And that's usually tidied up by people who are downstairs so they look at it.* (M, 36, architect)

The high interest in joint actions of neighbourhood clean-ups and the spring/autumn plantings organised by ZNK and similar initiatives in the neighbourhood challenge this trend to a certain extent. To operationalize community support for diverse ZNK activities that will be undertaken in the future, ZNK asked the participants in the online community survey to check all activities they would be keen to participate in, either as organisers or attendants. Participants selected a median of three out of nine activities they would engage in, with 50% of them checking between 2 and 5 out of 9. Signing a petition is the easiest way to engage: approximately 3.5 times more respondents said they are interested in signing one than not. Ecological events (such as clean-ups) and rallies were also popular forms of engagement as 1.5 times more people would engage in them than not. On the contrary, participating in public forums and expert panels, cultural and sporting events and representing neighbours from their building in ZNK activities were quite unpopular: around twice as many surveyed community members would rather not engage in these activities than do so. Moreover, almost no one was prepared to speak publicly about the issues of the quay or spend their leisure time distributing flyers and posters about quay issues to the local people: respondents were eight times more likely to say “no” to “yes.” After an exhibition organized in July 2020, ZNK planned activities such as flowering or cleaning the quay and sports events along the quay. Participants were more interested in flowering (1,285 out of 1,920) and clean-up of the quay (1,276) than in sports events (705) or bike tours (354). Trying to respond to the community's needs and wishes, ZNK organized the quay clean-up on World River Day in September 2020.

However, participation in these sorts of activities is far from articulated and conscious political engagement. One-time, sporadic and depoliticized actions such as flowering, neighbourhood clean-ups, or signing a petition certainly contribute to sensitizing the local community to urban issues and draw attention to the acute problems that the ZNK deals with. What we must not lose sight of when thinking about the political activism of the ZNK, is that without establishing and jointly articulating demands and strategies to solve burning environmental and urban problems, these activities are nothing but a slightly

elevated and advanced version of “taking-care-of-your-own mentality”, mentioned in the quote above. Furthermore, the sporadic, ad hoc and occasional nature of ZNK activities is an obstacle to political organizing at the local level, as it requires long-term and dedicated field work.

### 3. Strategic and/or ideological disagreements

Unlike the social movements *Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own - Ne davimo Beograd* (Domachowska 2019; Perić 2019) and *United Action For A Roof over Your Head - Združena akcija “Krov nad glavom”* (Vasiljević 2020; Dolenc et al. 2021), which flourished despite the unfavourable political climate, in its four years of existence, the main focus of the ZNK so far has not been to mobilise a large number residents and integrate sympathisers into the core of the organisation. Seeing as ZNK operates in the context of great distrust in the political system and democratic institutions, one of the possible reasons for this result is the institutional and legalistic nature of their struggle for public interest. Some of the respondents state this as the reason they do not support the work and activities of ZNK more actively:

*I think that the story with ZNK bothered me in that the whole thing is illiterate politically, historically somehow. I don't think you should read some political theory, but somehow it is too much, not too much - it completely relies on some petitions and appeals to the city authorities, which I think is naive. I don't know what kind of worldview you should have and where you lived in previous years to think that it would do something. When I realized that, I never showed up again (...) But there are initiatives that have somewhat similar views, such as this *Za krov nad glavom*.<sup>17</sup> These guys may just be able to learn something from them about that relationship of law and property and everything they are doing but don't know how to. And maybe through that connection, they could mobilise, and maybe in that way come up with a way to solve the problem. So, I mean, I don't have a specific program what I would do in their place, but if I took part in it, I would look to the side of connecting with initiatives that deal with similar problems, but I guess that connection is not so obvious if you grow up watching *Utisak nedelje*.<sup>18</sup> (M, 36, software developer)*

The above-cited informant recognizes and shares the dissatisfaction with the problems that the ZNK is committed to solving, since he attended some of the open meetings organized by this activist group. However, his dissatisfaction and criticism stem from his political position. Being a leftist, for him the

<sup>17</sup> *United Action for a Roof over Your Head (Združena akcija za Krov nad glavom)* is an anti-eviction movement in Serbia established in 2017. The movement operates in three major cities: Belgrade, Novi Sad and Subotica.

<sup>18</sup> Long-running political talk show “Impression of the Week” has been broadcast intermittently since 1991. The show is often criticised by both the left and the right for its image. By “growing up watching *Utisak nedelje*” the informant refers to his impression that prominent members of the ZNK are shaped by liberal ideology and thus not radical nor progressive to his taste.

issue of illegal floating objects does not stem from “institutions being captured” and “not doing their job”. On the contrary, this respondent believes that the issue of access to the Sava river bank is inseparable from the conflict between public property and private capital, characteristic of an entrepreneurial city, and therefore cannot be solved through institutional mechanisms ZNK relies on. Therefore, he considers it naive to sign petitions and rely on institutional mechanisms that are (thanks to corrupt networks, but also the state’s attitude towards the public good) supporting private property and profit. For him, a more adequate way to fight for the goals that ZNK stands for, as well as one that he would more actively support, would be radicalization and networking with other social movements that more critically examine the relationship between the state and private property. Such attitude, dominant on the left, has been questioning the progressive character of middle-class activism since the 1960s, criticizing it for its conservative role in reinforcing the power of the existing elites (Chomsky 1969; Goldthrope 1982).

While several respondents expressed the need for sharper criticism and radicalisation of the ZNK approach labelling it as “lukewarm and hermetic” (F, 61, municipal clerk), others reproached this activist group for “polarising the public” (F, 20, student) and interfering in daily political issues, thus antagonising the vast majority of the population who are sympathisers of the ruling party.

### From membership to management

In the following section, we argue that the previous three factors, lack of information, apathy, and disagreement over methods affect the development and orientation of this activist group. Namely, these factors create conditions for this local, single-issue activist group to become a mediator between citizens and institutions, rather than grow into a social movement. A clear causal link between the previously listed reasons for passive support and the educational and mediating role that ZNK has taken on in the community since its founding cannot be determined with absolute certainty based on the methodology used and the material collected. Relying on the concept of “membership to management shift” (Skocpol 2003), in this section we will offer one of the possible explanations for this dynamic, densely woven into the Serbian contemporary political context.

The shift “from membership to management” (Skocpol 2003) and professionalisation are already well noted in studies of social movements (Cohn et al. 2003; Duyne Barenstein, Pfister 2019; Polletta et al. 2021), political parties (Rogers 2005) and non-profit organisations (Vetta 2009; Spade 2013, 2020). This shift implies that membership associations are transforming into advocacy groups and social service providers, building their supporters and donors, rather than members (Skocpol 2003). “This historical insight presses academics and politicians alike to relinquish nostalgia for an idealized mythical past in which civil society was small, community-based, and organic” (Sobieraj 2005: 1763).

Given this, it becomes clear that ZNK informs and directs its activities based on the wishes and needs of the local community, which does not translate into membership. The online community survey was the second large-scale space ZNK opened for the community members to deliberate about community development. The survey was conducted only a year after an initial petition was signed by 5,823 community members. ZNK is aware that its advocacy of quay landscaping affects the whole community. Therefore, the group's members sought to challenge their own standpoints by considering the opinions of other members of the community.

After the survey, ZNK organized an exhibition at the quay.<sup>19</sup> The exhibition presented the environmental, communal and urban problems in the neighbourhood, together with ZNK's previous, current and future plans for the quay landscape. The duration of the exhibition was over a month in the summer of 2020, and it served as the platform for educating citizens. As previous research suggests, urban activism in the region is characterised by "small or medium scale activities focused on various aspects (cultural, economic, environmental, and communal) of everyday urban living" (Petrović 2019: 173–174). Furthermore, their activities tend to be peaceful and organized in a carnival and do-it-yourself fashion (Jacobsson 2015:14), and ZNK activities only confirm this thesis.

As ZNK is centred around issues surrounding the quay, in the online community survey, participants chose issues they found most alarming. "A large number of unlicensed floating objects on the quay" and "illegal construction and traffic on the embankment" received 30% more attention (chosen by 1,217 and 1,077 respectively) than "danger to the embankment posed by flooding (from drilling and destruction of installations, driving, etc.)"; "neglect of the quay (greenery, promenade, benches, bins...)"; "driving and parked vehicles on the quay"; and "noise (especially music from the floating objects at night and connected traffic)". Responding to most of the community saying "We want to see the river", ZNK focused on the issue of unlicensed barges. As there has been no reaction from the city authorities to ZNK's calls to reduce the number of unlicensed barges, the organisation shifted its focus at the beginning of the 2021 to a lack of objects and activities on the quay.

In the survey, participants could rank by personal preference seven broad activities or objects lacking on the quay. The most frequent answer was: "cultural events" (1,170 out of 1,920), while all other answers were half as common (around 500), and included "sports and entertainment events for children", "painting some parts of the quay", "public toilets", "running tracks", "sports programs"), with "exhibition panels" receiving the least attention (388). In response to the community being nostalgic for annual cultural events that took place on the quay, such as "New Belgrade Summer of Culture" (*Novobeogradsko*

<sup>19</sup> ZNK won the public competition in the program "Active communities" by a community foundation, Trag Foundation. Facebook event of the exhibition is at this link: [https://www.facebook.com/events/555426985151974/?active\\_tab=discussion](https://www.facebook.com/events/555426985151974/?active_tab=discussion) (viewed 20.2.2022). Content is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.940245963245787&type=3> (viewed 20.2.2022).

*kulturno leto*), ZNK wrote a project proposal for a half-day festival in 2021, received funds for it<sup>20</sup> and carried it out. Entitled “See you at the quay?” (*Vidimo se na keju?*),<sup>21</sup> the festival took place on September 11, 2021 and involved several local primary school groups, activists and artists who worked together in five educational workshops on the same topic: recognition of local environmental problems and ways to solve them.

However, a year and a half after the survey, ZNK has not created a place for deliberation or debate, even though it had ongoing projects, activities and advocacy initiatives. Rather, in its decision making, ZNK relies on a single survey and acts as if having a mandate to represent the local community to the local authorities. Citizens were only invited to participate in projects as volunteers.

Furthermore, it is particularly interesting that respondents who generally give reserved and passive support to ZNK, as well as those who lack familiarity with the organization still believed in the need for a mediator between citizens and institutions. Indeed, they recognised ZNK as a substitute for a self-governing community institution:

*I don't think it's a question of transparency. It's not like they are hiding something, but they just don't manage to reach every building entrance, for example. So that, for example, we knew that when we have a problem in the area or something happens, we had someone to call. If that kind of "institution" existed, I think a lot more things would be happening in [apartment] blocks and we would together demand to change (M, 35, lawyer)*

*And I think that it would be best... if the local community<sup>22</sup> was real, and if someone sits there all day, that when you ask him, he has the right information, that he regularly informs, puts up posters or whatever. But like this, what do I know? It's not bad, but it doesn't have much of an effect, it's a little hermetic, you see the same people all the time. Nobody to approach, nobody to ask... (F, 61, municipal clerk)*

Moreover, some supporters already trust ZNK to solve emerging problems. For instance, in October 2021, a woman wrote via Facebook Messenger:

*“Hi, two quads [motorised vehicles] drove along the Sava quay a half an hour, among walkers, children and the elderly, I have photos, but I didn't know who else to approach.”*

A study of the political positions of Serbian citizens, conducted in 2017, confirms the well-established theses (e.g., Spasić 2013) on the prevailing belief

20 ZNK once again won the public competition in the program “Active communities” by a community foundation, Trag Foundation. Members fundraised additional resources in the community.

21 Video footage of the Festival, Internet. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3593948917509473> (viewed 13 January 2022).

22 The informant is referring to the local community (*mesna zajednica*, srb) or a neighbourhood district as the smallest governance unit, implying the legacy of Yugoslav self-governing socialism.

“that collective mobilisation and action for the sake of some general goal and improvement is not within the “competence” of citizens and their associations, but is someone else’s business, primarily the state” (Fiket et al., 2017: 34). This view of collective mobilization and the role of institutions in preserving the public good is shared by interview respondents:

*I think that there should be people to deal with it<sup>23</sup> at the municipal level, at the community level – people should receive a salary for that. I personally don’t have time for that, really.* (M, 28, journalist)

If ZNK does not change its approach, the possibility of collective mobilisation and a more radical struggle for the right to the city and environment will be significantly reduced. In the context of general apathy and distrust in the political system and institutions (Stanojević, Stokanić 2014), when a local organisation that does not have a strong foothold in the base and does not invest in its capacities to work with citizens, but rather reduces its activities to communication with relevant institutions, expecting them (naively) to solve problems deeply embedded in corrupt networks – there is no prospect of mass mobilisation and citizen participation. If ZNK does not increase its presence in the field but continues to predominantly engage in promotional and advocacy activities, the only way to remain relevant as an activist group is to accept the role of mediator between (uninterested) citizens and (corrupt) institutions.

On the one hand, shifting ZNK activities to serve the needs of the local community may seem like abandoning the critical stance and could contribute to further resignation of citizens. On the other hand, building political trust, promotion of civic participation and self-management practices could open up space for deliberation and local organising, which would certainly be important for exercising the right to the city.

Therefore, a significant contribution of this activist group to the local community, although at first glance inconspicuous and insufficiently valued by the group members, is of an educational nature. In the context of “complete ignorance and misunderstanding of the mechanisms of civic participation, except party activities, which could be used in social engagement” (Fiket et al. 2017: 32), continuous education of citizens on how cities are planned, how political decisions of urbanism and the environment are made and implemented in cities is a significant contribution to the development of political literacy and democratic culture.

In 2019, in cooperation with the non-profit organisation Ministry of Space,<sup>24</sup> ZNK organised a public forum and discussion with experts on how the new General Plan of Regulation would negatively affect the quay’s green areas. Afterwards, these two groups encouraged mobilised citizens to file their

<sup>23</sup> Barges on the Sava quay and the noise they produce in the residential zone (authors’ note).

<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Space is a Belgrade-based research-activist collective founded in 2011, with the desire to contribute to the democratic and fair development of cities. Website: <https://ministarstvoprostora.org/> (Viewed: February 21, 2022)

complaints and suggestions to the City's Urban Planning Office, educating them along the way about the public oversight. However, those were small-scale attempts, with fewer than thirty citizens engaged.

Finally, despite the failure to mobilise a wider group of citizens for their goals, several respondents recognised ZNK as a local actor, whose public and community engagement leads to a more democratic society.

*Just as we are members of the same Facebook group, we are a community here as well. Because if we need the same electrician, if we don't have water at the same time, if we have the same problems, the same needs – we are connected to each other. And I see, I see that awareness is growing, that we can't pretend we're not a community and that we can do nothing in that community (...). Yet those groups are pushing that awareness. And now these regressive phenomena... Serbia is really currently on a regressive course of civilization, not to mention politics now. But as a civilization, we are going backwards. Well, this goes ahead. There are more and more neighbourhood clean-ups, more and more actions are directed towards institutions, more and more requests are being submitted, more and more often there are warnings of those who violate something. It's great. It can't go any faster. (F, 50, freelance copywriter)*

Although this comment indicates the importance of the activities that ZNK practices locally with optimism and hope, the absence of any response from city authorities to their demands indicates that this type of political action - apart from empowering and educating citizens about participation mechanisms and their rights - is often insufficient. However, the responsibility for the fact that the local activist group during several years of its activity fails to mobilize the wider population or to radicalize the methods of struggle cannot be attributed only to the group itself. An adequate question, which, however, exceeds the scope of this paper, could also be whether the residents of these housing estates are eager to take on a more active and committed role in struggling for their own, as well for the interest of the wider community. From the perspective of the New Social Movements theory the activities of the ZNK can be seen as “a defensive reaction against the encroachment of invasive capitalism” (Rose 1997: 471). However, the majority of surveyed citizens do not see the issue of illegal floating objects as a reflection of the way the state and city authorities treat the public good, nor they demand a more radical changes that would lead to interventions that are not only aesthetic or procedural in nature. Their interest in activities such as exhibitions, planting, neighbourhood clean-ups and bike tours, paradoxically, can also be seen as “a positive affirmation of new values resulting from growing affluence” (Ibid). In that sense, this type of sporadic, mediated and often depoliticized self-interest engagement suits the dominant population of New Belgrade housing estates, offering them a platform to express dissatisfaction in a way that does not take too much time and, more importantly, does not jeopardize their social position. Therefore, the membership to management shift “is great” as it is “pushing that awareness” (F, 50, freelance copywriter). Although it does not achieve much more than that, it still meets the needs of the community.

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper we presented the insights and attitudes of the local community about the activist group *Za Naš Kej*, gained through three independent lines of research. Citizens' perceptions were collected throughout two years (2020 and 2021) and analysed comparatively with the data about ZNK's activities. We did not observe significant qualitative changes in that period, neither in the political context, in the citizens' perceptions of ZNK nor in its activities. Therefore, we rely on collected perceptions as if they are valid for any point in time of ZNK's operations analysed in this paper. The data indicates that this activist, single-issue group, despite its local character, does not have a strong foothold in the community, and thus receives only passive and partial support.

Further, we categorised the reasons for such passive support into three groups: lack of information (indicating insufficient familiarity), apathy (following a global decline in political and civic participation and well-documented political mistrust among Serbian citizens) and strategic and/or ideological disagreements (regarding ZNK's advocacy and insisting on institutional mechanisms). Relying on the concept of "membership to management shift" (Skocpol 2003) in civil society studies, we argued that these three reasons create the conditions for such a shift in both the approach and the activities of ZNK.

Despite the failure to mobilise a wider group of citizens and unfavourable prospects for mass political mobilisation for their cause, this activist group continues to be a relevant (political) actor in the local community. It continuously works on raising the level of political literacy and empowering citizens to practice the available mechanisms of political participation and communicate their demands to local authorities. Furthermore, it enjoys the trust of the local community to be a mediator between institutions (primarily municipal and city authorities, but also utility departments) and residents of the Sava apartment blocks, and tailor its activities to meet some citizens' needs. However, there is a threat that taking on the role of a service provider will further contribute to the quieting of citizens, rather than empowering and encouraging them to take a more active part in the political and social life of their local communities.

Nevertheless, it is possible to speculate that the homogeneous middle-class structure of the activist group itself, as well as of the housing estates in which the ZNK operates, also has a stake in the group's strategy and shift from the desire for wider local mobilization in the beginning, to the later mediating role between citizens and institutions. In the collected material, as a consequence of the used methodological apparatus, we do not have enough arguments for this bold statement. However, we consider it an interesting direction for future research.

Two of three authors (Iguman and Mijatović) that are ZNK activists themselves, found these results particularly useful for understanding strengths and weaknesses in functioning of their activist group. However, these research findings might be insightful for other similar activist groups and social movements too. Further research might lean on others that focus on the way that

pandemic influenced the activities of activist groups as well as the involvement of citizens in this peculiar period (Pleyers 2020; Pinckney, Rivers 2020).

Another important factor in contemporary and future analysis of citizens' engagement and social movements is that 2022 is the elective year in Serbia, which implies a special political and social atmosphere that must be approached with caution. Recent dynamics have put the most active groups of the mentioned area in a close collaborative position that could ease the future research on a wider sample of citizens following and supporting these groups. Deliberative mini publics presented in the introductory article of this issue (Fiket and Djordjevic) are potentially a very good mechanism that could strengthen this collaborative position and engage citizens in democratic innovations as a means to increase their participation in decision-making about their neighbourhood.

Finally, a strong wave of ecological and other social movements in Serbia that have particularly risen in 2021 and 2022, presumably because of the elections in spring 2022, triggered spontaneous, neighbourhood activist groups and put them in more visible political and social context. At this point, we can only assume that a hypothetical political shift might bring some changes in functioning of existing local activist groups as well as in social movements, however that is intended for further research.

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Sanja Iguman, Nevena Mijatović i Sara Nikolić

## „Samo napred, *Za naš Kej!*“ Pasivna podrška građana lokalnoj aktivističkoj grupi

### Apstrakt

Duboko ukorenjene političke turbulencije, zajedno sa sadašnjim hibridnim režimom, dovele su do nepoželjnog društvenog, ekonomskog i političkog miljea u Srbiji. Takva atmosfera je plodno tlo za sivu ekonomiju, korupciju, nepotizam i ograničavanje medijskih sloboda. Ovi „nekonvencionalni“ načini društvenog funkcionisanja, izazvali su smanjivanje poverenja u državne institucije i srazmerno tome, porast učešća građana u vaninstitucionalnim modelima angažovanja.

Cilj ovog rada je da se analizira jedan takav model vaninstitucionalnog angažovanja: lokalna aktivistička grupa *Za naš kej*, koja deluje u Savskim blokovima na Novom Beogradu. Autorke su analizirale percepciju lokalnog stanovništva o aktivističkoj grupi *Za naš Kej* u poređenju sa narativima i akcijama grupe. Korišćenjem utemeljenog teorijskog pristupa autorke su objasnile ulogu grupa kao što je *Za Naš Kej* u razvoju participativne i deliberativne demokratije u lokalnoj zajednici.

Naši podaci govore da *Za naš kej*, i pored svog lokalnog karaktera, nema čvrsto uporište u zajednici, pa stoga dobija samo pasivnu podršku. Građani vide *Za naš kej* kao posrednika između lokalnih institucija i stanovnika stambenih blokova pored Save. Uprkos neuspehu da mobilise širu grupu građana, ova aktivistička grupa nastavlja da bude relevantan (politički) akter u lokalnoj zajednici.

Ključne reči: građanski angažman, politička participacija, aktivističko-istraživački rad, lokalna zajednica, Srbija, Novi Beograd