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VOTING AFTER TRANSITION: POLITICAL PREFERENCES OF SERBIA'S TRANSITIONAL LOSERS

ABSTRACT

Economic crises create specific social conditions that affect voter preferences and behaviors. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 reached Serbia a year later, causing a major shock to the fragile Serbian economy, already burdened by the legacies of wars and international isolation during the 1990s, compounded by inequalities and uncertainties stemming from the delayed transition. Subsequent elections brought the collapse of the post-2000 political consensus, with many liberal and social democratic parties never recovering. This led to the domination of the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in the party system from there on. The main hypothesis of this article posits that the 2008 crisis solidified the pool of transitional losers composed of low skilled workers, the unemployed, low educated, rural populations, and elderly, providing continuous support for SNS ever since. The authors investigate whether the socioeconomic status of these groups still correlates with SNS votes, even though the party has been in power for 12 years. If the correlation stands, it implies that past economic traumas continue to influence voter preferences to this day. The study utilizes original data from two nationwide public opinion surveys.

KEYWORDS

economic crisis,
transitional losers,
voter preferences,
elections, populism,
Serbia

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of sociodemographic factors on voters' decisions, with some specifically focusing on the relationship between the economic status or class position of voters and their political preferences. Meanwhile, the modern world has undergone seismic transformations: the proliferation of democracies, increasing economic interconnectivity, more fluid class structures, and crises from distant regions affecting societies more profoundly than ever before. During this

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period, socialist countries of the former Eastern Bloc transitioned rapidly to capitalism, alongside implementing democratic reforms. While this brought about evident benefits and economic growth, it also led to heightened social inequalities, the loss of state-provided privileges, the dissolution of traditional class structures, and exposure to global competition and global shocks. Further down the road, both developed democracies and former socialist countries in Europe and elsewhere were equally strongly affected by the aftermath of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, which came after almost two decades of growth. This newer crisis was characterized by soaring unemployment, income declines, cuts in social benefits, but also pronounced fear of losing the social status, leading to diminished trust in business and especially political elites (Owczarek 2017). These conditions provided a favorable social environment for populist politicians: the rise of Donald Trump in the United States or Brexit politicians in the United Kingdom can be related to the economic crisis. Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, proved to be a fertile ground for populists during this period, leading some authors to coin the term “populist belt” stretching from the Baltic to the Mediterranean Sea (see: Eiermann, Mounk & Gultchin 2017).

The transition in former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe has subjected many social groups to economic and political forces they did not always comprehend. The immense societal stratification during this period inevitably produced winners and losers of the reforms, and the later global financial crisis exposed the limits of growth, revealing to the latter that promises and aspirations for a better tomorrow may never materialize for them. These grievances and frustrations shaped their electoral behavior. The impact of these groups on political outcomes has been examined in a number of case studies within the post-socialist framework, although seldom with the focus on Serbia.

This is particularly intriguing because the country is one of the first where a populist party (Serbian Progressive Party, srb. Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) won the elections right after the crisis, retaining its grip on power to this day. The authors of this article argue that SNS consistently gathers support by exploiting the unified discontent of those left behind in the transition process, which in Serbia began in full swing very late, compared to other former socialist states: practically only with the overthrow of the Slobodan Milošević regime in 2000. The subsequent chapters of the study will delve into the theoretical framework of economic voting, with a particular focus on transitional losers, as well as the nexus between populist parties, voters, and the crisis. We will then establish a hypothetical framework for the study, present the methodology and data sources, as well as the models with which we will examine the socio-economic structure of SNS support, and the impact of transitional losers' vote on this party's electoral success in Serbia.

Theoretical Framework: Economic Voting and the Transitional Losers

A series of studies have identified the impact of voters' economic status on the decisions they make at the polls, particularly concerning the choice between ruling and opposition parties, or, in ideological terms, between right-wing and left-wing parties (for an extensive review of the 20th century literature on the subject, see: Miller 1997). One of the later studies (Leigh 2005) illustrates that the divide between political parties in the established Western democracies is particularly pronounced in three sociodemographic dimensions: between the young and the old, between the wealthy and the poor, and between native and foreign-born citizens. The theory gained a new momentum with the examination of the economic voting hypotheses in former communist countries, which, in a rapid process of transition, underwent significant socioeconomic stratification, creating a new constellation of social classes. An influential study conducted within the framework of argumentatively most successful post-socialist economies (Fidrmuc 2000) noted significant differences in terms of voting preferences related to the experiences of certain demographic groups with transformational reforms during the 1990s, clearly delineating a distinction between the young, educated, entrepreneurs, and urban population on one hand; and the unemployed, pensioners, manual and agricultural workers, on the other. Subsequently, the connection between unemployment and strong voting preferences has been identified over the broader European sample (see: Algan et al. 2017).

This brings us to the concept of transitional losers, the individuals or groups who experience negative consequences during the process of societal transformation. These drawbacks can include economic hardships, loss of social status, and the protracted feeling of being left behind in the evolving socio-political landscape. In academic literature, the concept emerges in the context of post-socialist transformation, forming part of the narrative of social distinction. Primarily associated with the discourse of reforms in Russia and the concept of individual well-being as the primary criterion distinguishing winners from losers early in the transformational processes, the term quickly expanded to encompass all other countries in similar circumstances (see: Danilova 2014). Specifically, the notion of transitional losers is linked to the inequality caused by tectonic changes in the wage structure after market reforms, i.e., after the abolition or significant reduction of centrally determined wage levels. This led to wage disproportions and subsequent social status disparities (see: Brainerd 1998). Apart from the case study of the Russian Federation, a similar phenomenon has been academically explored in countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and East Germany, where it has been associated with other significant demographic factors like education, urban-rural divides, or age (see also: Brainerd 1998: 1095).

A detailed study of five Central European countries (Mateju 2012) confirmed these findings. According to Mateju, the common determinant of the boundary

between the subjective assessment of the status of winners and losers was, in fact, the age of respondents. A significantly smaller number of losers were identified in younger cohorts, in contrast to the older ones, which mostly felt left behind. Additionally, the rural population, especially agricultural workers, and often families of manual workers, tended to perceive their position in the transition as losing, as did the unemployed respondents. Another case study from Latvia also found that transitional losers, in terms of a decline in personal income in the first five years of the transition, were most prevalent in demographic groups such as women, rural populations, and specifically for that Baltic country, members of the Russian minority (Titma, Tuma & Silver 1999). Some research also identified women as transitional losers (see: Spehar 2006). A paper examining the position of recipients of social benefits in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Russia over a ten-year transitional period revealed that the unemployed were the most common cohort of transitional losers. It also revealed that a decline in income was experienced by urban pensioners in all examined countries except Russia. Education, in the context of this study, proved to be another strong factor in terms of acquiring a higher social status during the transition (see: Verhoeven, Jansen & Dessens 2009).

The Populist Appeal after the Global Financial Crisis

The impact of a crisis on the rise of populist tendencies within a society was among the first identified by Laclau (1977). Meanwhile, numerous authors have established the impact of economic crises on the consolidation, growth, and even the Ascension to power by populist candidates and parties (see: Moffitt 2015; Hernandez & Kriesi 2016). It is widely accepted that during periods of economic difficulties, those in power tend to lose support; while the opposition forces, often populist, tend to strengthen. This pattern can be replicated among social groups most affected by the crisis: presumably the unemployed, lower-educated, elderly, or rural populations are the ones who often find resonance with the narratives and communication of populist politicians.

There are some alternative explanations regarding class support for populists during the times of crises, which put more emphasis on the subjective perception of threat to the current economic status. Exploring the surge of support for Donald Trump before the 2016 presidential elections, Mutz (2018) found that the key driver was economic (but also cultural) threat to the collective social status of white, Christian men in the United States. A similar correlation between the subjective perception of social status and the likelihood of voting for the right-wing populist parties is identified across the panel of European countries by Gidron & Hall (2017). Their conclusions align with our earlier assertions about the strong impact of the crisis in 2007-2008 and beyond on the rise of populists, mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, especially when compared to the transformational crisis of the early 1990s. The harsh transformational reforms did not produce many populists and seldom

led them to electoral successes, in stark contrast with the 2007-2008 crisis. Simply put, the initial conditions in which citizens evaluated their position in 2008 were better, subjective status and the potential for loss were higher, and as a result, the crisis served as a more significant threat to voters' status than the post-socialist transformation.

Furthermore, crises may not necessarily be economic but can also involve the malfunctioning of political institutions, or more recently, cultural and identity-related crises, especially when it comes to the issues of immigration and integration in Western societies (see: Caiani & Graziano 2021). However, these crises, although sometimes closely linked to economic shocks, are beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, given that populist parties are inevitably seen as products of political crises, we see these trends as supplementary, with economic problems only intensifying distrust towards existing political supply (according to: Kriesi 2015). Another long-established theory in political science tells us that lower social classes are more inclined to vote for political parties advocating for redistribution, i.e., left-wing parties, socialists, social democrats, labor parties, and the like. However, the shift of the left parties towards more moderate center position at the end of the 20th century, primarily operationalized through the acceptance of the market consensus, also caused the detachment from redistributive policies and, therefore, from their working-class and union origins. These trends, coupled with the left's additional turn towards identity issues, social reform, and integration, have alienated their traditional voter base. While this was seen as the tactical repositioning towards more middle or higher-class support, in long-lasting term it created a strong social demand for populists, especially after the 2007-2008 crisis and its aftermath, when the threatened lower classes no longer had political representatives of the left they could trust (Berman & Snegovaya 2019). The populist right swept into that vacant space of the political spectrum.

The neoliberal left, as Beck (2006: 271-274) calls the newly transformed social-democratic parties, quickly occurred all over the former Eastern Bloc in the late 1990s and early 2000s as well. These parties were initially founded on social democratic positions during the early stages of democratic reforms, but soon turned to adopt neoliberal policies. Examples of such cases include the Hungarian Socialist Party, the Czech Social Democratic Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party in Romania, the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, the Socialist Party in Albania, and so on. Many of these actors implemented economic reforms or were in power at the time of the Global Financial Crisis, paying the price for their disconnection from the original voter base of lower social classes and, in some cases, almost completely losing legitimacy among those voters (Farkas 2016: 459). An illustrative example in this regard is seen in Hungary, where the need for integration into the global economic order led almost entire political spectrum to adopt neoliberal ideological positions regarding socioeconomic policies (Wilkin 2016: 23-49). As a result, the Hungarian Socialists lost the support of both manual workers and rural demographics. The earlier liberal, now populist-right Fidesz, as well as

the far-right Jobbik, adeptly exploited the situation, offering voters simple and materialist solutions, along with strong criticism of the liberal economic consensus and often with an offer of a scapegoat for their difficulties. An analysis by Kreko & Juhasz (2017: 87) demonstrated that more than a third of Jobbik's voters come from the former socialist voter base. Here, we witness a demonstration of the trend: voters that traditionally supported the redistributive left (workers, pensioners, rural population) were disillusioned by the handling of the crisis and turned to the anti-elite, populist, often far-right nationalist parties, which then consolidated support among these social groups.

Hypothetical Framework

Our research builds upon the conclusions of previously outlined studies, but focuses exclusively on Serbia, requiring brief contextual explanations. After the Yugoslav wars and international isolation in the 1990s, Serbia entered a belated but accelerated transition in 2000, resulting in extreme societal stratification. Various classes of transitional losers who were bypassed by the benefits of privatization, marketization, and social transfer cuts emerged soon, although many were already impoverished during the continuous 1990s crises. In line with previous studies, this group in Serbia also comprises the elderly, pensioners, manual workers, the unemployed, the under-educated, and rural populations.

In the aftermath of the regime change in Serbia in 2000, two distinct waves marked the emergence of transitional losers, manifested by a surge in unemployment. The initial wave materialized promptly following the advent of the new democratic government, which, by means of market liberalization and the disengagement of the state from the managerial structures of the economy, prompted a notable escalation in the unemployment rate (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Unemployment rate in Serbia 2002-2006

2002	13.3%
2003	14.6%
2004	18.5%
2005	20.8%
2006	20.9%

Source: National Bank of Serbia

The second, notably more intense wave transpired amidst the Global Financial Crisis, a period during which Serbia confronted the challenge with a historically low unemployment rate of 13.6%, which came as a recovery after the transformational crisis. Nevertheless, the global economic downturn disrupted the previously optimistic trajectory of decreasing unemployment, precipitating substantial workforce reductions and culminating in the highest recorded unemployment rate (25.9%) since the democratic reforms (see: Table 2).

Table 2. Unemployment rate in Serbia 2008-2012

2008	13.6%
2009	16.1%
2010	19.2%
2011	23.7%
2012	25.9%

Source: National Bank of Serbia

In the aftermath, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. The right-center populist party consolidated power ever since, while the support for many of the democratic parties associated with the 2000-2012 reform period declined very rapidly (see: Spasojević 2019a). Despite the perceived dominance of major ethnic and geopolitical issues in Serbian politics, SNS builds its popularity, both in campaigns and beyond, mainly on materialistic positions, presenting itself as the defender of a broad front of disenfranchised classes (see: Pavlović & Stanojević 2016). One of the early and rare studies addressing the socio-economic foundations of SNS support revealed that, as early as the 2012 elections, the main predictor of a municipality predominantly voting for this party was economic, operationalized in terms of employment and income levels (Pejković 2012).

Our main hypothesis assumes that since the last economic crisis, almost the entire pool of social groups that can be defined as transitional losers has turned from their previously fragmented voting choices to SNS. Accordingly, this party has been mobilizing primary support among citizens of a weaker market position in post-transitional democracy: the older population, manual workers, pensioners, the uneducated, the unemployed, and rural populations. The hypothesis therefore proposes that, although almost 15 years has passed since and the economic situation in Serbia is relatively stable (unemployment in 2024 stands at 9%), experience of the crisis continues to impact SNS voters. Old socio-economic traumas remain relevant for voter preferences even today, while the ruling party also frequently tends to remind the voters about the blunders of its political competitors who governed Serbia during the economic troubles.

However, the hypothesis as formulated does not exclude alternative explanations for the mobilization and sustained support of current SNS voters, particularly when considering the nature of the ruling party in Serbia since 2012. In recent years, various international indices have characterized this regime as hybrid (Freedom House 2024) or an electoral autocracy (V-Dem 2024). In the context of significant democratic backsliding, partially enabled by external actors willing to overlook serious issues related to democracy, media freedom, and the rule of law (see: Bieber 2018), there has been a facilitation of the development of an extensive clientelist network. This has been especially effective in consolidating the party's electoral base among lower social classes, a

pattern common in similar hybrid regimes (Pavlović 2019; for the similar case in Hungary, see Kreko & Juhasz 2017: 123-124). Simultaneously, SNS's dominance in both the political system and the mechanisms of redistribution, combined with its control over the media landscape, has presumably hindered the emergence of viable political alternatives capable of influencing that electorate, which is further exacerbated by the fragmentation of the party system and widespread distrust, particularly toward opposition parties (Spasojević 2019b). Nevertheless, this is not the primary focus of our study, as we aim to explain voter behavior through the lens of a socioeconomic shift in value orientations – a perspective that is not necessarily incompatible with the mechanisms employed by the ruling party to maintain power once it initially succeeds in securing the support of certain voter cohorts.

Methods and Data

The study employs two datasets from two separate public opinion polls. The first of them was conducted from 8 to 23 December 2022. To ensure a comprehensive and representative dataset, a Face-to-Face (F2F) data collection approach was employed, utilizing the Tablet Assisted Personal Interviewing (TAPI) as its main survey method. The study targeted a total population of Serbia, focusing on individuals aged 18 years and above, encompassing a substantial 6,501,689 eligible voters. The sampling strategy involved a Representative Stratified Three-Stage Random Sample methodology, with the sampling unit defined as the constituency-polling place territory, totaling 120 units. The stratification criterion included nine distinct strata based on the size of polling places and region (small, medium, and large). Respondents were randomly selected through a three-stage process, involving polling place (PPS sampling), household, and the first following birthday. The study included a final sample size of 1,185 respondents, with the research targeting a confidence interval of ± 2.8 for events anticipated to have a 50% incidence rate. To address potential sample biases, a weighting procedure was implemented, utilizing a Multinomial Proportion Fitting through a multilinear regression procedure. This approach aimed to ensure representativeness within the sample that is aligned with the data from the last census, enhancing the overall reliability of the study's findings.

The demographic profile of the surveyed population reflects a balanced gender distribution, with 50.9% female and 49.1% male respondents. The survey encompassed both urban and rural settings, with 54.1% of respondents residing in urban areas and 45.9% in rural regions. Regional diversity was also aligned with the census data, as the research covered Belgrade (25.8%), Vojvodina (25.9%), Central and Western Serbia (28.2%), and Eastern and Southern Serbia (20.1%). Educational backgrounds varied among the respondents, showcasing the diversity and representativeness of the sample. Only 1% reported having no elementary school education, while 3.7% completed primary school. The majority had completed either three-year (18.1%) or four-year (55.4%) secondary

education, with 10.8% holding degrees from vocational schools and 11% having attained higher education through university degrees. The employment landscape was multifaceted, with 33.5% working in the private sector, 11% in the public sector, and 5.8% owning their own businesses. Additionally, 24.1% identified as pensioners, 10.3% as students, 7.9% as unemployed, and 1.3% as individuals facing health challenges or disabilities that hindered their ability to work. The financial situation of respondents varied, with 12.7% finding it very difficult to meet their needs, 50.5% managing somehow but lacking stability, 32.5% having enough for their needs, and 4.3% having sufficient resources without concerns.

The second study was conducted from 25 October to 5 November 2023, in the same manner (F2F, TAPI) and with the identical sampling strategy, stratification criterion, and weighting procedure as described above. A total of 1,202 respondents participated in the study, reflecting a fairly balanced gender distribution, with 51.5% female and 48.5% male participants. The survey encompassed both urban and rural settings, with 61.7% of respondents residing in urban areas and 38.3% in rural regions. Geographically, the sample mirrored the distribution of the population across different regions of Serbia, including Belgrade (25%), Vojvodina (26.2%), Central and Western Serbia (27.4%), and Eastern and Southern Serbia (21.4%). In terms of educational attainment, the respondents exhibited a diverse range of backgrounds, with 6.3% having completed primary education, 17.9% holding diplomas from three-year secondary schools, 53.4% from four-year secondary schools, 9.7% from vocational schools, and 12.9% possessing university degrees. Regarding employment status, the respondents represented various sectors of the economy, with 13.6% employed in the public sector, 36.9% in the private sector, 6.9% as self-employed business owners, 5.4% unemployed, 6.9% students, 24.2% pensioners. The financial situation of the respondents varied, with 12.1% finding it very difficult to meet their needs, 44.4% managing somehow but lacking stability, 38.7% having enough for their needs, and 4.8% having sufficient resources without concerns. These comprehensive demographic overviews set the stage for a nuanced analysis of the research findings in subsequent sections.

Findings and Discussion

The 2022 questionnaire encompassed the operationalization of multiple independent variables, wherein a pivotal emphasis was placed on the variable concerning the individual perceptions of respondents regarding their experiences across three distinct chronological periods in Serbia (variable: “Have you experienced job loss and had difficulty finding new employment?”) (1) Yes, from 1990 to 2000; (2) Yes, from 2000 to 2012; (3) Yes, from 2012 to the present). One period spans from 1990 to 2000, characterized by civil wars, the disintegration of the socialist Yugoslavia, economic collapse, sanctions, international ostracism, the Kosovo War, and NATO intervention in 1999. The period from 2000 to 2012 was typified by the processes of democratization, emergence

from international isolation, economic reconfiguration, and privatization. Also, in this period, the Global Financial Crisis took place, which very intensively spilled over into Serbia. The contemporary period from 2012 onwards is delineated by a regression in democratic norms, democracy backsliding and hybridization of governance (see: Bursac & Vučićević 2021), but also with economic stabilization. This variable functioned as a proxy for stratifying respondents who may be categorized as transitional losers and non-losers in a sense of employment as a most basic criterion (see: Table 3).

Table 3. Transitional losers in three distinctive periods

	Non-losers	Transitional losers
From 1990 to 2000	76.1%	23.9%
From 2000 to 2012	75.3%	24.7%
From 2012 to the present	87.5%	12.5%

Post-stratification analysis has revealed that there are no statistically significant differences between responses from men and women to the posed question, nor based on the urban-rural divide. However, distinctive variations were noted across different age cohorts. Specifically, statistically significant disparities emerged when examining age groups, indicating a nuanced pattern of responses ($\chi^2 = 16.923$; $df\ 3$; $p < .00$). In the age group 33-42, 84.6% are classified as non-losers while 15.4% are transitional losers. Among respondents aged 43-52, 72.9% fall into the non-loser category, compared to the rising percentage of 27.1% transitional losers. In the 53-62 age group, 67.3% are non-losers and staggering 32.7% are transitional losers. Finally, for respondents aged 63 and older, 76.3% are non-losers while 23.7% are transitional losers.

The data also illustrates a clear pattern where different regions display varying proportions of responses which is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.204$; $df\ 4$; $p < .01$). For instance, in Belgrade, 80.4% are categorized as non-losers, while 19.6% are transitional losers. Similarly, in Vojvodina, 78.1% fall into the non-loser category, compared to 21.9% transitional losers. These two regions are usually described as better off in the context of the Serbian economy. In the regions of Central and Western Serbia, 74.4% are non-losers and 25.6% are transitional losers. The data shows that Eastern and Southern Serbia have the highest number of transitional losers: 30.9%.

The sample also highlights a noticeable trend of respondents with a higher level of education showing a lower frequency of transition losers ($\chi^2 = 22.881$; $df\ 5$; $p < .00$). For individuals without elementary education, 45.5% are classified as transitional losers. Among those with completed secondary education, 25% fall in the loser category. Similarly, respondents with a three-year secondary education exhibit 36.2% transitional losers, whereas those with a four-year secondary education show 21.1% transitional losers. In the case of individuals with university degree, only 16.9% can be classified as losers.

The demographic battery of questions was followed by a set related to values. Interestingly, investigation into attitudes towards issues such as solidarity, democracy, rule of law, traditionalism, and respect for diversity between these two groups do not reveal statistically significant differences, showing no obvious propensity toward populist politics or authoritarian rule when comes to respondents' values. However, attitudes towards capitalism reveal that transitional losers exhibit a diminished preference for the market-based economic system. Specifically, non-losers score an average of 3.04 (SD = 1.48) on the desire for capitalism scale 1 to 5, whereas transitional losers score 2.68 (SD = 1.53) on average ($F = 2.517$; $t = -3.093$; $df = 902$; $p < .00$, two tailed). These findings suggest that transitional losers are less inclined towards market reforms and economic globalization, which is somewhat expected.

The main research goal of our study was to explore the voting patterns of social groups categorized as transitional losers, particularly in the aftermath of Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Our hypothesis suggested that a significant portion of these vulnerable groups would align with SNS since the onset of the economic downturn. The data we collected provide evidence supporting this hypothesis, shedding light on the voting behaviors of transitional losers and their political affiliations in contemporary socio-economic contexts. Before addressing that, it is important to highlight that demographics reveal interesting patterns regarding voting for SNS. Data shows that this party enjoys the highest support in Eastern and Southern Serbia, with overall support increasing with age, but decreasing with level of education. As we have seen, these groups correlate to the transitional loser category.

Insights from the poll reveal a statistically significant increase in the number of SNS voters within the cohort identified as 2000 to 2012 transitional losers compared to those who are not. These findings underscore the complex interplay between socio-economic factors and political preferences, suggesting a notable shift in voting behaviors among individuals experiencing transitional challenges. The data indicate that there are no significant differences among other political parties (only parties with more than 20 observations in the sample were considered), except SNS and, to some extent, two smaller right-wing parties (see: Tables 4 & 5). These data provide empirical support for our initial hypothesis, indicating a detectable trend towards SNS affiliation within the transitional loser cohort.

Table 4. Voting behavior of 2000-2012 non-losers and transitional losers (party)

	SNS	SPS	SSP	Dveri	NDSS	Zavetnici
Non-losers	60.8%	9.9%	4.9%	3.1%	3.8%	3.5%
Transitional losers	67.7%	7.7%	0%	5.6%	2.6%	5.1%

$\chi^2 = 40.212$, $df 22$, $p < .01$

Table 5. Voting behavior of 2000-2012 non-losers and transitional losers (party blocks)

	Party in government (SNS & SPS)	Left-wing opposition	Right-wing opposition
Non-losers	75.9%	10.8%	13.2%
Transitional losers	80.9%	1.6%	17.5%

$\chi^2 = 15.699$, df 2, $p < .00$

If we consider transitional losers more broadly, incorporating those who fall into this category both during the 1990s and the 2000s, we obtain data that further supports our hypothesis that these sociodemographic groups now significantly lean towards SNS (see: Tables 6 & 7).

Table 6. Voting behavior of 1990-2012 non-losers and transitional losers (party)

	SNS	SPS	SSP	Dveri	NDSS	Zavetnici
Non-losers	56.6%	9.2%	5.5%	4.2%	3.5%	4.2%
Transitional losers	70.2%	9.4%	1.5%	3.2%	3.2%	3.5%

$\chi^2 = 39.909$; df 22; $p < .01$

Table 7. Voting behavior of 1990-2012 non-losers and transitional losers (party blocks)

	Party in government (SNS & SPS)	Left-wing opposition	Right-wing opposition
Non-losers	72%	12.9%	15.2%
Transitional losers	83.3%	3.4%	13.3%

$\chi^2 = 21.888$, df 2, $p < .00$

In Serbia, the appeal and alignment with SNS are frequently assessed in light of its leader and incumbent President, Aleksandar Vučić. Consequently, our survey aimed to evaluate the perception of his political attributes, examining responses through the comparative lens of transitional losers and their more better off counterparts. The empirical findings delineate that transitional losers, across 5 out of 7 attributes, view President Aleksandar Vučić more favorably than their non-losing counterparts.

Table 8. Perception of President Vučić among non-losers and transitional losers

	Abides by laws	Keeps his promises	Inspires trust	Possesses expertise	Exhibits charisma and leadership	Acts in accordance with the party ideology	Has the power to achieve what he advocates
Non-losers	56.2%	50.4%	50.9%	55.9%	58.7%	70.5%	69.7%
Transitional losers	60.6%	56.0%	55.7%	64.6%	61.1%	67.8%	69.3%

The consolidation of SNS support in the years following their initial electoral victory is evident through the analysis of voting patterns across two distinctive periods of Serbian political development. Our 2023 survey included a question about historical voting preferences, prompting respondents to recall the party they supported before SNS's electoral debut and victory in 2012. It should be noted that this party was founded in 2008 and did not exist during the initial transformative crisis of the Serbian economy after 2000. Respondents were presented with five common choices, notably DS (Democratic Party, nominally social democratic party that led the Serbian government in 2000-2004 and again in 2008-2012), the nationalist SRS (Serbian Radical Party), the old-regime SPS (Socialist Party of Serbia), the conservative DSS (Democratic Party of Serbia, which led the government in 2004-2008), and the liberal G17 (which participated in almost all reformist governments 2000-2012), along with an "other" option for smaller political actors. Despite acknowledging potential memory biases and socially desirable biased responses given in current political context, the survey results nevertheless offered insights into the changing voting patterns of transitional losers. Our analysis (see: Table 9) compares vote fluctuations from pre-2012 options to SNS among the general population, compared to four identified demographic groups often described as transitional losers in the CEE context: rural populations, individuals with lower education levels (holding less than a 4-year secondary degree), the unemployed (encompassing unemployed individuals, pensioners, and housewives), and the elderly (aged over 60).

Table 9. Vote fluctuations of pre-2012 parties' voters' towards SNS in general population and four distinctive transitional losers' groups

	Now voting for SNS (total)	Rural population now voting for SNS	Low educated now voting for SNS	Unemployed, pensioners, housewives now voting for SNS	Older than 60 now voting for SNS
pre-2012 DS voters	32.6%	48.9%	60%	57.1%	73.1%
pre-2012 SRS voters	64.5%	65.8%	57.9%	77.5%	79.5%
pre-2012 SPS voters	66.9%	75.6%	75%	74.5%	77.5%
pre-2012 DSS voters	51.5%	58.6%	50%	55%	75%
pre-2012 G17 voters	33.3%	35.7%	50%	50%	83.3%
pre-2012 voters of other parties	20.4%	31.6%	27.3%	36.4%	35.7%

The comparison reveals that while there is volatility within the base of every pre-2012 party, the propensity towards SNS is significantly higher in almost every group of transitional losers compared to general voters. With the slight exception of the "other" category, which in most part comprises ethnic minority interest parties, all major actors within the Serbian party system experienced a high number of their voters shifting to SNS after its emergence. This shift is

primarily driven by transitional losers within their ranks, particularly the older population, the unemployed, and to some extent, individuals with lower levels of education and those living in rural areas. As mentioned earlier, SNS has consistently portrayed itself as a defender of the disenfranchised, contrasting with the political elites that governed Serbia through a challenging transformation and the disastrous Global Financial Crisis. This strategy has obviously mobilized all groups who suffered economic hardships during these periods and largely turned their backs to their previous electoral choices.

Conclusions

The study underscores the intricate dynamics shaping political attitudes and behaviors in Serbia, emphasizing the role of socio-economic factors affecting the electoral landscape. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of political phenomena of transitional losers voting behavior. The research briefly explored various socio-economic and demographic factors, including the impact of historical periods, age cohorts, regional disparities, economic status, and levels of education on political preferences and attitudes. Our findings indicate that both transitional losers, defined as individuals who faced job loss and employment challenges, notably during the 2008-2012 period, show substantial voting trends in favor of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). This trend persisted even when considering a broader definition of transitional losers, spanning across the 1990s and the 2000s. Moreover, our analysis highlighted significant associations between voting behaviors and demographic characteristics such as age, education level, and regional distribution. Transitional losers, particularly older individuals and those with lower educational attainment, showed a higher propensity towards SNS. Conversely, attitudes towards capitalism revealed a diminished preference among transitional losers, suggesting a nuanced relationship between socio-economic positions and ideological leanings. Furthermore, perceptions of President Vučić among transitional losers indicated a favorable appraisal across various attributes, underscoring the influence of leadership perceptions on political affiliations among these demographic groups.

Our main hypothesis assumed that transitional losers, particularly since the last economic crisis, predominantly shifted their vote towards SNS, drawing upon their historical socio-economic experiences, regardless of the party's 12-year tenure in power. The comparative analysis convincingly demonstrates that a significant portion of the vote volatility towards SNS since 2012 originated from groups characterized as losers of transformative processes: rural residents, individuals with lower levels of education, the elderly, and the unemployed. The continuing support SNS receives from these groups means that experiences from previous economic hardships could shape voting behavior in the long term.

These findings align with theories surveyed in our study, focusing mostly on transitional processes in other post-socialist countries in Europe and

highlighting substantial differences in voting patterns linked to the experiences of specific groups. Furthermore, they contribute to the expanding body of literature uncovering support patterns for populist parties and offering insights into the emergence of populists. Possible limitations of our study include use of post-hoc survey method for establishing pre-2012 voting preferences, as well as disregarding the voting preferences of smaller number of transitional losers who do not vote for SNS (as well as those non-losers who vote for them) – indicating multilayered voters motivations that need to be further examined. Furthermore, we acknowledge the reductionist approach of the study focusing only on socioeconomic status as possible explanation of voting behavior, necessitating the testing of other possible predictors. Most notably, democratic backsliding in Serbia has enabled the ruling party to maintain its electoral base not only by exploiting voters' socioeconomic position, but also through a combination of widespread clientelist relationships and an uneven playing field in which political alternatives are significantly constrained. Findings of this study thus can facilitate further research, along with other explorations of voting behavior, party systems, and populist phenomena not only in Serbia, but also across the broader CEE region.

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Nikola Jović i Dejan Bursać

Glasanje nakon tranzicije: političke preferencije tranzicionih gubitnika u Srbiji

Apstrakt:

Ekonomске krize stvaraju specifične društvene uslove koji utiču na odluke i ponašanje birača. Globalna finansijska kriza iz 2007–2008. godine stigla je u Srbiju godinu dana kasnije, izazvavši veliki šok u ionako krhkoj srpskoj ekonomiji, već opterećenoj nasleđem ratova i međunarodne izolacije tokom devedesetih godina, kao i nejednakostima i nesigurnostima koje su proizašle iz prolongiranog procesa tranzicije. Izbori koji su usledili su doveli do sloma političkog konsenzusa uspostavljenog posle 2000. godine, od čega se mnoge liberalne i socijaldemokratske partije nikada nisu oporavile. To je ujedno omogućilo dominaciju populističke Srpske napredne stranke (SNS) u partijskom sistemu, koja traje do danas. Glavna hipoteza ovog rada polazi od pretpostavke da je kriza iz 2008. godine učvrstila bazu tranzicionih gubitnika, koju čine nisko kvalifikovani radnici, nezaposleni, manje obrazovani, ruralno stanovništvo i starije osobe, a koji od tada kontinuirano pružaju podršku SNS-u. Autori istražuju da li socioekonomski status ovih grupa i dalje korelira sa glasanjem za SNS, iako je ova partija na vlasti već dvanaest godina. Nalazi impliciraju da ekonomske traume iz prošlosti i dalje oblikuju biračke preferencije danas. Studija se oslanja na podatke iz dva nacionalna istraživanja javnog mnjenja.

Ključne reči: ekonomska kriza, tranzicioni gubitnici, biračke preferencije, izbori, populizam, Srbija

